

Cape Cod Bay Right Whale Update

DMF awarded long-awaited federal grant, 2001 a baby boom year, and entangled (now freed) whale movements impress scientists

Right whale protection and the coexistence of maritime industries and whales are high priorities for DMF. The past right whale season will be remembered for the right whale baby boom and the extraordinary results from the successful disentanglement of a nine-year old female right whale nicknamed "Calvin."

DMF got good news in May when it was awarded a \$190,000 federal grant through the Northeast Consortium to conduct its right whale research and conservation program in Cape Cod Bay. These funds come after three years of requests for federal funding support, and will be spent next winter on DMF's highly successful January - May Surveillance and Monitoring Program, conducted by the Center for Coastal Studies. The program has been ongoing since 1998 and was developed by DMF with input from leading right whale researchers. It dovetails with similar programs in federal waters, other states' waters, and those in Canada to reveal whale movements and distribution of aggregations for management of maritime activities with an objective of avoiding harm to right whales.

DMF's program has become vital to federal scientists and managers who rely on timely and accurate photo-identification efforts to further right whale demographic studies. Results enhance our knowledge of the movement and fates of individual whales including those that have been entangled.

This past winter's program performed as advertised when the entangled whale "Calvin" (last seen off Canada last summer) was re-sighted in Cape Cod Bay in February. The whale had floating line through its mouth and wrapped around its body. Without the skills of our aerial survey team this whale may never have been detected because the line was not visible from the water. After repeated attempts to free the whale, the CCS Disentanglement Team attached a buoy rigged with satellite and radio transmitters to track the whale's travels (see box). After 36 days the tag and the remaining line came off the whale, and the whale has been documented gear-free. The Team suspects the steady drag from the buoy can sometimes help pull line off the whale. The DMF/CCS program is credited with playing a key role in resolving this entanglement.

This entanglement is similar in line type and location to the highly publicized case of #1102, an adult male seen during June off George's Bank with similar line cutting into its rostrum. These types of "floating" lines commonly are used by lobstermen and gillnetters who fish with ropes that are lighter than water and float off-bottom between traps or between nets and anchors. There is a growing consensus among Massachusetts fishermen that lowering the profile of these lines will prevent entanglements. DMF will propose new regulations at November public hearings to prohibit or restrict this line type.

The season was another success for right whale population studies. Over 80 different whales were photographed in Cape Cod Bay from mid-December through April 29. The season was typical with the daily survey counts peaking in late March and early April. In late April, right whales departed on schedule in herd-like fashion from the Bay. Their exodus was abrupt with the daily survey count from the

Critical Habitat dropping from 18 on April 29 to zero two days later on May 1.

After a few years of depressingly poor reproduction (only five calves born in the last two years), the population got a boost this year with 30 newborn calves sighted off Florida and Georgia in the southeast Critical Habitats during December through March. On schedule the mothers and calves began arriving in Cape Cod Bay during the first week of April, and at least 6 were successfully identified.

The optimism generated by this record number of births has been tempered by the death of four calves. On two occasions, carcasses were seen floating off the Southeast U.S. coast, and scientists have not determined their causes of death. The second two dead calves were victims of vessel collisions and were seen off Virginia and Long Island, NY. Fishing gear entanglements are not linked to any of these four mortalities.

By Dan McKiernan For more information see DMF's web site <http://www.state.ma.us/dfwele/dmf/dmfrtwhl> or CCS' site at: <http://www.coastalstudies.org/>.



"Calvin" an entangled 9-yr. old female spotted by the DMF/CCS surveillance team in Cape Cod Bay off Plymouth. CCS staff tied a satellite transmitter to the trailing line and documented an impressive migration over five weeks between the two "Critical Habitats" of Cape Cod Bay and Great South Channel. Moreover the whale spent 2/3 of the time outside these two designated areas. The line and the telemetry buoy came off the whale on its own, and the whale appears scarred but is gear-free.

