

Scientists Prepare for Risky Rescue of Entangled Whale



This breaching right whale is one of an estimated 300 right whales left in the world, making these animals one of the most endangered species on the planet.

Tom Brakefield/CORBIS

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News update (June 19, 2001): *Scientists and marine life experts postponed an attempt to rescue the Atlantic right whale Tuesday. Unfavorable winds at the rescue site caused the effort to be called off little more than an hour before the rescue team was scheduled to put to sea.*

The scientists were expected to decide later when to reschedule the rescue attempt. In the meantime, an airplane was sent to check on the status of the whale. A tag that sends a satellite signal is attached to the mammal.

Original Story:

Scientists on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, are preparing for a bold and potentially dangerous attempt on Tuesday to save the life of a 50-ton (100,000-pound) Atlantic right whale that became entangled in fishing line off the Massachusetts coast.

The line—a thick synthetic rope—is wrapped around the whale's jaw and enmeshed deeply in its body. It has caused an infection, which is spreading.

"If the line is not removed, this whale will eventually die," said Terri Rowles, a veterinarian from the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) fisheries in Woods Hole, Massachusetts.

Right whales, which can measure more than 50 feet (15 meters) in length, are nearly extinct. Hunted nearly out of existence in the 19th century for their heavy layer of blubber, the whales are now often victims of collisions with massive tankers or entanglement in fishing gear.

Scientists estimate there are only 300 right whales left, making the animals one of the most endangered species on the planet.

There is particular concern about the whale off Cape Cod because it is a 20-year-old male, which means it is important for reproduction and keeping the species extant.

The scientists were unable to attempt the rescue over the weekend because of fog and residual bad weather from tropical storm Allison. They have been tracking the whale's position with a satellite tag they attached to one end of the line.

"Unprecedented" Rescue Attempt

NOAA scientists will attempt the rescue with the Center for Coastal Studies in Provincetown. The center's scientists have been involved in the rescue of more than 50 whales over the last 20 years, but they say this one will be unprecedented.

They will try to cut the tangled line while the powerful whale is at sea, perhaps even a few feet under water and not restrained or in a confined area.

"Imagine a doctor trying to perform surgery with a scalpel attached to a fishing line, running alongside the patient attempting to make an incision," said David Mattila, head of the center's disentanglement team.

The team will approach the whale in a 17-foot (5-meter) inflatable boat, only a third as long as the whale. They will first try to tire the whale by attaching the boat directly to the mammal and making it drag the craft along the water. (Ironically, in the 19th century that technique, called the "Nantucket Sleigh Ride," was used as a first step in killing whales.)

The rescue team will be at risk. One flick of the huge whale's powerful tail would be perilous.

The team might try to sedate the whale first. A drug would be administered by a rifle-fired dart. Marine veterinarians have been calculating the proper dose. But such sedation has never been tried before.

Custom-Made Tools

To cut the line, the rescue team has prepared custom-made tools, including V-shaped knives with one edge smooth and one razor sharp. The smooth edge would slip under the line along the whale's skin, allowing the sharp edge to cut the line free. The team would then remove it.

"We have not ever tried to make cuts of rope as deeply embedded," said Charles Mayo, a senior scientist at the coastal studies center. "Whales have generally not been in such serious condition," he added, "so we're working right at the edge."

If they are unsuccessful, the scientists say they will rig the free ends of the line with buoys that will cause enough drag to help the whale free the line from its body.

Because right whales are protected under the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Act, the U.S. federal government must give permission for the procedure, which could potentially threaten the whale. The scientists were expecting to receive the go-ahead on Monday.

The whale is in desperate condition. Mattila, who took part in one rescue attempt last week, said looking at the whale in that condition "just breaks your heart."

National Geographic has sent a television crew to Massachusetts to report on the attempt to rescue the entangled whale. Watch continued television coverage of this event on [National Geographic Today](#)

Rescuers Fail to Free Entangled Whale off U.S. Coast



Surfacing Right Whale

Although right whales have been protected from whaling since 1935, the population has failed to show any significant signs of recovery. Today right whales die from collisions with ships and are often injured, scarred, or sometimes killed from entanglement in fishing gear.

Photograph by Tom Brakefield/CORBIS

Hunted to Near-Extinction

Northern right whales are among the most endangered animals in the world. Only about 300 whales of this species are left.

According to a recent Congressional report on the status of the right whale, at least 10,000 and perhaps as many as 50,000 whales once lived in the northern Atlantic Ocean. They were hunted aggressively by whalers in the 19th century for their oil and bones, and got their common name from being known as the right whale to hunt.

After the total population was devastated as a result of whaling, the right whale was the first whale species to be given international protection, beginning in the 1930s.

The whales were always easy targets for whalers because they are slow swimmers who tend to feed near the surface. Now, the greatest danger they face is entanglement in fishing gear, such as fish weirs, deep sea lobster lines, gill nets, and ropes.

Collisions with vessels also reduce the number of right whales, some of whom feed near the surface in heavily traveled shipping lanes.

Last week, a female right whale calf was found belly up in the waters off Long Island, the victim of a boat propeller that had sliced fatally into her back.

Scientists say the limited reproduction of right whales—only 25 calves were born this year—means the loss of any individual member, especially a male of reproductive age, could affect recovery of the entire species.

Their dedication to freeing the whale seems to have given the scientists involved a strong sense of purpose. Said Mayo: "We are dealing with the last dregs of a population that lived along these shores happily by tens of thousands, [but were] decimated by my ancestors.

"We are down to the last act," he added, but "we can truly have an influence on that."

Watch continued television coverage of this event on National Geographic Today, only on the National Geographic Channel, 7 p.m. ET/PT in the United States. [Click here to request it.](#)