

ZOOLOGY

The North Atlantic Right Whale: Disappearing Giants. Revised and Updated Edition

By Scott Kraus, Marilyn Marx, Heather Pettis, Amy Knowlton, and Kenneth Mallory. 2019. Fitzhenry & Whiteside. 140 pages, 24.95 USD, Paper.

North Atlantic Right Whales (NARW; *Eubalaena glacialis*) have been in the news quite a bit over the last three years in Canada, beginning in 2017 with the deaths of 12 NARW in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. This may not seem like a huge number, but with around 400 individuals left, mortality events like this are noteworthy. The Government of Canada acted surprisingly quickly, enacting vessel slowdown measures and fisheries closures to reduce the risk of ship strikes and entanglements, respectively. This management strategy apparently worked, with no NARW found dead in Canadian waters in 2018. But 2019 was a dire season again, with eight or nine NARW found dead in Canadian waters. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the United States have even labelled these mortalities as Unusual Mortality Events. *Disappearing Giants* outlines the plight of NARW, paying particular attention to the recent Unusual Mortality Event that the population underwent. This book provides a useful, relatively concise overview of the conservation issues surrounding this species, and could be especially interesting for Canadian readers who want to learn more about this species following the recent deaths in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Disappearing Giants is a clearly written, non-technical overview of NARW, filled with wonderful photos of the whales. Close to 50% of the book is filled with photos, so beyond the interesting content, it would be a great book to leave out on a coffee table. This book is written by researchers from the New England Aquarium, some of whom, including main author Kraus, have been studying NARW since the 1970s. The book educates readers about NARW, with a brief chapter on evolution, followed by their history with humans, starting with centuries of whaling that devastated the population, to current research and



threats to the species. While all of the 14 species of baleen or great whales (Mysticetes) were target species for whalers, the ‘right whales’ to hunt were the three species of right whales (*Eubalaena* spp., including NARW) and Bowhead Whales (*Balaena mysticetus*; Family Balaenidae) because they were easier to recover after they were killed: when they die, they tend to float on the surface, unlike rorqual whales (Family Balaenopteridae) that typically sink once they die. The commercial hunt for NARW ended in 1935 and, at that point, it was thought that only 100 whales were left. The population has recovered since then, but not as well as other right whale species, such as Southern Right Whales (*Eubalaena australis*). A main reason for this difference is that NARW live along the Atlantic coast of North America, where they are constantly exposed to ship traffic and active fishing grounds, leading to continued human-caused mortality.

Disappearing Giants doesn’t just focus on the bleak history of NARW. It ends on a chapter called “Hope for the Future”, where the authors describe reasons why we shouldn’t give up on NARW, and should continue working towards helping this species recover. The authors outline recent management initiatives that have been quite effective in reducing mortalities of NARW and, perhaps most importantly, describe the collaborative nature of NARW conservation initiatives, where like-minded people have come together to address conservation issues surrounding NARW. These collaborations are a crucial aspect of the recovery of this species, and do indeed give me hope that the conservation issues surrounding NARW are solvable, which will hopefully lead to recovery.

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