

Experts gather to solve mystery of largest recorded die-off of great whales

March 16 2010



A mother and calf pair of southern right whales in the waters of coastal Patagonia. Whale and health experts from the Wildlife Conservation Society and other organizations have gathered for a workshop to examine the possible causes of an increasing die-off of right whale calves. Credit: G. Harris/Wildlife Conservation Society

What is causing the largest die-off of great whales ever recorded?

To answer that question, a team of whale and health experts from the Wildlife Conservation Society have joined experts from other organizations at a workshop sponsored by the International Whaling Commission on the Patagonian coast of Argentina to try and solve a perplexing and urgent mystery.

At issue is the long-term conservation of the southern right whale, one of

the world's great conservation success stories and the focus of a thriving eco-tourism industry along Argentina's Patagonian coast. Over the past five years, health experts from WCS and biologists working around the famed Península Valdés—an important calving ground for right [whales](#) and a World Heritage Site—have recorded an alarming increase in the number of dead right whale calves.

The workshop— hosted by the Centro Nacional Patagónico (CONICET)—convenes in Puerto Madryn in Chubut Province March 15-18 for the purpose of identifying the possible causes of the die-off and formulating conservation recommendations and future research to better understand them.

"We need to critically examine possible causes for this increase in calf mortality so we can begin to explore possible solutions," said Dr. Marcela Uhart, associate director of WCS's Global Health Program and one of the early founders of the program that discovered the problem. "Finding the cause may require an expansion of monitoring activities to include the vast feeding grounds for the species."

The Wildlife Conservation Society's Global Health Program helped establish the Southern Right Whale Health Monitoring Program, a consortium of NGOs that has recorded an increasing number of whale calf mortalities in Golfo San José and Golfo Nuevo, located on the north and south of Península Valdés. Other members of the monitoring program include: the Ocean Alliance / Whale Conservation Institute (OA/WCI); Instituto de Conservación de Ballenas (ICB); Fundación Patagonia Natural (FPN); and Fundación Ecocentro.

Since 2005, a total of 308 dead whales were recorded in the waters around Peninsula Valdés, 88 percent of which were calves less than three months old. The deaths constitute 28 percent of live calf sightings during that period.

Examination of samples taken from the beached whale calves ruled out many of the suspected causes, and some have revealed unusually thin blubber layers.

In 2009, the Scientific Committee of the IWC identified the die-off as a management priority, prompting the organization of the workshop.

"Península Valdés is one of the most important calving and nursing grounds for the species found throughout the Southern Hemisphere," said Dr. Howard Rosenbaum, director of the WCS's Ocean Giants Program and a member of the IWC's Scientific Committee. "By working with the government of Argentina, the Province of Chubut, the IWC, and our diverse team of experts and specialists, we can increase our chances of solving this mystery, the critical next step to ensuring a future for this population of southern right whales."

Workshop participants will consider a number of hypotheses on the cause or causes of calf mortalities such as: biotoxins; disease; environmental factors at their nursing grounds; and potential variations in prey availability at the whales' distant feeding grounds.

The workshop also includes participants from: the Centro Nacional Patagónico; the Zoological Society of London; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA); the World Conservation Union (IUCN); the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution; the British Antarctic Survey; the Marine Mammal Center; the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission; and other local and international organizations.

Growing up to 55 feet in length and weighing up to 60 tons, the southern right whale is now the most abundant species of [right whale](#) in the world. Unlike the North Atlantic and North Pacific right whales (both of which number in the low hundreds), southern rights have managed to rebound from centuries of commercial whaling, with populations growing at

approximately seven percent annually since 1970. Of the estimated total population of southern right whales found throughout the entire Southern Hemisphere, around one third use the protected bays of Península Valdés as a calving and nursing habitat between the months of June and December.

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

Citation: Experts gather to solve mystery of largest recorded die-off of great whales (2010, March 16) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-03-experts-mystery-largest-die-off-great.html>

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