

## UF researchers to document boating patterns; could aid endangered whales

August 30 2010, by Mickie Anderson

One of the world's most endangered whale species makes its way south every winter to give birth in waters near northeast Florida and southeast Georgia. During that trip, North Atlantic right whales face two major threats: fishing gear and boats.

University of Florida researchers are embarking on a two-year study that is the first attempt to map boating traffic patterns in the northeast Florida area.

Mapping those patterns could, in turn, allow whale managers to better focus outreach efforts and more accurately assess the effects of future marine-related projects on protected species.

The UF researchers, Bob Swett and Charles Sidman, will use geographic information system, or GIS, technology to better understand boater travel patterns off the coasts of St. Johns, Duval and Nassau counties. The work will begin with boater surveys, answering questions about their usual routes and seasonal boating habits.

The researchers will also take to the air to log positions and characteristics of recreational boats. Then, all of the information will become part of a graphic representation that will help managers and policy makers understand what's happening in area waterways.

"Once you have the patterns, you can start comparing them to the known sightings of right whales—to find the hotspots, if you will," said Sidman,



associate director for research for Florida <u>Sea</u> Grant, a UF-hosted ocean and coastal science program that works closely with UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

Swett, a GIS expert, is an associate professor in UF's school of forest resources and conservation. He also coordinates the Florida Sea Grant Boating and Waterway Management Program.

Somewhere between 325 and 400 whales remain of the species that was hunted nearly to extinction by 18th- and 19th-century whalers.

It's been illegal to hunt right whales since 1935, but vessel strikes and fishing gear entanglement continue to be a threat to the creatures, which can grow 55 feet long and weigh 70 tons.

The whales typically arrive off the Florida-Georgia coast in December and stay until early spring, said Barb Zoodsma, a biologist with the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration who coordinates right whale recovery efforts in the Southeast. NOAA is funding the \$246,000 study.

Awareness among recreational boaters about right whales is not as high as it could be, she said, and the whales are more frequently seen bearing scars from collisions with boat-engine propellers.

Although rules state that boaters must keep well away from <u>right whales</u>, captains she's spoken with after collisions said they never saw the animal before impact.

"From what captains have described to me, the impact is so tremendous that at first, they thought they'd hit a large container that had fallen off a ship," she said. "So it's not just about protecting the whales, it's a boatersafety issue, too."



## Provided by University of Florida

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