

Notifying speeding mariners lowers ship speeds in areas with North Atlantic right whales

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This image depicts a group of four North Atlantic right whales, approximately 1% of the entire species in a single photograph. Credit: NOAA

There are only around 500 North Atlantic right whales alive today. In an effort to further protect these critically endangered animals, a recent

NOAA regulation required large vessels to reduce speed in areas seasonally occupied by the whales. The policy of notifying—but not necessarily citing—speeding vessels in protected areas was effective in lowering their speeds, helping to protect these magnificent creatures from ship collisions, while keeping punitive fines to mariners to a minimum.

A NOAA regulation, instituted in December 2008, requires vessels 65 feet or greater in length to travel at speeds of 10 knots or less in areas seasonally occupied by the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale. In a NOAA-led study, published today, researchers examined the compliance with speed regulations by 8,009 individual vessels that made more than 200,000 trips between November 2008 and August 2013, mostly in areas where the endangered whales are known to travel. All vessels were remotely monitored by radio signals sent from the vessels themselves.

Virtually all ships received notification of the speed regulations. The owners or operators of 437 of these ships received non-punitive notifications of violations and were reminded of the regulation, or cited after they were observed violating the restrictions. Twenty-six of them received citations and were fined.

Compliance with the regulation was low at the beginning of the regulatory period but steadily improved, according to the study. Vessels that received fines or citations later showed improved compliance. Informational letters issued by NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement, monthly public summaries of vessel operations, and direct at-sea radio contact also were effective in keeping the vessels in compliance with the law.

"We've shown that notifying the mariners of their responsibilities, along with issuing citations when applicable, results in widespread

compliance," said Donna Wieting, director of the NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources. "We appreciate working with the industry as a trusted partner in conserving natural resources and [endangered species](#)."

Cargo vessels showed the greatest improvement in compliance, followed by tankers and passenger [vessels](#). According to the article, the results could likely be applied in other settings where remote monitoring for compliance is feasible.

"The novel way to remotely monitor and enforce regulatory compliance in a large international community and on a broad geographic scale has been truly impressive," said Bruce Buckson, director of NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement. "This is evidenced by the quantified increase in compliance rates. And increased [compliance](#) equals better protection."

North Atlantic Right Whales, among the most endangered of marine mammals, are highly vulnerable to collisions with ships. The two biggest threats they face are ship strikes and entanglements in fishing gear. Scientists estimate that there are as few as 500 of these whales alive today. NOAA scientists have not seen one critically endangered right whale that has been struck by a large vessel in the areas where the ship strike reduction rule applies, since it went into effect.

More information: Silber GK, Adams JD, Fonnesebeck CJ. (2014), Compliance with vessel speed restrictions to protect North Atlantic right whales. PeerJ 2:e399 [dx.doi.org/10.7717/peerj.399](https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.399)

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