

Whale entanglements drop, but remain major threat, feds say

June 28 2022, By PATRICK WHITTLE



In this photo provided by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, an endangered North Atlantic right whale entangled in fishing rope is sighted on Dec. 2, 2021, with a newborn calf in waters near Cumberland Island, Ga. The federal government released data on Tuesday, June 28, 2022, that said entanglements of whales in fishing gear declined in 2020, but the entanglements remained a dangerous threat to endangered species such as the North Atlantic

right whale. Credit: Georgia Department of Natural Resources/NOAA Permit via AP, File

The number of whales entangled in fishing gear has declined recently, but the entanglements remain a critical threat to rare species, the federal government said in a report released Tuesday.

There were 53 confirmed cases of large whales entangled in gear in the U.S. in 2020, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said Tuesday. That was a 25% decline from the previous year and a lower figure than the 13-year average, the agency said.

Entanglement in fishing gear is one of the two biggest threats to declining species of whales, particularly North Atlantic right whales, which number less than 340 in the world. The other threat is collisions with ships.

Every [coastal region](#) except Alaska saw a decrease in whale entanglements, NOAA said. The agency said it will take more research to determine the cause of the decline in entanglements, and it's possible that the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of both fishing activities and data reporting could have played a role.

It's also possible that factors unrelated to the pandemic could have played a role, as "some regions have reported large-scale environmental changes, like marine heat waves, that may also be affecting large whale entanglement rates and reporting," the agency said in the report.

More than half the entangled whales were humpback whales, which are popular with whale watchers and have a relatively stable worldwide population. However, four of the whales were North Atlantic right

whales, which are in the midst of population decline due to recent years of high mortality and poor reproduction.

The [right whales](#) give birth off Florida and Georgia and migrate north to the waters off New England and Canada to feed. Scientists and conservationists have sounded alarms in recent years that warming waters seem to be causing the whales to stray from protected areas of ocean in search of food.

The current level of entanglements is more than whales can stand, said Kristen Monsell, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, a [conservation group](#). The group and others have pushed for tighter restrictions on commercial fishing to prevent the whales from entanglement.

"These reports show far too many endangered whales are caught in [fishing gear](#), particularly because reported entanglements are just the tip of the iceberg," Monsell said.

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