

ship strikes and whales: preventing a collision course

the chance for a whale to be struck by a ship

ship speed



► North Atlantic right whale swims through ship traffic.



Photo: New England Aquarium/Taken under permit authorized by NOAA

Whales around the world are threatened by collisions with vessels, known as ship strikes, often resulting in severe injury or death. Ship strikes are not only a welfare issue, but also a huge conservation concern.

Research indicates that for every whale we see that has been fatally injured by a ship strike, around 20 whales with the same fate go undetected (i.e. 20:1 ratio).

Whales face many threats in the ocean today, but collisions are one issue that can be addressed and reduced with straightforward solutions. Globally, both the number of ships and the speeds at which ships are able to travel have increased in the last few decades and this means a greater risk of ship strikes and injuries to whales, particularly where shipping activities overlap with critical whale habitat. However, research suggests that a moderate 10% speed reduction of all ships worldwide could half the risk of ship strikes.

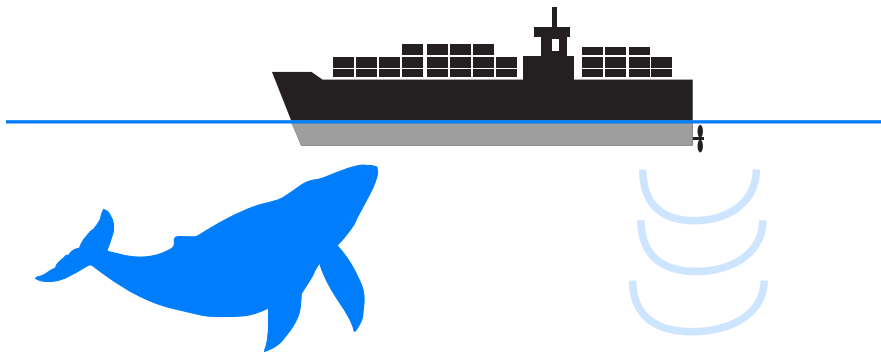
Where possible, busy shipping lanes used by commercial vessels much like highways for cars, can also be moved away from critical whale habitat where they feed and breed.

IFAW works with governments, regulators and industry to move shipping lanes and implement speed reductions where needed to keep whales safe from strikes around the world. Here are some examples of our work:

Sri Lanka - blue whales

High numbers of unique Indian Ocean blue whales are found off the southern tip of Sri Lanka in one of the busiest shipping routes in the world, resulting in a particularly high risk of ship strike.

Research shows that a small shift in the current shipping lanes to the south would greatly reduce the risk to blue whales off Sri Lanka, a move widely supported by the shipping industry.



10%

speed reduction of the worldwide shipping fleet could result in a

50%

estimated reduction of the risk of ship strikes and a

40%

reduction in underwater noise and GHG emission reduced considerably

<360

North Atlantic right whales remain in the world today

▶ The North Atlantic right whale has joined a growing list of animals on the brink of extinction and is now officially classified as 'Critically Endangered'.

East coast USA – North Atlantic right whale

According to the latest estimate, the North Atlantic right whale population numbers are less than 360 individual whales. This species is 'Critically Endangered' and collisions with vessels are one of the main threats to the survival of this species. The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has established regulations to reduce the likelihood of deaths and serious injuries to these whales from collisions, and all vessels 65 ft (19.8 m) or longer must travel at 10 knots or less in certain locations and at particular times of the year.

Hellenic Trench, Greece - sperm whales

The Hellenic Trench is core habitat for the eastern Mediterranean sperm whale sub-population, which is believed to number just a few hundred individuals and is listed as 'Endangered' on the IUCN Red List. This critical habitat overlaps with busy shipping routes, creating a serious ship strike problem, with 61% of the stranded sperm whales along Greek coasts showing signs of a collision with a large vessel. Here, small changes in current shipping routes would dramatically reduce risk for these sperm whales.

▶ see how at ifaw.org



#SaveOurSeas



Photo: Brian Skerry

Why do vessel strikes often go undetected and unreported?

- ▶ Problem of detecting whales: A mid-sized container vessel is about 320m long. In comparison, the largest whale is the blue whale at about 33m length and most of its body at any given time is underneath the water's surface.
- ▶ Dead whales often sink to the bottom of the sea or are carried away by currents—only a small proportion wash up on a beach or are carried into harbours.
- ▶ Many mariners do not know about reporting requirements for ship strikes, which means the number of whales struck is underreported and figures underrepresent actual incidents.

Why don't whales get out of the way?

The many, complex reasons for collisions are not yet fully understood, but there are some possible explanations. For one, most collisions occur in areas that whales need to survive—core feeding habitat, calving grounds or spaces that whales need to traverse during their annual migration. If these whales were to move out of such areas, they would not find food or could not rear their young ones in good conditions. Shipping, particularly the size, speed and number of ships, has changed drastically over the last 50 years. So, a long-lived animal such as a blue whale will have experienced these seismic changes in the shipping