

TOP 10 NOMINATION FORM

2020 Topic: Illegal wildlife (plants and animals) trafficking and unsustainable trade

Species must meet these qualifications:

- Must be native U.S. species or international species with significant U.S. demand
- Must be experiencing substantial decline (do not have to be threatened/endangered listed)
- Must be directly or indirectly impacted
 - Direct: exploited as trophies, pets, medicines, etc.
 - Indirect: impacted by imported exotics or imported disease vectors (e.g., chytrid)

Your Name: CT Harry – US Marine Campaigner, Kate Wall – Senior Legislative Manager

Organization: International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW)

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Nominated Species (Common Name & Scientific Name):

North Atlantic right whale, *Eubalaena glacialis*

Question 1: Threat to the Species

How is the species and/or its habitat threatened by illegal wildlife trafficking and/or unsustainable trade? Note the extent of the threat and whether it is direct or indirect. Include references to relevant scientific studies. Does the species face any associated political threats?

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, historical “Yankee whaling” drove the species’ decline from a population numbering in the tens of thousands down to a mere few hundred animals. The unsustainable practice of killing right whales for their blubber to be used in commercial products such as lamp oil set the species on a perilous future path of uncertainty for species survival.

Fast forward to the present where fortunately commercial whaling has ended but a whole new suite of threats (entanglements, vessel strikes, ocean noise exposure from commercial shipping and offshore development, marine pollution, and climatic changes affecting food resources) are all current obstacles preventing recovery.

Regarding political threats, the current administration has sought to reduce funding for research related to specific right whale conservation efforts within NOAA, dismantle the Marine Mammal Commission, and open much of the Atlantic coast/OCS to fossil fuel development overlapping critical right whale feeding and calving grounds, and has taken countless actions to reverse progress on addressing climate change.

Question 2: Role of the Species

What is the ecological and/or scientific importance of the species?

Note if it is a keystone species and describe its role in its environment. Include references to relevant scientific studies.

Right whales are considered key [marine ecosystem engineers](#). They are important predators of zooplankton throughout their range, and have been found to support nutrient recycling and primary productivity. In a recent [International Monetary Fund \(IMF\) report](#), it was determined that whales in general are considered a very effective and efficient at “natural” climate change mitigation and thus critically important to protect vulnerable populations,

In addition to their ecological role, right whales make up an important component of the whale watching industry, a valuable source of both economic growth supporting a multi-billion dollar industry and public enjoyment. NOAA Fisheries, in a 2008 analysis, estimated that Americans value right whale recovery at an annual sum of \$4.28 billion.

Question 3: Message

What is the most important message about this species for decision-makers and the public?

This iconic marine mammal is at a tipping point and the population will not recover without serious intervention. It demonstrates how difficult it is to recover a species that has been pushed to the brink of extinction by unsustainable trade practices. With a known population of approx. 400 individuals of which less than 100 reproductively active females remain, recent population metrics suggest that without concerted and immediate action in the next five years to reduce the two main threats to survivorship (entanglement in fishing gear and vessel collisions), right whales are likely to pass the “point of no return” for recovery. If we fail to act, these threats will likely push the species to extinction within our lifetime. Weakening the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and failing to fund critical marine conservation programs jeopardize the entire species’ continued existence.

Final Selections

If my nomination is selected for inclusion in the report, I would like the first draft of the species profile for the report to be written by (choose one):

You (ESC), and then my NGO will edit the profile and approve the final draft.

Me (my NGO). I understand that I (and other participating writers) will need to adhere to ESC’s writing guidelines.

Deadline: May 8, 2020

Send to: top10@endangered.org