



AS IT IS

US Agency Studies Rare Whale Habitat Expansion Request

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The U.S. government has agreed to a request from environmental groups to study increasingly important **habitats** for North Pacific right **whales**.

The animals are among the rarest whales in the world. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries estimates there are about 30 North Pacific right whales left in the world. Centuries of hunting, ship strikes, and entrapment in fishing equipment have badly harmed the **species**. They have been listed as **endangered** since 1973.

In 2008, NOAA declared two areas in the northern Pacific Ocean as critical habitats for the whales. One area is about 3,043 square kilometers in the Gulf of Alaska. The other is 91,841 square kilometers in the southeast Bering Sea.

Two groups -- the Center for Biological Diversity and Save the North Pacific Right Whale -- are asking the agency to increase the protected areas by connecting them.

NOAA said in a statement that this would increase the Bering Sea boundary west and south. The proposal would also extend the critical habitat area off Alaska's Kodiak Island east to the Gulf of Alaska to include new feeding grounds. The Center for Biological Diversity said these feeding grounds for the whales were confirmed by new research.

Kristin Carden is a scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity. She said in a statement, "Safeguarding the North Pacific right whale's habitat is **crucial** to protecting these **magnificent** animals."

Carden added, "The threats to North Pacific right whales grow with each passing day."

NOAA Fisheries said the extended habitat would include productive fishing areas and paths that many ships take. But it also would include places where the large whales have been seen and heard.

The environmental groups said in their request to NOAA that physical and biological **features** in the proposed critical habitat require special considerations and protections. They may include placing speed limits on ships.

Keven Champion is with the Save the North Pacific Right Whale group. He said the proposal is, “is a step in the right direction for making sure these animals get to exist on the planet.”

NOAA Fisheries is taking comments on the proposal until September. The agency must publish its decision within a year.

I’m Jill Robbins.

Mark Thiessen reported this story for The Associated Press. Gregory Stachel adapted it for VOA Learning English.

Words in This Story

habitat – *n.* the place or type of place where a plant or animal naturally or normally lives or grows

whale – *n.* an often very large animal that lives in the ocean and that is a mammal rather than a fish

species – *n.* a group of animals or plants that are similar and can produce young animals or plants

endangered – *adj.* used to describe a type of animal or plant that has become very rare and that could die out completely

crucial – *adj.* extremely important

magnificent – *adj.* very beautiful or impressive

feature – *n.* an interesting or important part, quality, or ability,

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