

Book Review

NORTH ATLANTIC RIGHT WHALES: FROM HUNTED LEVIATHAN TO CONSERVATION ICON. David W. Laist. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, USA, 2017. ISBN 978-1421420981, 464 pp.

I'll give you the punch line right up-front—I liked this book very much and strongly recommend it. David Laist has accomplished a remarkable feat of research and scholarship in covering the entire sweep of the history of North Atlantic right whales. Every student or scientist interested in conservation of right whales or other endangered species ought to read this book carefully. Before getting into more details, however, I need to make a few disclaimers. David is a long-time colleague and friend whom I have long respected as a tireless advocate for right whale conservation (and he inscribed my copy); the focus is on the species that has been the primary focus of my research for most of my career; and I read and commented on segments of the book while he was writing it, so I was already anxious to see the completed whole.

This is not your typical whale book. David's objective was to step back and take a long-term, wide-angle view of the issues surrounding the conservation of what is likely the world's most endangered large whale species. Following the preface, the book includes 22 chapters, each with more or less voluminous endnotes and multiple black-and-white illustrations; eight pages of color plates in the middle; a short appendix that attempts to summarize whaling kills in the Strait of Belle Isle, Newfoundland, and along the U.S. Atlantic coast; and a 10-page index.

Chapter 1 sets the stage, describing the conservation issues via stories of some of the early disentanglement attempts by the Center for Coastal Studies. Chapter 2 ("What's in a Name?") explains in detail why we call the species *Eubalaena glacialis* rather than one of a number of other alternatives. The third and fourth chapters describe David's hypothesis for the convergent evolution of feeding structures in right whales and flamingos and a summary of the right whale's evolutionary history.

The next ten chapters cover the history of right whaling (including bowheads) in the North Atlantic—from prehistory to the Middle Ages, the Basques, the Dutch, the English, and finally the

Americans. The number of sources consulted and cited in these chapters boggles the mind; in all, the ten chapters include 553 endnotes, some of which include two or three separate sources. This book is my new go-to source, and recommended source for anyone else, for the history of North Atlantic whaling and for an exhaustive entry into the primary source material when needed.

Chapter 15 is about the near-impossibility of estimating, with any level of confidence, how many North Atlantic right whales inhabited the ocean before the first Arctic aboriginal or Viking hunter or Basque whaler stuck a harpoon into one. Chapter 16 then brings us into the 20th century, from the beginnings of whale conservation with the first International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling in 1937 to the latest Convention in 1946. It also describes the beginnings of modern right whale research by Bill Schevill and Bill Watkins in Cape Cod Bay and David and Melba Caldwell in Florida. Chapter 17 is entitled "A Dedicated Recovery Program," covering the 1970s through 1990s in the U.S.—from the enactment of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and Endangered Species Act to the crafting of a recovery plan and appointment of two recovery implementation teams, as well as the initial designation of Critical Habitat. David really hits his stride from this point forward because he was an important part of it, having joined the staff of the Marine Mammal Commission only five years after its creation under the new MMPA. His direct participation in much of the action brings a unique and personal perspective to the narrative.

Four of the last five chapters bring us up to the present in the struggle to conserve a population that has been and still is in serious danger of extinction because of excess human-caused mortality, principally from ship strikes and fishery entanglement.

Chapters 20 and 21 describe the tangled mess (pun absolutely intentional) involved in trying to reduce anthropogenic mortality caused by entanglement in fishing gear. No matter what your favorite metaphor for slow movement may be—tortoise, snail, glacier, molasses, that certain brand of ketchup—all are fast compared to action on regulating fisheries to reduce whale entanglements. Here again, David's intimate involvement in the process provides the reader with an

insider's perspective on why progress has been so painfully slow. The final chapter—"Ten Thousand Right Whales"—wraps up with thoughts for the future: short- and long-term prospects for the North Atlantic right whale population, possibilities for new ways to monitor populations and to either avoid or mitigate impacts, and new and/or expanding impacts on the horizon, while looming over everything the threat of climate change. David ends on perhaps a more optimistic note than I might:

And North Atlantic right whales could rise from the depths of former whaling grounds like a phoenix from the ashes of ruin to once again enliven coastal waters of not only North America but also Europe and northwestern Africa and resume the role they once played in creating a rich and productive ecosystem.

Given the complexity of the material and the sheer volume of references consulted, the number of errors I found was not consequential. Tighter copy-editing would have helped, but that seems to be a thing of the past. I found no errors that really altered the point that the author was trying to make. The illustrations were numerous and helpful. A few were somewhat dark, but that is probably unavoidable when reproducing figures from centuries-old books and manuscripts. None of this detracts from my whole-hearted recommendation to add this book to your library shelf (or your digital library; it is also available in a Kindle edition).

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