

Offshore Wind and Whale Protection

Whale strandings and deaths along the east coast have been increasing since 2016. Why? We need to address the real threats to these endangered species.

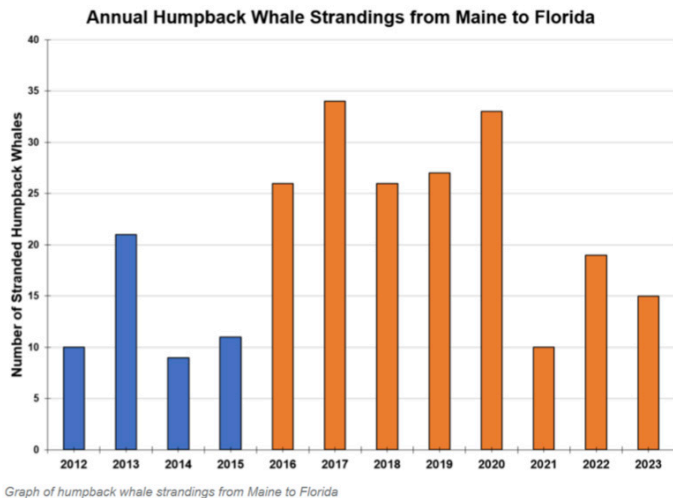


Background

Several highly publicized and heartbreaking whale strandings and deaths have occurred off the coast of NY since December 2022, including a minke whale stranding in the Rockaways and a humpback whale stranding in Lido Beach. Unfortunately, both of these whales later died, bringing the count of whale deaths in the New York/New Jersey region to a dozen between December 2022 and March 2023.¹

Whale Mortality Events off the Atlantic Coast

Recent whale strandings have led to increased media and public attention. Due to an increase in humpback whale fatalities off the Atlantic coast, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration declared an Unusual Mortality Event for humpback whales in 2017.² This chart below from NOAA identifies 2017 as being the worst year to date for whale mortalities with 78 whale deaths on our shores.



gear as the greatest human threats to these species. Since the Covid pandemic there is a 35% increase in the volume of shipping to NY and NJ ports since 2019.⁵ Unfortunately, increases in cargo ships is an increased threat to whales.

Another ongoing threat to whale populations, as well as other marine mammals and fish populations, is climate change. Warming waters can lead to the loss of humpback whale breeding grounds, with predictions that humpback whales could lose 36% of their breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere by the end of the century.⁶ Changes in the food web and warming waters also mean whales are more likely to come near-shore, increasing the risk of strikes and entanglement.⁷ Greenhouse gas emissions are not only causing air pollution, but also leading to ocean acidification. The changing pH levels of our oceans and estuaries is already impacting shellfish populations off NY's coast in the South Shore Estuary Reserve, Long Island Sound, and Peconic Estuary. Ocean acidification's impact on smaller species like pteropods, tiny snails that act as a food source for larger species including whales, poses a significant threat for local marine species.⁸

Some have questioned the role of offshore wind exploration as a potential factor. It is important to note that the increase in whale mortality events started in 2016, far before any offshore wind development was occurring off our shores. **In fact, there is no evidence that offshore wind is a contributing factor to any of these strandings or deaths.**^{3,4}

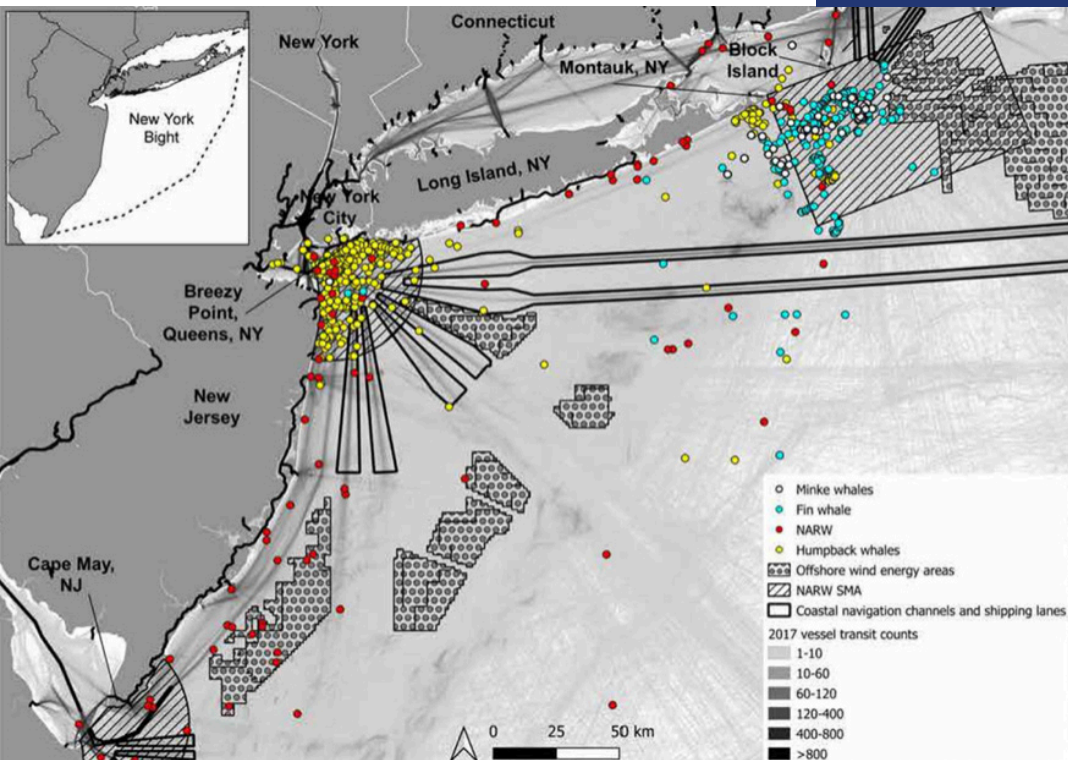
Here is what we know - Necropsies have been performed on approximately half of the 181 whales that died through February 2023. The results showed that 40% had evidence of either entanglement in fishing gear or a ship strike. This is consistent with studies across the country and the globe, which identify ship strikes and fishing

Offshore Wind for New York

Offshore wind may be new to NY however it has been used around the globe for 30+ years. For example, studies on whale fatalities off the coast of the UK, which has 2,600+ offshore wind turbines and has been generating offshore wind power for over 20 years, found no evidence that any whale deaths were the result of offshore wind.⁹ Europe and China both generate over 25,000 mw of offshore wind each, yet there has been no evidence that these large-scale wind projects have caused increases in whale mortality events either.

Some have questioned the potential impacts from noise during offshore wind surveys and the fact that part of regulatory process

involved authorized "Incidental Takes" of whales. Unfortunately, the word "take" is misleading and may cause the public to believe a whale is harmed. This is not the case. Offshore wind companies are not allowed to kill a whale. NOAA is clear that these "takes" are potential temporary behavioral impacts and that they have not and will not authorize any serious injury or mortality of whales. NOAA has found no link between ongoing surveys and any whale injuries or deaths.¹⁰ The sound used in offshore wind surveys is far less invasive than the sound for oil and gas exploration, which involved seismic blasting, and wind companies are not permitted to use levels of sonar at frequencies that could be fatal to whales.¹¹



Who is Opposing Offshore Wind?

There is genuine concern over the increase in whale mortality events. We need to seek out the real reasons for whale deaths and not fall victim to those who are using whale deaths to advance an anti-wind agenda. Groups who may be spreading the myth that offshore wind is responsible for whale strandings and deaths are exploiting whale deaths instead of using their resources to protect whales.



Environmental Experts Support Offshore Wind

Climate change is a substantive threat to whales, wildlife, and our communities which is why **environmental groups have been overwhelmingly supportive of offshore wind**. There are several things that we can do to protect whales off our coasts.

1. PREVENT SHIP STRIKES: One of the most important actions to protect whale populations is to mandate ships decrease speed. There has been some action taken to reduce ship speed off the coast, but more can be done. Mandating slowing the speed of boats, particularly in Dynamic Management Areas and Seasonal Management Areas gives whales more time to move out of the way of vessels and decreases the damage done in the event of a ship strike.

2. PREVENTING ENTANGLEMENT IN FISHING GEAR: Commercial fishing gear continues to injure and kill whales and other marine mammals. The gear, including fishing nets and vertical lines, are often difficult to see for these animals. Once they become entangled, the gear can weigh them down and disrupt their ability to feed. Globally, there is an estimated 640,000 tons of fishing gear lost in our oceans each year.¹²

3. REDUCE PLASTIC POLLUTION: Over 80% of the pollution in our global marine environment comes from land-based sources, and of this marine pollution is plastic debris.¹³ If we do nothing, there will be more pounds of plastic than pounds of fish of our oceans by 2050.¹⁴ This ubiquitous plastic pollution can kill whales and other wildlife as result of ingestion, starvation, suffocation, infection, drowning, and entanglement. Reducing the amount of single-use plastics and plastic packaging we use is critical to protecting our whales and other marine species.

4. REDUCE FOSSIL FUEL POLLUTION: One of the greatest threats to not only whales but all wildlife and our oceans is climate change. Warming temperatures, ocean acidification, changing food webs, and altered migration and feeding habits put whales at greater risk. One thing we can do locally is support the transition off fossil fuels and towards renewable energy, which will decrease local ocean acidification in our local waterways, protect local marine species and fisheries, and help combat global climate change.



1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/28/nyregion/east-coast-whale-deaths.html>

2 <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-life-distress/2016-2023-humpback-whale-unusual-mortality-event-along-atlantic-coast>

3 <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/new-england-mid-atlantic/marine-life-distress/frequent-questions-offshore-wind-and-whales>

4 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/28/nyregion/east-coast-whale-deaths.html>

5 <https://www.panynj.gov/port-authority/en/press-room/press-release-archives/2022-press-releases/port-authority-reports-facility-volumes-for-september-2022.html>

6 <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2022.837772/full>

7 <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/humpback-whales-face-a-major-setback-from-climate-change>

8 <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/insight/understanding-ocean-acidification>

9 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/02/11/whale-deaths-and-windmills/11178432002/>

10 <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/new-england-mid-atlantic/marine-life-distress/frequent-questions-offshore-wind-and-whales>

11 <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1312/10/9/1278> Categorizing Active Marine Acoustic Sources Based on Their Potential to Affect Marine Animals

12 <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2016/09/28/495777033/whales-sea-turtles-seals-the-unintended-catch-of-abandoned-fishing-gear>

13 <https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/oceans-seas/what-we-do/working-regional-seas/land-based-pollution>

14 World Economic Forum. The New Plastics Economy Rethinking the future of plastics. 2016. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_New_Plastics_Economy.pdf



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