

## Shipping news buoys the right whale

Move ensures that the worlds of oil tankers and giant mammals no longer collide, SHAWNA RICHER writes

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Lubec, Me. — The impressive and endangered right whale is safer in its summer playground these days after a change in the busy Bay of Fundy shipping routes, which appears simple yet was anything but.

In July, 2003, after five years of research and complicated negotiations steered by Saint-John-based Irving Oil, a half-dozen interested parties, from sea captains to scientists to government, agreed to shift the international shipping lanes between New Brunswick and Nova Scotia a mere four nautical miles east of the whales' plankton-rich feeding grounds off Grand Manan Island. It has made all the difference.

A year later, the probability of a collision between a right whale and a ship has fallen 95 per cent, far exceeding the 80-per-cent goal scientists had set. Before the rerouting, 30 per cent of right whales sighted in the Bay of Fundy frolicked in the shipping lanes. Today, just 1.5 per cent of those seen are in the way of traffic.

"This has worked out better than we dreamed," said Moira Brown, a marine biologist and senior scientist with the New England Aquarium in Boston. "There is still a chance a whale could be struck by a ship, but the risk has been so reduced that we can worry a little less. Right whales need all the help they can get."

Sought eagerly by whalers as early as the 16th century and all but destroyed by the 1930s, the playful right whale was named because it was the "right" whale to hunt, desired for its oil and baleen.

Roughly 1,000 ships churn in and out of the Bay of Fundy each year. Irving Oil tankers account for more than half that traffic, which is why the company says it took the lead in finding a solution. Right whales are big -- adult females reach 17 metres -- but are no match for a tanker that stretches 335 metres and takes five kilometres to bring to a stop.

Earlier this month, scientists from the Boston-based research centre and officials from Irving Oil set out hoping to glimpse the elusive mammal in its favourite feeding spot. But with the rains and winds of tropical storm Frances licking the northeastern United States and two-metre swells breaking the bow of the Galatea, a 13-metre lobster boat owned by the aquarium, attempting to see one of the curious cetaceans was too dangerous. An hour out of Lubec, with two to go, the decision was made to turn back.

But Ms. Brown said she no longer has to see the right whales to know they are there, enjoying a much better chance of survival.

The Bay of Fundy is teeming with whales -- fin, humpback, minke and the occasional sperm whale. But the northern right whale is special. With fewer than 350 left on the planet, they are the rarest of large whales. At least three have been killed and dozens more injured by ships in the Bay of Fundy in the past decade.

Along the 2,253-kilometre stretch of the Atlantic coast that guides the whales' migratory journey between the Bay of Fundy and Florida each year, there have been 60 known right whale deaths since 1970. Twenty-one were the result of ship collisions, Ms. Brown said. Nearly three-quarters of the hundreds of mammals catalogued by the aquarium bear marks of boats or fishing-gear entanglements, another serious problem for the whales.

John Logan, a senior manager at Irving Oil who was asked in the 1990s to investigate how the company might help to preserve the right whale population, considered radar and sonar first, but discovered the wildly expensive equipment was not capable of detecting whales accurately.

So he and the environmental groups, including the aquarium and the World Wildlife Fund, approached Transport Canada with a plan for a new shipping route. He said altering the lanes has slowed traffic slightly because tankers occasionally get caught on the wrong side of the tide and must wait 12 hours, but that is not a significant worry.

"Nobody didn't want this," said Mr. Logan, who brokered the solution with the half-dozen interested parties. "It was pretty easy: Here's where the ships are; here's where the whales are. We couldn't ask the whales to move, so this was the right thing, the only thing, to do. Going into it, we weren't sure how it would affect us. Now it takes a little longer to get into Saint John [Harbour]. But it's not noticeable."

Moving a shipping route four nautical miles does not sound like a difficult move, but it took five years of discussions among Irving Oil, fishermen, scientists, tanker captains and the United Nations, the agency that governs the International Maritime Organization, which has the final say in lanes and traffic. It was the first time a sea route has been moved to accommodate an endangered species. The Bay of Fundy lanes had been in place since 1983.

"There was a lot of goodwill for this change," said Scott Kraus, director of the Edgerton Research Laboratory with the New England

Aquarium. "The partnership between scientists and the industry has been really unique. This has been the biggest conservation advance ever made for right whales, and it establishes a model between environment, business and government we hadn't really seen."

Right whales are slow swimmers and do not fear ships or their low-frequency sounds. Mr. Kraus said it's like putting a city kids' playground in the middle of a busy street.

"Whales just don't hear the [ship] traffic, and they're not afraid of it anyway," he said. "I've seen one surface 500 [metres] in front of a moving tanker and just fall asleep. There's not a high survival factor with behaviour like that. They really needed our help."



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