



North Atlantic Right Whales: From Hunted Leviathan to Conservation Icon

David W. Laist

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In the cold waters of the unforgiving North Atlantic Ocean, some of the heartiest humans of medieval days ventured out in search of whales. As the desire for whales grew through the centuries, people on both sides of the North Atlantic became increasingly dependent on whale oil and other cetacean products. Eventually, whaling grew ever more sophisticated, evolving into fleets of skilled huntsmen and leading to the collapse of what was once a seemingly inexhaustible supply of large cetaceans. Central in this struggle for existence was one species, the North Atlantic right whale. David W. Laist, a major player in right whale conservation, now provides the first complete history of the North Atlantic right whale, from its earliest encounters with humans to its close brush with extinction to its present precarious, yet hopeful, status as a conservation icon.

Favored by whalers because of its high yields of oil and superior quality baleen, these giants became known as "the right whale to hunt," and their numbers dwindled to a mere 100 individuals. Salvation of a sort came in the 1930s, when their dire status encouraged the adoption of a ban on hunting and a treaty that formed the International Whaling Commission. Recovery, however, has proven elusive. Ship-strikes and entanglement in commercial fishing gear have hampered herculean efforts to restore the stocks. Today, a total of about 500 right whales live along the US and Canadian Atlantic coasts—a great improvement from the early twentieth century, but a far cry from the thousands and thousands that once crisscrossed the oceans.

Laist's masterpiece is sprinkled with an incredible collection of photographs and artwork. The result is a single volume that offers a comprehensive understanding of North Atlantic right whales, the many cultures that hunted them, and the modern—sometimes frustrating—attempts to help them recover. This book is sure to appeal to readers interested in both whales and whaling.

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