

# Commentary: Whales are dying — Is there a link to offshore wind?

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Today, as with many other issues, our country has politicized whale deaths. With each new whale stranding, politics intervenes to either whitewash, weaponize, or silence the facts. The facts, however, stand. With yet another dead humpback whale spotted off the coast of southern New Jersey, we are witnessing an alarming number of recent whale deaths. At least nine humpback whales have died along the coast of New York and New Jersey since December. During this same period, offshore wind companies have been conducting underwater surveys along the Atlantic coast. Their preconstruction seismic surveys began in 2016-2017. The timing coincides with the onset of unusual mortality events (UMEs) for three baleen whale species, including the humpback, minke, and critically endangered North Atlantic right whale.

If an association between the surveys and whale deaths exists, the public deserves to know. Neither the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the agency tasked to protect marine mammals, nor the offshore wind companies and their supporters want to examine whether underwater surveys have contributed to the high whale mortality. In response to the recent events, the coordinated messaging of the pro-wind contingent follows a typical sequence: first, NOAA states vessel strikes and entanglements cause 40 percent of humpback whale deaths; yet, neglects to explain the remaining 60%. Next, they deny that nearby offshore wind-related surveys could have directly caused the mortality. Finally, they publish a strawman argument, asserting that climate change will drive whales to extinction regardless, in an attempt to justify the harmful effects of offshore wind activity. Their defense relies on an absence of any direct causality.

Despite these claims, a logical, indirect, link exists between underwater surveys and baleen whale deaths. The surveys discharge low-frequency sound waves in the same range that humpback whales and other baleen whale species use to both hear and communicate. To avoid distressing noise, baleen whales, including North Atlantic right whales, will swim closer to the surface, where underwater sounds are less intense. Baleen whales can experience permanent tissue damage and even death from decompression sickness if they surface too quickly. Moreover, baleen whales do not have the ability to echolocate (or use sonar) to detect objects. As a result, once close to the surface, they are more vulnerable to vessel strikes.

In 2018, the fossil fuel industry attempted to conduct similar offshore underwater surveys for oil and gas exploration (albeit employing a different sounding method). Out of concern for the safety of endangered whale species, environmental groups and scientific institutes mounted an aggressive and ultimately successful campaign to halt the surveys. Since 2019, many of these same organizations have accepted funds from offshore wind companies. Now, they remain silent about the possible association between underwater surveys and the recent spate of whale deaths.

NOAA will not release the scientific results of the whale necropsies. If the authorities have nothing to hide, why should the public not have full access to these necropsy reports? Without transparency, the deaths shall remain a mystery. Killing endangered whales, even inadvertently, violates the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act. The offshore wind companies have recently requested multiple Incidental Take Requests (ITRs). If granted, these authorizations will permit the legal harassment of marine mammals, even to the point of death. Combined, the ITRs would allow for the “taking” of thousands of marine mammals. Such requests suggest that we have not seen the last of these “mysterious” mortality events.

*This is the second in a series of commentaries written by Lisa Quattrochi Knight, M.D., Ph.D., of Little Compton and Bill Thompson of Tiverton, on behalf of Green Oceans (info@green-oceans.org). For further reading:*

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