

Ongoing significant Southern Right Whale (*Eubalaena australis*) mortality at Península Valdés, Argentina

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Between 2003 and 2014, 695 southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*) were found dead along the shores of the Península Valdés nursing ground in Argentina. These deaths include alarmingly high annual losses since 2007, a peak number of deaths in a single year in 2012 (116), and a substantial proportion of newborn calf deaths across years (626; 90%). Over the past 12 years calf mortality has averaged above 50 deaths per breeding season, greatly surpassing the previous decade's (1993-2002) average of 8.2 yearly. Furthermore, deaths in 2012 affected 113 first-season calves (97% of total deaths), and represent the highest number of natural mortalities ever recorded for the species in a single year. Factors influencing the whales' condition, behavior, and health such as biotoxins, infectious diseases, decline in food availability and kelp gull harassment (kelp gulls feed on the skin and blubber of live southern right whales at Península Valdés), as well as density-dependent processes modifying population dynamics are the main hypotheses that have been proposed to explain these recurring high mortality events. In this presentation we will discuss ongoing investigations and most significant findings to date on health, welfare and nutritional aspects, as research efforts to unravel the causes of these unexplained deaths continue. Consistent and sustained high calf mortality rates could slow the recovery of the Península Valdés southern right whale population.