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Minimizing Ship Strikes on Whales: An Integration of Science, Technology and Management in the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary

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The Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary (SBNMS) is a region of considerable contrast – a crucial migratory seasonal feeding ground for right, fin and minke whales, a site of significant fishing pressures, and an area in which over 200 large commercial ships converge to enter the Port of Boston each month. Despite long-term regulatory measures and restrictions on vessel speed and activity, marine gear entanglements and ship strikes remain the primary cause of death for the great whales (including the critically endangered northern right whale) that migrate to the sanctuary each spring from the Caribbean. Scientists, researchers and marine policy experts from SBNMS, in partnership with colleagues from other government agencies, research institutions, non-governmental organizations and academia, have developed new technologies and management schemes to greatly reduce the probability of whale mortality from ships both within and in close proximity to the sanctuary. These include the recently approved shifting of the ship traffic lane in and out of Boston Harbor (the first such alteration in U.S. history designed to protect wildlife), the placement of real-time acoustic detection buoys in the newly-realigned Boston Traffic Separation Scheme, and the continual transmittal of whale detection data from ships via the Automated Identification System. Years of research, data collection and collaborative efforts throughout Massachusetts Bay and the southern Gulf of Maine have led to these advances and the hope of far fewer whale mortalities in the near future.

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