

Gulf of Mexico Whale

The Gulf of Mexico whale is one of the most endangered whales in the world, with an estimated population of only [33 individuals](#). Because of their limited range, small population size, and the alarming amount of human-related threats they face, the Gulf of Mexico whale is on the brink of extinction.

Range of the Gulf of Mexico whale

The remote habitat of the Gulf of Mexico whale, makes it hard, but not impossible, for people to see or observe these whales. They are found exclusively in a small area off the Florida panhandle in the northeastern part of the Gulf of Mexico. They can be found along the continental shelf break in the area known as the [De Soto Canyon](#), between 400 and 1,000 feet deep. According to historical whaling records, the range of the Gulf of Mexico whale was previously much larger, including the southern and north-central Gulf of Mexico. They are the only baleen whales endemic to the Gulf and, unlike other baleen whales, they remain in the area year-round and do not migrate.



Photo Credit: Ocean Alliance

Threats

The Gulf of Mexico whale faces many threats, increasing their risk of extinction. Pervasive energy exploration and development in the Gulf requires significant supporting infrastructure like pipelines and platforms that destroy the Gulf of Mexico whale's habitat. The construction and vessel noise required to transport materials can [greatly disturb the whales](#), alerting their ability to communicate, navigate, and locate prey.

Offshore energy exploration and exploitation results in oil spills and platform disasters. After the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster, [48 percent](#) of the Gulf of Mexico whale's habitat was covered in oil. This had catastrophic effects on the whale's population and health. An estimated [17 percent](#) of the population was killed, and many of the reproductive females within the population experienced reproductive failure.

Genetic characteristics

Gulf of Mexico whales are a unique, [genetically distinct](#), subspecies of Bryde's whales and evolutionary divergent from other populations of Bryde's whales found elsewhere on the planet. Gulf of Mexico whales have very low genetic diversity, which threatens their ability to adapt to environmental changes. They are also at risk because of inbreeding depression, which reduces biological fitness within the population and their ability to survive.

Actions to protect the Gulf of Mexico whale

[September 18, 2014](#) – The Natural Resources Defense Council (“NRDC”) petitioned to list the Gulf of Mexico whale as an endangered species

[April 6, 2015](#) – The National Marine Fisheries Service (“NMFS”) published a 90-day finding that there was substantial scientific and commercial information to warrant the petition

May 5, 2016 – NRDC files a complaint about NMFS' failure to issue a 12-month finding within the statutory deadline and settlement agreement was reached

[December 8, 2016](#) – NMFS released their proposed listing for the Gulf of Mexico whale to be listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act

[February 21, 2019](#) – NRDC filed litigation for failure to issue a final rule on the listing of the Gulf of Mexico whale