

CWI makes progress in studying the North Atlantic right whale

By MARK PAVILONS
Editor

Whales are the harbingers of things to come. Helping to save one species from the brink of extinction can very well help humankind preserve our planet.

That message was delivered to supporters of the Canadian Whale Institute, during a special presentation by two top research scientists. Caledon's Sarah Haney, CWI chair, hosted *An Evening in the Company of Whales*, which brought New England Aquarium scientists Dr. Scott Kraus and Dr. Moira Brown to Caledon to share details of their work.

Haney noted Kraus has worked with marine species for more than 27 years and joined the New England Aquarium (NEAQ) in 1979. She met him in 1996 and her life "has never been the same since - it's gotten better!"

Dr. Brown was the first Canadian allowed on Dr. Kraus's boat and the accomplished researcher is now the senior scientist with NEAQ and CWI. She will receive a lifetime achievement award from the IFAW, putting her in the same company as Farley Mowat and Jane Goodall.

Dr. Kraus said the NEAQ is unique in that it contains a large research and conservation program.

Given the progress made over the years, many are under the impression the whales have been saved, but that's far from true. Anti-whaling was put in the spotlight during the '70s, largely due to the efforts of Greenpeace.

Whales have been hunted for hundreds of years, but the modern enemy of many species, particularly the

North Atlantic right whale, is accidental deaths from ship strikes and fishing net entanglements. Dr. Kraus admitted the object of his affection is "very ugly," but "quite endearing." The North Atlantic right whale has no dorsal fin and is easily recognized by the callosities (growths on the head). The baleen skim feeders move slowly and their stout, robust shape unfortunately works against them.

Studies on the right whale since the 1980s have included photo identification, surveys and biopsies, to the point where all 350-390 have been catalogued.

Dr. Brown said the creatures flock to the Bay of Fundy, bordered by Maine, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Calves are typically born December to February off the coast of Florida. Another popular spot is the Great South Channel off of Cape Cod, but unfortunately

these are also popular shipping lanes. Some two-thirds of the animals arrive in the Bay of Fundy and Scotian Shelf around July. It's still a mystery where the other one-third of the whales go.

She helped start a genetics programs in the 1980s and by 2006, 80% of the creatures have been biopsied and they're working on a complete genealogy for the entire species.

With a low birth rate, and a mortality rate of 1-2 females per year, the fate of the whole species hangs in the balance.

While she's a trained scientist, Dr. Brown has had to become an advocate and politician when it comes down to presenting the cause to governments and industry.

Hard work and pressure paid off, as they were able to alter, for the first time in history, shipping lanes in the Bay of Fundy with the

International Maritime Organization and Transport Canada. In the last three years, there have been less than 2% of whale sightings in those lanes.

Another very popular spot for the right whales is Roseway Basin. More than 150 creatures were seen in just eight days earlier this year. Dr. Brown said Transport Canada and IMO hope to move ahead with shifting lanes in that area next spring.

Dr. Kraus said some 70% of the whales bear scars from fishing net entanglements. Ship strikes are constant, and the whales simply can't decipher the low frequency ship hum. They have also been known to fall asleep directly in the path of ships.

Scientists are limited in their research because it's virtually impossible to get blood samples through the whales' thick layers of blubber. They rely on sampling feces and have even used drug dogs to locate whale feces. Concentrated on the U.S. east coast, the whales encounter a hive of human activity.

However, their long lives and long reproductive cycles may be their saving grace.

Supporters are also trying to encourage the fishing industry to adopt different types of nets to lessen the impact on the whales. Pressure on Canadian lobster fishermen to alter their habits and gear, seem

to have fallen on deaf ears, as we enter a busy lobster period.

"It's time to change business as usual in order to save the whale," he said.

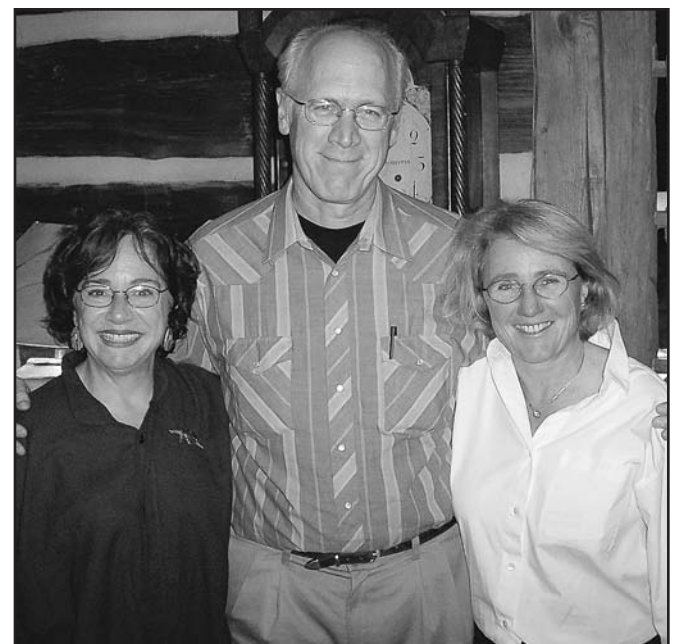
He added if we can solve the right whale dilemma, we can perhaps prevent the demise of any other species.

Dr. Brown said given the adversities, it's amazing the North Atlantic right whale is still around. Progress can be made if researchers, fishermen and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans can sit down together and develop

strategies to allow man and whales to co-exist.

Paula Curtis, executive director of CWI, noted the organization is about developing relationships and spreading awareness, through talks and presentations such as this. She noted Haney herself is more than willing to share her expertise with groups in the area.

For more on the work of CWI, call 905-939-2721 or e-mail Curtis at canadianwhaleinstitute@yahoo.ca.



Sarah Haney (left) of the Canadian Whale Institute, welcomed Dr. Scott Kraus and Dr. Moira Brown, from the New England Aquarium, for a presentation about the right whale.

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