

“The Whales Of New York” Transcript

[Original video](#) (released October 2, 2017)

DR. HOWARD ROSENBAUM: I think it's one of these amazing wildlife spectacles when you actually see these bait balls or these large schools of menhaden. Those are small-schooling fish. Sometimes these pods are about the size of a football field. When something ripples to the surface across the big ball, typically, there is a predator either nearby or just beneath them-- could be a shark, a large fish-- hitting, if you will, the outer portions of that school. And then to have some of the largest animals that have ever inhabited this planet feeding on them, I mean, that's, to me, is an amazing marine wildlife spectacle just miles from beaches that people enjoy on the weekend, and even at other times with the New York City skyline in the background.

I'm Dr. Howard Rosenbaum. I direct the Ocean Giants Program for the Wildlife Conservation Society. We use scientific tools and approaches to protect large whales and other marine life in the New York Bight. The New York Bight is the body of water that lies between the tip of Montauk and Cape May, New Jersey, all the way into the coast, areas like Fire Island, New York Harbor, and then down the New Jersey coast to Sandy Hook, New Jersey and points along the Jersey Shore.

In the New York Bight, there's a great deal of marine life that most people aren't aware of, many species of fish, and sharks, and turtles. Increasingly, we're seeing what appears to be more abundant menhaden in our waters. And with that, we have increasing habitat use of some of the large whales in some of these waters. The fin whale, they're present during large portions of the year here to a greater extent compared to those other baleen whale species. Most of them are seasonally migrating here. That includes the humpback whale, the North Atlantic right whale, the sei whale, the minke whale. Some may spend more time here than we expected. And that's something that our research is beginning to tease out.

So we use a suite of tools to study and learn more about whales in the New York Bight. They range from boat-based surveys, where we're out and looking for whales, to the most cutting-edge type tools. Right now, we have deployed in the New York Bight, in collaboration with the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, a near-real-time acoustic monitoring buoy. So any time there is a whale vocalizing, one of four species, we get a notification of those animals being present in the New York Bight.

For example, in a nine-month period, we had vocalizations on something like 218 of those days. So that provides extremely valuable information. Because we've located this buoy, an intersection between the shipping lanes, but also an area that's considered potential for wind energy development.

When we go out and do surveys, we collect the full suite of information when we come across a particular whale groups. We're logging the positions of where we detect the whales. We'll collect individual identification photographs. For some of the work, we'll actually collect a small tissue samples for genetic analysis. We will use a crossbow with a hollow-tipped dart that we will shoot into the epidermis for the whale.

[DART SHOTS]

What gives you the best target is when they arch their backs. And you're actually catching them in the middle of a fluke and dive. And all of the sudden, you've just kind of startled them a little bit. And so they kind of just bring their flukes down and slap them on the water. In truth be told, this is kind of like getting bit by a mosquito.

Most of the time, the sample will be retained into the bolt. With that DNA, we can determine the sex of that animal, population identity or individual identity of those animals we just sampled. So we can get amazing information from that one little bit of tissue.

20 years ago, in the waters of New York City, wow, you're really lucky if you got to see a whale. But we're seeing now, in essence, from important environmental legislation, whether it was the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, good fisheries management, all of these things at some level acting in concert with one another have certainly allowed for us to have this amazing wildlife spectacle, as we said, occur right here in New York Bight.

There are obviously some concerns too. Animals getting hit by ships are of great concern. The noise associated with shipping and other activities is of great concern. As there are more menhaden, are those fisheries regulated and monitored well enough to make sure that those stocks don't get depleted? What happens in a changing climate? We have to try to figure out how to protect these animals in light of some of these activities that are either ongoing and/or projected.

And I think there's a great opportunity for the residents and denizens of the greater New York City area to take pride in this and to get behind all of this-- the most amazing, wonderful experiences that you can ever imagine. It really never gets old.

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