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FACT-SHEET ON:

Southern Right Whale *Eubalaena australis*

UK Overseas Territory: South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands

The Southern Right Whale belongs to the group of baleen whales, which use their baleen plates to filter-feed on plankton. Callosities, or rough calcified skin, are characteristic of right whales and can be white in appearance due to large colonies of whale lice. Adult females are, on average, 15m in length and weigh up to 47 tonnes. They are known to reach over 100 years old.

Importance: In the rich marine waters of the sub-polar South Atlantic, including South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands, a UK Overseas Territory, a thriving whaling industry existed between 1904 and 1965. It is estimated that over 176,000 whales were killed in its waters. The British Antarctic Survey (BAS) notes that it was mainly Fin, Blue and Humpback Whales killed during this time as the Southern Right Whale population had already been decimated as far back as the 1850s. At the start of South Georgia whaling, the fjords were reported as full of Southern Right Whales. Abandoned ships and gear can still be seen today on the shores of South Georgia as a reminder of this once lucrative industry, which nearly wiped out some of the giants of the ocean. Southern Right Whales were easy targets for whalers as they were calm, floated when stuck and preferred near-shore waters to protect their young. This made them the 'right' whale to seek out and gave them their common name.

These Whales are known to have strong maternal connections to their birthplace and return there at intervals until they become reproductively mature. This underlines the importance of calving grounds throughout their lives.

Ecosystem: Southern Right Whales are found in the southern hemisphere and do not normally cross the warm equatorial waters and connect with the other northern species. Now, after some recovery after centuries of over-exploitation, they are again the most common whale seen around South Georgia, whose inshore seas are important feeding grounds. Research, by BAS, suggests that their winter migration route is to calving grounds at Peninsula Valdes in Argentina.

Threats: The Southern Right Whale is listed on Appendix I of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), as this species has been listed as in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant proportion of their range.

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) is the only organisation for the international management and conservation of whales, and co-ordinates global action. The IWC was established to administer the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling 1946. The UK Government opposes all whaling, apart from limited aboriginal subsistence whaling. As a member of the IWC, the UK seeks to use its position within the Commission to ensure the survival of numerous whale species and create opportunities for whale populations to recover.

Transportation and service corridors, including shipping lanes, can have direct (ship-strike) or indirect (disorientation)



*Southern Right Whales:
Above: © British Antarctic Survey.
Left: Tail-slapping, © South Georgia Museum.
Bottom: Michaël Catanzariti, via Wikimedia Commons*

impacts on the population of Southern Right Whales as they are migratory species.

Over-exploitation of the Whales' food source, krill, by large-scale commercial fishing is a major concern. Climate-change and severe weather, in the feeding or calving grounds, could alter the marine ecosystem, which ultimately could reduce reproductive success.

Needs: According to the IUCN Red List, an action recovery plan is in place but no systematic monitoring scheme exists. Conservation sites have been identified and protected areas, such as the South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands Marine Protected Area (MPA), which protects important feeding grounds, have been established. Southern Right Whales are included in international legislation and are subject to trade controls. Research needs include: population size, distribution and trends. A greater understanding of threats and population trends is needed. Work by Falklands Conservation, the Governments of Falklands and of South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands, British Antarctic Survey and South Georgia Heritage Trust, with support from others, is gaining a greater understanding of this species in order to unpin conservation efforts.