

The Brazilian Right Whale Project

by José Truda Palazzo, Jr.

A Chance for a Threatened Species in Brazilian Waters

It's a sunny and warm spring morning of 1973 in the coastal town of Imbituba, State of Santa Catarina, in southern Brazil. A crew of middle-aged fishermen has just slipped its small wooden boat into the water in response to a signal from their sentinel, who enthusiastically points to a barely-visible V-shaped cloud rising just above the sea.

The small boat tries to approach the spot where the slow-moving creature has been sighted. As often happens, a previously-unnoticed calf comes near, leaving its protective but slower mother behind and, once again, as on many previous spring mornings, the calf is the first to be harpooned. Its mother, instantly aware of the danger, tries to help her bleeding calf, but she, in turn, is struck by the primitive *bombilanca*, a dynamite-bearing harpoon. The struggle is unusually short this time. Forty minutes after the drama starts, it is ended. The last southern right whale hunted in Brazilian waters is dead, together with her calf. The fishermen, though, were not unaware that this population of the big, fat-yielding whales (the only part taken was the blubber; the rest was left to rot on the beach) was doomed. In fact, no more right whales were spotted in the following years.

This rough reconstruction of the last right whale hunting operation in Brazil is possibly the greatest achievement obtained by the small group of volunteers who comprise the field team of the Brazilian "Right Whale Project." It brought to light the slaughter of protected whales which the Brazilian government had successfully kept hidden from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) until 1983. With the help of the well-known whale protection activist L. A. "Nick" Carter, the team presented to the IWC a fully documented report on the illegal taking of right whales off southern Brazil which had continued until 1973, creating a visible uneasiness among the Brazilian IWC delegation.

Conceived in 1981 by Ibsen de Gusmão Câmara, a retired Brazilian Navy admiral, President of the Brazilian Conservation Foundation (FBCN), and a whale protection enthusiast, the *Projeto Baleia Franca* (Right Whale Project) was primarily intended to gather enough data to verify the scattered and unconfirmed reports of whale sightings off Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul, the two southernmost Brazilian states. These whales, Admiral Câmara guessed, would have to be southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*). Having received, through the efforts of Dr. Francisco Palacio, a small but very useful grant from the University of Miami, he invited me as an FBCN member based in southern Brazil to develop the field work. Our goal was to a) interview as many people as possible in coastal villages and towns of Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul about (right) whale sightings and b) spend some time attempting to obtain first-hand sightings of these (then unidentified) whales.



This photo taken in Imbituba, Brazil by an anonymous photographer was the definitive proof that the species usually hunted there was the right whale. The Brazilian government did not admit this until 1983 when this and other photographs were presented to the IWC.



Two FBCN volunteers inspect a dead right whale calf in Rio Grande do Sul. (Photo by Carlos A. Lessa)

But the grant wouldn't cover a paid researcher; in fact, it wouldn't even be enough to cover hotel expenses during the two seasons when the first phase of the project was to be developed. So a group of about six conservation volunteers (many of whom were students) was put together to undertake the task of surveying all villages and towns along some 500 miles of Brazilian coast. The group worked each weekend from June to October in 1982 and 1983. Travelling sometimes until 5:00 a.m. on Mondays in order to be back at the University in Porto Alegre, 60 miles from the coast in Rio Grande do Sul, sleeping in the car, camping in tents (or even in trees!), and eating (to the saturation point) canned food, this group was able, by the end of 1982, to fully document the "rediscovery" of southern right whales in Brazilian waters and to observe them. One exciting sighting involved a group of eight whales right off Imbituba,



Figure 1: A first-day cover of the right whale stamp which drew attention to the conservation effort.

where the ruins of the old whaling station are still visible today. By this time, with the help of local fishermen, our group had discovered and verified the "undercover" whaling operations of Imbituba, and decided to forward the data to the International Whaling Commission.

A logical follow-up for the project would be to survey in depth the "rediscovered" right whale population to determine its size, where the whales prefer to congregate, and if or how they interact with other known populations. This could be done by compiling a catalog of surface and aerial photographs using the characteristic callosities and other features to identify individual whales.

But FBCN has never obtained funding to cover this more-expensive second part of the Right Whale Project. Nevertheless, thanks to the help of Dr. Roger Payne, who is cooperating with cetologists working in South America, Dr. Maria do Carmo Both, a veterinary wildlife specialist working with the Project, and I were able to travel to Península Valdés, Argentina, in 1985 and undertake full practical training on right whale research and population assessment techniques. Informal discussions held in Argentina with Dr. Payne and other researchers focused mainly on the possibility that the "Brazilian" right whales could possibly interact or even be an expanding fraction of the "Argentine" population occurring off Brazil in alternate years, as they do in Península Valdés.

The research, it should be pointed out, is aimed not only at answering questions for "scientific curiosity," but to provide information on which a recovery and conservation plan can be based. Right whales are a "natural monument" in Argentina and are fully protected by federal law. But in Brazil, though whaling is no longer carried on, they have no legal protection and no conservation plans are in place. No laws or regulations protect this species from being chased, harassed, or wounded

and, in fact, several whale/fishery conflicts due to actual or alleged net entanglement occurred in the last three years. More frequent problems are to be expected if the whale population increases. Not only must protective measures come rapidly, but also must detailed data on the behavior of right whales off the Brazilian coast be gathered and used to provide effective guidelines for fishermen in order to reduce net entanglement and negative attitudes about the whales' presence.

In spite of lack of funding for the research, the group of FBCN volunteers has not stopped working. An awareness campaign was drafted and is being distributed in order to alert the coastal communities and authorities of Southern Brazil to the need to protect the right whales and other marine mammals. Thanks to a personal donation by Mr. Russel Wid Coffin, a benefactor of cetacean protection initiatives in Brazil, car stickers with a right whale and calf (drawn by Dr. Both) saying "Right Whale - Natural Heritage of Southern Brazil" were produced and are appearing in huge numbers on cars in Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul. In answer to our appeal, the Brazilian Postal Authority agreed to issue a stamp depicting the right whale on last June 5th, the World Day of Protest Against Whaling, and the Federal University of Santa Catarina held a commemorative conference on the biology and conservation of right whales on that same day.

As this article is written, FBCN is awaiting an answer from the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF-US) to our request for \$5,500 for the next steps to be taken in our attempts to understand and protect the Brazilian right whales. They are, undoubtedly, a heritage of all concerned people, and a conservation responsibility which the Brazilian government should, at last, take seriously. ✉

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