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## Campaign encourages consumers to 'Eat Local, Not Lobster'

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A new campaign aims to raise awareness of the risks facing North Atlantic right whales and to educate Georgians about the wide-reaching impact their consumer choices can have.

One Hundred Miles, Glynn Environmental Coalition, St. Marys Earthkeepers and The Dolphin Project recently launched the “Eat Local, Not Lobster” campaign, which most directly targets Coastal Georgia residents and visitors.

The campaign is designed to increase understanding about the deadly impact fishing gear from the lobster and snow crab fisheries have on critically endangered North Atlantic right whales.

“The consumer education campaign is targeted at Georgians because we really want Georgians to understand that our luxury choices of food are killing North Atlantic right whales,” said Alice Keyes, vice president of coastal conservation for One Hundred Miles. “The entanglements are one of the primary reasons that they could be functionally extinct in 20 years.

“If we can stop ordering and stop buying snow crab and lobster from New England and Maine, we’re hoping that would expedite the transition to these more whale-friendly practices and technologies.”

Entanglement is the leading cause of death for North Atlantic right whales. The whales travel thousands of miles to Georgia and Florida waters each year to give birth to calves.

“As they migrate, they must pass through commercial fishing channels that are congested with thousands of fishing lines from the lobster and snow crab industries,” said Alex Kearns, executive director of the St. Marys EarthKeepers. “The result of entanglement is often death and with so few right whales remaining, each tragic death can tip the scales into extinction. The right whale is the Georgia state marine mammal and I believe that people do genuinely care about their fate.”

The campaign asks that Georgians “Eat Local, Not Lobster” until whale-safe fishing practices are implemented throughout the lobster and crab industries.

Scientists estimate that there are fewer than 375 individual North Atlantic right whales remaining on the planet, and only about 100 calving females.

Since 2017, at least 47 animals have died due to ship strikes and entanglement. Entangled right whales often suffer long and painful deaths. Ropes and gear from the lobster and snow crab industries in New England and Canada wrap around right whales, weighing them down, digging into flesh and bone, and obstructing their ability to swim and breathe.

“They swim with those ropes cutting into their flesh and even into their mouths and their baleen,” Keyes said. “They swim with those for years, and it wears them down.”

The campaign’s organizers emphasized that unless dramatic action is immediately taken, scientists predict that the species could become functionally extinct in the next 20 years.

Even though Georgia is geographically removed from the source of entanglement, residents and visitors in the state have a stake in the survival of the whale.

“What we have noticed is that there are changes that are happening to benefit the whale, but those changes – whether it’s through litigation or regulation – are occurring very slowly,” Keyes said. “We felt that a campaign that sends a message directly to the fishermen and women of New England and Canada would expedite the change that we know is necessary to save the whales.”

The campaign aims to give Georgians the power to push suppliers to utilize more whale-friendly practices and drive improvements throughout the industry.

“Georgians have a well-deserved reputation for some of the best seafood in the world,” Kearns said. “When shopping or dining out, choosing wild Georgia shrimp, oysters and blue crab supports our local fishermen and women, strengthens our coastal economy and persuades the lobster and snow crab industries to seek out and utilize new technologies that protect the endangered right whale.”

Many are not aware of the full implications that each of their individual purchases can have and potential negative environmental impacts, Keyes said.

“When we go to a grocery store or a restaurant and we see this amazing menu item, we just think, ‘Oh well, why not?’” Keyes said. “But every choice that we make, whether it’s to buy shrimp or whether it’s to eat organic food, every choice that we make really has implications beyond our own pocket book and beyond our backyard.”

Choosing to buy locally caught shrimp, blue crab or oysters rather than lobster will also support the area’s fishing industry.

Zach Gowen, owner of the Georgia Sea Grill on St. Simons, has long adhered to this practice.

Lobster isn’t on Georgia Sea Grill’s menu, because Gowen prefers to offer dishes that feature local seafood options. Shopping local supports the area’s economy, he said, and ensures that staff at Georgia Sea Grill know the catch is fresh.

“If you want to go out of town, you’re going to want to eat at a local restaurant,” Gowen said. “... You want to get something local and that should be not just the dishes but also the ingredients.”

The campaign's partners have created multiple resources to help consumers protect right whales when dining out or at the grocery store.

To learn more about ways to get involved in the campaign, visit [OneHundredMiles.org/RightWhales](https://OneHundredMiles.org/RightWhales).

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