

Qualia

Save the whales, shoot the seagulls?

September 10, 2012 | Author: AAAS member -- Freelance Writer Mary Bates, Ph.D.



Southern right whales swimming off the coast of Argentina used to breach far out of the water, like the right whale pictured, but because of the threat of seagull attacks they now only expose a small area of skin by the blowhole. (Image: NOAA)

Argentineans agree on the importance of saving the endangered southern right whales that use the waters off the coast of South America as birthing grounds. But Provincial authorities and environmentalists do not agree on how to protect the whales from an unusual new threat: seagulls.

Seagulls around the city of Puerto Madryn started attacking southern right whales about a decade ago. The birds discovered that by pecking at the whales as they surface for air, they can create open wounds. Then, each time the whales resurface, the gulls cut away more skin and blubber with their beaks and claws. This novel feeding strategy has spread among the gulls and the attacks have become more frequent, posing a real threat to both the whales and the local whale watching industry.

Gull attacks on whales are so common that authorities are planning to shoot the problem gulls displaying this behavior. Patagonian authorities approved a 100-day plan to shoot gulls and then retrieve their bodies before they are eaten along with the ammunition, to avoid more damage to marine life.

Environmentalists are calling the plan misguided. They say humans are at the root of the problem. The gull population has exploded in the last decade due to easy access to human garbage. The birds find easy meals in open-air garbage heaps, as well as from fish parts dumped into the waters by fishermen and a nearby seafood packing plant.

As more gulls have adopted this feeding strategy, whales have responded by changing their behavior. Rather than breaching the water and exposing large parts of their bodies to the predatory gulls, they rise just barely enough to breathe through their blowholes before descending into the safety of the deep.

Officials in the Argentinean province of Chubut are moving forward with the plan to shoot the gulls. Whale watching is big business in Chubut, and the bloody attacks are disturbing to tourists. But environmentalists maintain the only way to effectively reduce the gull population is to cut off access to the garbage buffet. Activists support closing nearby open-air garbage dumps, prohibiting people from dumping fish parts, and developing better recycling and waste facilities around Chubut.

What do you think? Does it make sense to shoot gulls in order to save whales? Or are there better ways to manage the seagull population?