

New documentary ‘proves’ building offshore wind farms does kill whales

By

[Michael Shellenberger](#)

Published Aug. 26, 2023

Updated Aug. 26, 2023, 12:28 p.m. ET

0 of 37 seconds Volume 90%

MORE ON: [WHALES](#)

- [‘Lost’ sea creature amazes onlookers in rare sighting in Wales](#)
- [Former veterinarians, trainers claim beloved killer whale Lolita died from neglect](#)
- [Beloved orca dies before expected release back into ocean after more than 50 years in captivity](#)
- [\\$20M plan to fly 4-ton whale to freedom after 53 years at Miami Seaquarium on track: report](#)

The increase in whale, dolphin, and other cetacean deaths off the East Coast of the United States since 2016 is not due to the construction of large industrial wind turbines, U.S. government officials say.

Their scientists have done the research, they say, to prove that whatever is killing the whales is completely unrelated to the wind industry.

But now, a new documentary, “Thrown To The Wind,” by director and producer [Jonah Markowitz](#), which I executive produced, proves that the US government officials have been lying.

The film documents surprisingly loud, high-decibel sonar emitted by wind industry vessels when measured with state-of-the-art hydrophones. And it shows that the wind industry’s increased boat traffic is correlated directly with specific whale deaths.



Humanity has a spiritual connection to whales, says Shellenberg. This is the awe-inducing sight of a humpback breaching in the Gulf of Maine. Universal Images Group via Getty Images



But whales are in peril, especially the North Atlantic right whale, whose population has dropped to 340 from 400. This member of the species was photographed feeding off Cape Cod in May. REUTERS

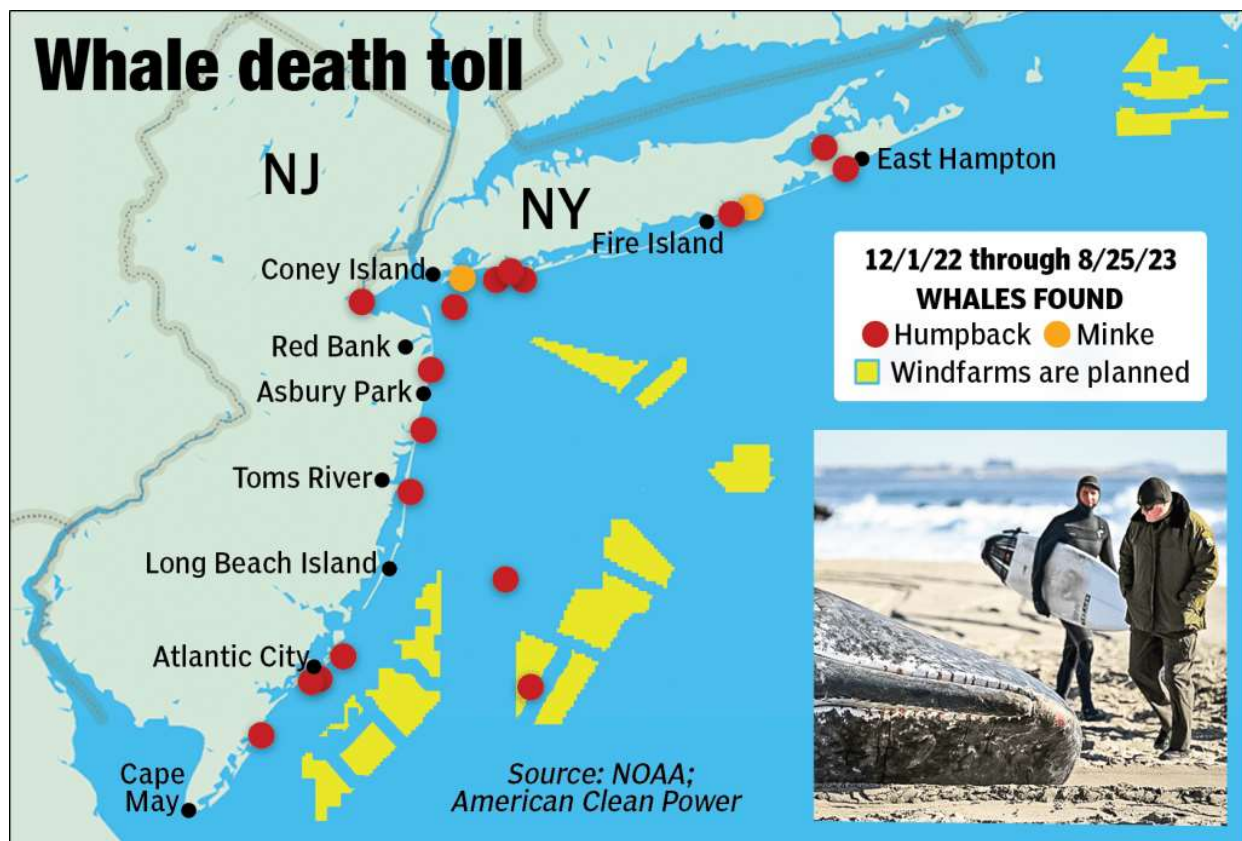
My nonprofit organization, Environmental Progress, which is independent of all energy interests, funded the documentary because, like millions of Americans, we love whales and believe their extinction is an avoidable tragedy

00:0603:57

The species in question is the North Atlantic right whale. Its population has dropped to 340 from over 400 over the last few years.

And, there have been more than 60 recorded whale deaths of all species on the East Coast since Dec 1, 2022, a number that increased markedly since 2016 when the wind industry started to ramp up.

The documentary may not stop the industrial wind projects from being built. After all, the wind projects are [going forward despite urgent warnings](#) from leading conservation groups and a top scientist at the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).



The waters off New York and New Jersey have seen a sudden upsurge in whale deaths this year.

But our documentary has hit a nerve. Within the first 48 hours of it being online, over 20,000 people re-posted it, and over 6 million people total, across [two tweets](#), have viewed the posts with the embedded trailer for “Thrown To The Wind.”

And, now, Republican members of Congress tell me they want to hold hearings to investigate.

I have been involved in a lot of great causes in the 35 years that I have been politically active. This one, saving the whales, is easily one of the most noble and important. One of my first political memories as a boy was the Greenpeace “Save the Whales” sticker in my father’s food co-op.

Whales touch something deep within us. They care deeply for their offspring. They form communities. They sing.



The most recent death in New York waters was the discovery on August 15 of a young male humpback on Atlantic Beach, in Long Beach, Long Island. AMSEAS/Instagram

Whales are, as the conservationists in “Thrown to the Wind” explain, magnificent spiritual beings, not just great biological ones.

There appear to be at least two distinct mechanisms by which wind industry activities are killing whales.

The first is through boat traffic in areas where there hasn’t historically been traffic. The second is through high-decibel sonar mapping that can disorient whales, separate mothers from their calves, and send them into harm’s way, either into boat traffic or poorer feeding grounds.

Whale deaths caused by boat strikes are not unrelated to windfarm works — as some have sought to claim — but fueled by them.



We cannot ignore the real cause of whale deaths like this humpback washed ashore at Brigantine, NJ, in January, says Shellenberger: windfarm development is a clear and present danger.AP

The waters around New York and New Jersey have seen three humpbacks die in August alone; two of them had blunt force trauma while the third was too decomposed for a necropsy.

Shot in the hand-held style made famous by Paul Greengrass, the creator and director of the Jason Bourne movies, Markowitz's "Thrown To The Wind" gives the experience of being on the ocean and in the room with the film's stars, Lisa Linowes, who correlated the whale deaths to wind industry activity with Eric Turner, and Rob Rand.

Linowes is a lifelong environmental activist, data analyst, and co-founder of the [Save the Right Whales Coalition](#).

She's also an obsessive data nerd who, working with her husband, sold their start-up software company over a decade ago and moved to New England where she does her conservation work full-time and without pay.



The film follows Lisa Linowes, who correlated the whale deaths to wind industry activity. Thrown to the Wind / Public productions



Linowes was able to hear the sounds to which whales are exposed during filming. Shellenberger writes that the effect of the sound is to disorient the whales, and drive mothers and calves apart — and into danger. Thrown to the Wind / Public productions

Rand, meanwhile, is a conservationist and one of the world's [leading underwater acoustics experts](#) with over 30 years of experience.

The commitment by Markowitz to investigative documentary filmmaking led him to go out on the ocean with Rand to measure the sound of industrial wind activity.

It was on that trip that Rand and his team discovered high-decibel sound emissions that appeared to violate NOAA's protective standards for marine life.

When combined with the work of Linowes and Turner, correlating whale deaths with wind industry vessel traffic, Rand's acoustic research should have far-reaching implications, including halting all industrial wind activity along the East Coast.



This barge off Smith Point, Long Island, is part of the survey work for wind turbines. A dead humpback washed up on Smith Point on August 11. Newsday via Getty Images

After a dead whale washed ashore on Takanassee Beach in New Jersey two weeks ago, police blocked off the area so tractors could be brought in to remove it.

"We were sitting on the beach yesterday, and I noticed it when people started running up to it," Soraya Nimaroff, who lives nearby, [told the Ashbury Park Press](#). "I'm very sad. It is very sad."

Our research shouldn't have been necessary. Dr. Sean Hayes, a top NOAA scientist warned last year that industrial wind projects "could have population-level effects on an already endangered and stressed species."

"Population-level effects" include extinction.



On

Lido Beach in January, the grim aftermath of a humpback death was apparent as heavy machinery was brought in to bury the 35-foot adult.AP

The presence of structures such as wind turbines are likely to result in both local and regional effects, and may disrupt the dense aggregations and distribution of zooplankton. Changes in the strength of tidal currents and associated fronts, changes in stratification, primary production, mixing, and stratification in the water column (Chen et al. 2021, Johnson et al. 2021, Dorrell et al 2022). Modeling studies in this region have found changes in distribution of right whale larvae under offshore wind build-out scenarios (Johnson et al. 2021, Chen et al. 2021). Impacts could occur with right whale's zooplankton prey. The scale of impacts could vary from hundreds of meters for local individual turbine impacts (Schultze et al. 2021) to kilometers of surface elevation changes stretching hundreds of kilometers (Christiansen et al. 2021). Offshore substations pose an unknown risk related to water withdrawals and impacts on zooplankton and other prey species.

This was the warning from NOAA's head of protective species about the dangers of windfarms. It was ignored, writes Shellenberger.

Dr. Hayes, NOAA's chief of protected species [warned](#) that "oceanographic impacts from installed and operating turbines cannot be mitigated for the 30-year lifespan of the project unless they are decommissioned." His warnings were ignored.

So, too, were the ones from scientists representing many of the same environmental groups supporting the industrial wind energy projects [wrote in a 2021 letter](#) that "the North Atlantic right whale population cannot withstand any additional stressors; any potential interruption of foraging behavior may lead to population-level effects and is of critical concern."

But the scientists then stood by as their organizations sold out them and the whales.

Under pressure from the White House, the US government has ignored its top scientists and pushed forward to industrialize the oceans and risk the extinction of the North Atlantic right whale.



The Jersey Shore has become an all too frequent host of the least welcome form of whale visitor: a washed-up corpse.

The best available scientific information shows that the North Atlantic right whale cannot withstand any additional stressors; any potential interruption of foraging behavior has population-level effects and is of critical concern.⁶⁸ Currently, NMFS undertakes take reduction and mitigation measures on a project-by-project basis, leading to inconsistent results. **NMFS must carefully analyze the cumulative impacts from the proposed wind energy activities on the North Atlantic right whale and other endangered and threatened species and ensure appropriate mitigation of these cumulative impacts. It is the intent of the proposed programmatic incidental take regulation for site characterization activities to carefully consider alternatives and mitigation measures at the scale at which impacts occur and potentially help increase the pace of environmentally responsible offshore wind development along the East Coast.**

This 2021 letter from scientists, many from groups backing the expansion of wind energy, warned how vulnerable right whales are. "Population-level effects" include extinction.

Part of the problem is that the wind industry spent years bribing the US government, scientific organizations, and aquariums to lie to the American people.

Wind energy companies and their foundations have donated nearly \$4.7 million to at least three dozen major environmental organizations.

And Facebook went so far as to [censor my post](#) linking whale deaths to wind energy off the East Coast of the United States.

The censorship came in the form of adding a link to a "FactCheck.org" article from March 31, 2023, which relied entirely on U.S. government sources "Thrown to the Wind" debunks.



Rhode Island hosts the nation's first offshore wind farm. Shellenberger argues it is reckless not to stop the expansion of the offshore giants.AP

“Thrown To The Wind” exposes the reality that the U.S. government agencies and the scientists who work for them either haven't done the basic mapping and acoustic research to back up their claims, have done the research badly, or found what we found and are covering it up.

Given the evidence presented in “Thrown To The Wind,” it's clear that the American people and our representatives cannot trust NOAA and the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), the two government agencies that, for years, have repeatedly betrayed the public's trust in service to powerful industrial interests.



In the documentary, the reality of the danger to whales is clear to all taking part. "When people see the evidence, the American people, their policymakers, and the courts will end this awful destruction of wild nature," Shellenberger writes. Thrown to the Wind / Public productions

Because politics has corrupted the normal scientific and regulatory process for protecting the North Atlantic right whales, we are urging elected officials at federal and state levels to conduct an investigation, issue subpoenas, and hold public hearings.

Saving the North Atlantic right whale is a goal that is within reach and well worth pursuing. Yes, its numbers have plummeted from over 400 to just 340 at the last estimate.

But the species will likely rebound if the sonar mapping and new boat activity in previously untrafficked areas is ended.

The strong reaction to the documentary over the last two weeks, including from members of Congress, gives me hope that things will soon change.



The depressing sight of a whale being buried, like this one in Lido Beach, has become too frequent already. Shellenberger is urging state and federal lawmakers to act.AP

When people see the evidence, the American people, their policymakers, and the courts will end this awful destruction of wild nature.

The government officials, scientists, and journalists who have been involved in promoting this project should quit their jobs and become whistleblowers before their work kills any more whales.

Michael Shellenberger is Founder of [Environmental Progress](#) and [Public](#), a Substack publication. [@shellenberger](#)