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# An 'unforgettable' humpback disentanglement raises new hope about 'weak' fishing rope

New Hampshire Public Radio | By **Eve Zuckoff**

Published October 1, 2021 at 9:16 AM EDT



NHPR

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Jabiru's calf is seen off Gloucester on Aug. 7. The six-to-eight-month-old humpback was entangled in lobster fishing gear.

As a naturalist leading whale watches out of Gloucester, Jamie McWilliams has seen her share of entangled whales. This past August, a familiar, grim scenario seemed to be unfolding in front of her.

*This article was first published by CAI.*

“From a distance — we were probably half-a-mile away — we saw a whale splashing and thrashing at the surface,” she said on a sunny Friday morning aboard a Cape Ann Whale Watch boat. “And it's: a) acting erratically, and b) you can see the line and the buoy.”

From her perch on the boat, McWilliams identified the entangled whale as the six-to-eight-month-old calf of a humpback named Jabiru. She and her 250 passengers watched the calf struggle with a rope from lobster gear wrapped around its flipper, and more rope threatening to bind its tail. Then, unexpectedly, it began circling the boat.

“So it passes underneath the bow, goes down the right-hand side, and then with all the gear attached, goes down underneath the stern, or the back, of the boat, and then pops up on the left-hand side,” McWilliams said. “And I'm watching and I'm watching and I'm watching...”

And then she saw something incredible happen – something she'd never seen in six years leading about a thousand whale watches.

“And I'm watching, and it's there, but there's no gear,” she said. “So I literally turn to my captain and I'm like, ‘The gear is gone. Like, where's the gear?’ He was like, ‘What do you mean it's gone?’ And I'm like, ‘It's not there.’ Like, ‘What just happened?’ you know?”

The calf was free. McWilliams and her team quickly found the gear — buoys and rope — pushed up against the side of the boat and hauled it aboard. For now, the best guess is that the calf felt the tension from the buoys at the surface as it dove under the boat, and shed the gear against the side of the vessel.

## The Case for Weak Rope

“There was no intervention on our part other than being in the right place at the right time and essentially letting the whale decide to use us as a tool,” McWilliams said.

The key difference, federal gear analysts have since said, between typical, sometimes deadly, entanglements and what happened with Jabiru's calf is the kind of fishing gear involved.

In a new push to protect critically endangered North Atlantic right whales, whose population has fallen to around 360, and whose leading cause of death is entanglement in rope and fishing gear, Massachusetts lobstermen were required this year to substitute parts of their regular ropes with what are called “weak” ropes. They can also insert weak links at 60-foot intervals that separate at 1,700 pounds of pressure.

“The thought process being that if enough weight is pulled on that [weak rope],” McWilliams explained, “that it would snap and fray.”

In this case, the humpback calf almost certainly benefited from the gear change. Before it reached the whale watch boat, anywhere from 10 to 50 or more heavy lobster pots were likely attached to the entangling rope.

“My assumption would be that the weak line was critical because it dropped the actual gear, the pots themselves,” McWilliams said.

If the line hadn't snapped, the calf could have been entangled worse, or become anchored in place, depleting its energy, even drowning it.

Federal regulators agreed.

“This is only one instance, but in this one incident we have evidence that the line parted at the weak insertion,” Colleen Coogan, lead of the Marine Mammal Sea Turtle Team for the National Marine Fishery Service's Greater Atlantic Region, said in a statement. “Given some concerns that weak rope would not be protective of right whale calves, the fact this was a young humpback and in this one case it appeared effective, we are cautiously optimistic.”

## **Lobstermen and Conservationists Agree: They Don't Favor Weak Rope**

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Regulators may be optimistic, but among other groups there's a lot of debate about the value of breakaway gear. Many commercial lobstermen, like Arthur "Sooky" Sawyer, have had concerns about its use.

"Some people have been having issues with it" he said. "You really shouldn't let it touch bottom, because it is weaker. And it gets chaffed on the rocks, and the rope starts untwisting apart. But for the most part, it seems like everybody's adapting to it, you know, reluctantly. You got no choice, so that's the way it is."

Many marine conservation groups also criticize weak rope, but for very different reasons. They say they want to see a transition to ropeless fishing technology that would eliminate most of the entangling lines in the water altogether, because even though in this case a calf came free, the stress that entanglements cause can be toxic.

"[Entanglements for whales] have long-term physiological impacts. They can impact your immune system, make you more susceptible to disease. They can impact your ability to reproduce," said Regina Asmutis-Silvia, executive director of the North American office of Whale and Dolphin Conservation. "Those things can also **impact growth.**"

But the implementation of **ropeless technology is still years off** — with technical, financial, and regulatory issues yet to be resolved. So for now, weak rope may give whales a fighting chance. Lobstermen like Sooky Sawyer, say, while it's not perfect, he's hopeful the new gear will be enough.

"If we can save the whales," he said, "if the whale doesn't get entangled and they can break the line and swim away, that's the best scenario for the lobster fishery."

And for whale-watch tour guide Jamie McWilliams, who witnessed the calf's escape and collected the gear that could have killed it, the best part of the new weak rope rules came when she watched the young humpback swim off with its mother.

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