

AHOI Leading Collaborative Project to Study Species at Risk on the West Coast of Newfoundland

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Norris Point, NL. - Atlantic Healthy Oceans Initiative (AHOI) is excited to announce the launch of a new research and conservation project focused on marine species-at-risk and their habitats in the Gros Morne region and southwest NL. The project, funded by the Government of Canada's [Canada Nature Fund for Aquatic Species at Risk](#), will bring together academic and private sector partners to gather new information on a variety of important but vulnerable marine species, investigate the health of key coastal habitats, and reduce the threat posed by marine debris in coastal waters.

The project includes working with Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) to examine the genetics of the Bonne Bay population of Acadian Redfish. According to MUN's Dr. Craig Purchase, the redfish project lead, "research from over 20 years ago suggests that the Acadian redfish found in the fjord of the East Arm of Bonne Bay are globally unique". A shallow glacial sill at the mouth of the bay may have isolated this population and created local adaptation. The Committee of the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) currently considers this population its own designatable unit under the Species at Risk Act, but little is known about them. This project aims to reconfirm the uniqueness of this population and evaluate its evolutionary significance.

AHOI is also partnering with Dalhousie University to assess the composition and energy content of zooplankton (mainly cold-water copepod species) offshore of various areas in western NL. These copepods are a key food source for critically endangered North Atlantic right whales and many commercially important forage fish species, such as the Atlantic Mackerel. "Recent estimates indicate substantial spatial variability in copepod size and energy content within the northwest Atlantic, resulting in differences in energy availability for fish and whales that rely on copepods as prey. The data we are gathering with AHOI can be used to help evaluate the suitability of western NL as foraging habitat for these species," according to Dr. Laura Helenius, researcher at Dalhousie's Fortune Whale Lab.

At the same time, private marine environmental consulting firm Edgewise Environmental are using hydrophones to acoustically monitor the presence of North Atlantic right whales, blue whales and other marine mammals at these locations to assess how often they visit these

areas during the summer feeding season and what other noise may be present along their migratory routes. "We are very eager to dive into this project and address a significant gap in the historical data of the marine soundscape and marine mammal presence off the West coast of Newfoundland," says Kevin Duquette, the leading acoustics researcher for Edgewise. According to Duquette, the wider region has a nearly nonexistent record of acoustic monitoring, "the Gulf of St. Lawrence is a critical habitat for various whale species and is accessible only through the Strait of Cabot or the Strait of Belle Isle, which both border Newfoundland at its narrowest point. These straits serve as strategic locations for monitoring and studying whale migration patterns." Duquette emphasizes the urgency of filling this historical data gap, particularly at a time when whales are adjusting their migratory routes to find new feeding grounds or to avoid human-induced disturbances. The project aims to enhance our understanding of these changes and contribute to the conservation of marine life in this ecologically vital region.

Lastly, AHOI will conduct shoreline cleanups through partnerships with local schools and communities to reduce threats posed by marine debris (plastic pollution and entanglement risk) to marine species at risk in the Gros Morne region. AHOI will also use a state-of-the-art remotely operated vehicle (ROV) to explore marine habitats around Gros Morne and document their importance to local marine life, including at-risk species such as redfish, wolffish, American eel, and others.

"At a time when we really need to buckle down on efforts to recover populations of at-risk species, we hope that this project will help us develop effective conservation strategies, create excitement for marine life in western NL and chip away at the risk posed to many species by coastal debris," says Dr. Jordan Thomson, Director of Marine Programs for AHOI.

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The AHOI Team with Project Partners (left to right): Dr. Jordan Thomson (AHOI), Jordan Woolfrey (AHOI), Dr. Laura Helenius (Dalhousie University), Kevin Duquette (Edgewise Environmental), and Rebecca Brushett (AHOI). Missing from photo: Dr. Craig Purchase (Memorial University of Newfoundland) and Sydney Sullivan (AHOI).

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Background

About Atlantic Healthy Oceans Initiative (AHOI):

[Atlantic Healthy Oceans Initiative](#) is a registered non-profit organization in the Gros Morne region of N.L. Its mission is to build awareness of our changing ocean and facilitate actions to protect it and the people who depend on it most. Looking after the marine biodiversity of our ocean and the coastal communities' way of life together is essential to protecting our environment, building successful stewardship and a sustainable blue economy for generations to come. AHOI has been leading the way towards reducing waste and increasing sustainability in the Gros Morne region of NL through various projects and partnerships with Grenfell Campus - Memorial University, Gros Morne Cooperating Association, Gros Morne National Park, Ecology Action Centre, Environment and Climate Change Canada, as well as local businesses, municipalities, and NGOs.

About Memorial University (MUN):

Established as a memorial to the Newfoundlanders who lost their lives during the First World War, [Memorial University](#) draws inspiration from these sacrifices of the past as we help to build a better future for our province, our country and our world. As one of the top 20 research universities in Canada, Memorial has more than 30 research centres. At Memorial University more than 19,000 students from over 115 countries come together to discover. Memorial offers certificate, diploma, undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate programs across five campuses. Over 40% of Memorial's research is ocean-related (in the Faculty of Science it's 68%).

About Dalhousie University:

[Dalhousie University](#) in Halifax, Canada is Atlantic Canada's top research university and one of the most respected science universities in Canada. With the Atlantic Ocean at our doorstep, our unique blend of academic programs, pioneering research, and a collaborative approach makes an impact on our local, national, and global communities.

About Edgewise Environmental:

[Edgewise Environmental](#) is a certified women-owned Canadian marine environmental consultancy focused in marine mammals, seabirds and underwater noise mitigation solutions. We developed Canada's first formal marine mammal observation, seabird observation, and passive acoustic monitoring programs. The team at Edgewise Environmental is dedicated to driving positive change within the Blue Economy, pioneering innovative solutions in marine environmental management, training, leading consulting services and cutting-edge research and development. Their commitment extends to transforming ocean industries from within, promoting ocean literacy, and fostering inclusive practices.

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