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## Summary and recommendations from Benin

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**Workshop on the Poorly Documented Takes of Small Cetaceans: West Africa. 7th – 9th May 2019**

**Summary and recommendations from Benin**

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Little information is available on bycatch and utilisation of small cetaceans in Benin. Partly due to lack of awareness but partly also because authorities typically enforce legal protection measures and stop fishers from landing cetaceans, which pushes the practice into covert mode and very difficult to detect. Article 79 of Benin's fisheries legislation<sup>1</sup> stipulates that “The fishery, the holding and the commercialisation of any species of aquatic mammal or sea turtle are prohibited in the Republic of Benin”. Article 80 allows the Minister of Fisheries to formulate additional regulations for protected species. Based on interviews, it has long been suspected that some Nigerian and Ghanaian fishers who operate in Beninese waters, especially in border areas, may export captured dolphins for sale in their respective countries, thus avoiding Beninese legislation.

Nonetheless, four odontocetes, namely the common bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), the short-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*), Cuvier's beaked whale (*Ziphius cavirostris*), sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) and the humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae* (2 specimens) are documented utilised for human consumption in Benin (Sohou *et al.*, 2001, 2013 and Sohou, 2011). Potentially captured species include also the false killer whale (*Pseudorca crassidens*) and the Bryde's whale (*Balaenoptera brydei*).

Dolphins still enjoy a certain degree of protection among the Beninese coastal Iwa people. Traditional religion (Vodoun) practitioners regard cetaceans as sacred (so-called *totems*) not to be hunted, but they may utilise their skeletal remains, baleen plates, etc. Stranded cetaceans are often buried ceremonially. However, findings suggest that traditional beliefs are gradually eroding and therefore stranded and by-caught cetaceans are increasingly considered a welcome source of protein (Sohou *et al.*, 2013). In 2001, the Cotonou port, Ayiguinnou and Agoué were known sites of dolphin trade for human consumption, but others have followed (Sohou *et al.*, 2001).

The Cuvier's beaked whale example, which was driven to shore shows that some alleged “live-strandings” may in fact be direct takes. The real extent of cetacean captures and utilisation will not be revealed until a comprehensive nation-wide survey can be implemented (Sohou *et al.*, 2013) with the full collaboration of personnel of the national fisheries

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<sup>1</sup> Article 79 : La pêche, la détention et la commercialisation de toute espèce de mammifères aquatiques ou de tortues marines sont interdites en République du Bénin;

Article 80 : Sous réserve des dispositions des conventions internationales, le ministre en charge de la pêche peut interdire ou soumettre à une réglementation particulière la capture, la détention et la commercialisation de toute espèce d'organisme aquatique protégé.

authorities. In Benin there are no clear indications for the use of cetacean carcasses as fish bait, however neither there are observational indications that would demonstrate the contrary.

In Benin small cetaceans are protected by law. The government signed and ratified a number of agreements on the protection of marine mammals, for example CMS (Convention on Migratory Species), IWC, CBD (Convention on Biological Diversity).

**Recommended to:**

- Presently in Benin since the “holding” of cetaceans is illegal, their utilisation is illegal as well. Invite the national fisheries authorities to open a public debate among small scale fishers communities about the utilisation of fresh cetacean carcasses from bycatch, whether or not it should be legalized and under what circumstances;
- A small-scale experimental programme could be launched in one the fishing port or landing sites where the landing of bycaught cetaceans could be temporarily permitted. These should be declared and after inspection, registration and confirmation of bycatch may be utilised locally. A simultaneous biological sampling programme should be set up in collaboration with national universities or research institutions; NGOs, working on this topic should be involve in this programme;
- To train national fisheries observers in basic data recording protocols of marine mammals and include captures of marine mammals on the fisheries department list of species to be monitored as standard procedure.
- To emphasize a cooperative framework to strengthen regional collaboration with other cetacean biologists and jointly seek funding for transboundary research and regional projects.

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