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Update from the Intersessional Correspondence Group on Marine Debris

Simmonds And Warrie

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ABSTRACT

The Intersessional Correspondence Group (ICG) continues to monitor developments on this topic, which is now in the context of the resolution agreed at the last meeting of the Commission.

How the IWC can best assist in collecting and collating relevant information and how to identify hot spots of cetacean-marine debris interactions are ongoing focuses for the group.

INTRODUCTION

Marine debris is a threat to cetaceans through ingestion, entanglement and potentially also through the impacts of microplastics, which are still being determined. There is a growing scientific literature about this matter and recent syntheses include those by Kühn et al. (2020) and Eisfeld-Pierantonio et al. (2022). There are growing concerns about wider environmental, economic and health impacts (Landrigan et al., 2023).

This ICG provides input to both the Scientific Committee and the Conservation Committee.

PROGRESS/UPDATES

The correspondence group has continued its work and now this includes taking into account the marine plastics resolution, which was unanimously approved during IWC 68. Recent activities include analysing how our group can best provide support to the SC, CC and the Secretariat to implement this resolution.

We also had a discussion on ways to inform the Secretariat/IWC on relevant work from regional agreements (like OSPAR, HELCOM, ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS).

Several members of the correspondence group are also involved in the ASCOBANS-ACCOBAMS marine debris workshop that will be held in April in Spain and will provide a report back from this.

SC INPUT TO CC -- WORKPLAN

The most recent work plan will expire at the end of 2024 and is appended below. During a recent meeting, we identified two primary focuses for this intersessional period:

1. How to improve the collection and collation of information related to interactions between cetaceans and marine debris – including but not limited to development and/or integration into appropriate databases (this will likely link to the work of the Strandings Expert Panel).
2. With respect to the identification of 'hot spots' (where important cetacean areas and high levels of marine debris co-exist) as mentioned in the resolution, assess possible ways forward to make this happen.

In this context, the work of the IUCN group on IMMAS was recalled (now covering some 67% of ocean areas) and the potential to compare this with data about marine debris. The particular vulnerability of deep diving species – as reflected in the available literature - was again noted. The Contaminant Explorer – a product of the Standing Working Group on Environmental Concerns – was also raised as a potentially useful tool to identify the hotspots.

QUESTIONS FOR THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

- Do you have any suggestions or concerns relating to an uniformized data collection of marine debris-cetacean interactions, taking into account different circumstances relating to infrastructure and other resourcing on a global level; and
- Is there existing work on the spatial dimension of species-human drivers interactions in a marine context which could prove useful in preparing the work for identifying hotspots.

References

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Appendix

Marine Debris WORKPLAN FOR 2022-2024

• Monitoring the relevant literature on marine debris, with a particular focus on interactions with cetaceans and the effects of micro-debris;

• Following up on the recommendations of the IWC marine debris workshop;

• Working with the secretariat to facilitate the collection and collation of relevant information;

• Monitoring international processes on this topic;

• Facilitating the interactions between the IWC and other international bodies and processes dealing with this topic; and

• Reacting to any other instructions that may come from the Commission meeting