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Report from ASCOBANS to IWC SC69A. 3pp

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Report from ASCOBANS to IWC SC69A

(Prepared by Jenny Renell and Mark Simmonds)

This report provides an update on progress made on activities undertaken within the framework of the Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic, North East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas (ASCOBANS) since IWC SC69a in 2023.

Meeting and workshops:

- **ASCOBANS-ASCOBANS Marine Debris Workshop: New and Emerging Aspects**, 15 April 2023, O Grove Galicia, Spain. The overarching aim of the workshop was better to understand the effects of marine debris on cetaceans, including the relationship between marine debris and fisheries, and taking into account the relationship between marine debris and other factors, such as toxic chemicals, pathogens and pharmaceuticals. See [report](#) (including links to presentations) and [recommendations](#).
- **ECS/ASCOBANS Workshop on Scoping the Development of a European Marine Strandings Database**, 16 April 2023, O Grove, Galicia, Spain. Outcomes from workshop talks and breakout discussions highlighted the support and willingness of European networks for developing a collaborative database. It was suggested that this is approached in stages, with the initial phase including basic data ('what-where-when') as a trial. This can be built on with more detailed information as the practicalities of the database develop (i.e. issues of data harmonisation). Participants identified the ICES data centre as a potential collaborator due to their track record for designing and managing data services that contains elements that meet the requirements of this unified database. See [report](#) including links to presentations.
- **ECS/ASCOBANS/ACCOBAMS Workshop on Current Cetacean Bycatch Issues in European Waters**, 17 April 2023, O Grove, Galicia, Spain. The workshop participants shared information on the current status of bycatch issues identified as of greatest concern in European seas. See [report](#) including links to presentations.
- **Workshop to recommend small cetacean conservation objectives in relation to anthropogenic removals**, [Part 1](#) on 24-25 April 2023 online, and [Part 2](#) on 16-17 May 2023 in Bonn, Germany. The workshops agreed that the general aim of the ASCOBANS conservation objective remained appropriate, i.e. "to minimize (i.e. ultimately to reduce to zero) anthropogenic removals" (mortality) over an unspecified timeframe. It was also agreed that the ASCOBANS subobjective "to restore and/or maintain biological or management units to/at 80% or more of their carrying capacity" remained appropriate. It was further agreed that the fixed percentages of 1% and 1.7% of the best available population estimate, for the 'intermediate precautionary level' and 'unacceptable interactions', respectively, were inappropriate. They would not achieve the desired outcome either when applied to the harbour porpoise or for other species. The work is ongoing, and Part 3 workshop is planned for 2024.
- **Technical Workshop to Develop Guidelines for Cetacean-friendly Marine Spatial Planning for the ASCOBANS Area**, 27-28 June 2023, online. The objective was to present an overview of the feedback received on the draft Guidelines during the consultation period, and to discuss any points that need to be solved before the draft could be presented to the ASCOBANS AC28. The workshop also had short thematic sessions on offshore wind and underwater noise, shipping, fisheries, climate change adaptation, on integration of cetacean conservation in maritime spatial planning, monitoring and dynamic management, restoration. See [report](#).

- **28th Meeting of the ASCOBANS Advisory Committee (AC28)**, 26-28-30 September 2023, Bonn, Germany. For the meeting, Parties reported on the following pressures and threats to small cetaceans: Cetacean watching industry, recreational sea use, pollution and hazardous substances (incl. microplastics), ship strikes, climate change, physical habitat change, MPAs and other protected areas, education and outreach. The species in focus at this meeting was the Risso's dolphin, and Parties were encouraged to conduct systematic surveys and habitat modelling to identify hotspots, particularly offshore, and to better assess relative importance of different conservation threats on a geographical basis. Intersessional discussion groups were established on climate change and the Iberian harbour porpoise. See [the AC28 Report](#) and [Action Points and Recommendations](#).
- **4th Meeting of the Common Dolphin Group**, 9-10 January 2024, online. The meeting discussed progress in implementation of the *Species Action Plan for the North-East Atlantic Common Dolphin*, and a number of other topics feeding into that progress. Presentations were delivered e.g. on the results of SCANS-IV and ObSERVE2, updates on the DELMOGES project, the current work regarding aerial survey monitoring in France, the OSPAR Quality Status Report 2023, relevant ICES work. The meeting also discussed transboundary Assessment of the common dolphin for reporting under article 17 of the EU Habitats Directive. See [recommendations](#) from the meeting. The report will be made available [online](#) in due course.
- **12th Meeting of the North Sea Group**, 12-13 March 2024, Zandvoort, the Netherlands. The meeting reviewed progress in implementing *the Conservation Plan for Harbour Porpoise in the North Sea*; discussed key priorities, such as the implementation of existing bycatch regulations and investigation of the effects of anthropogenic sounds on harbour porpoises. Priority Recommendations and the meeting report will be made available [online](#) in due course. In the joint session with the Jastarnia Group, experts delivered presentations including on underwater noise, population assignment of harbour porpoises in the North and Baltic Sea using whole genome data, CIBBRiNA project addressing bycatch; drones as a research tool in nature conservation; application of acoustic reflectors in set nets to reduce bycatch of harbour porpoises and other odontocetes; and evidence for the impacts of offshore wind energy on harbour porpoise.
- **20th Meeting of the Jastarnia Group**, 13-15 March 2024, Zandvoort, the Netherlands. The meeting reviewed progress in implementing the *Recovery Plan for Baltic Harbour Porpoises (Jastarnia Plan)* and the *Conservation Plan for the Harbour Porpoise Population in the Western Baltic, the Belt Sea and the Kattegat (WBBK Plan)*; learned about complementary initiatives, including at HELCOM; and raised concern on the rapid decline of harbour porpoise numbers in the Belt Sea, calling for immediate and effective conservation actions, noting also prey depletion in the region. The Action Points and the meeting report will be posted [online](#) in due course.

Relevant working groups expected to deliver work in 2024 (please contact the ASCOBANS Secretariat asap if you are interested in contributing in any of these Working Groups):

- **Beaked whales:** Tasked to draft a Resolution for MOP10, based on [ASCOBANS/AC26/Doc.4.3](#).
- **Maritime Spatial Planning:** Tasked to draft a Resolution for MOP10. The *Guidelines for Cetacean-sensitive Maritime Spatial Planning for the ASCOBANS Area* have been developed, and are ready to be submitted to MOP.
- **Recreational speed craft:** Tasked to develop a paper for MOP10, highlighting the issue of recreational vessel use as a particular concern; and to prepare a draft Resolution.
- **Offshore renewable energy:** Tasked to assess whether ASCOBANS [Resolution 8.6 Ocean Energy](#) and [Resolution 6.2 Adverse Effects of Underwater Noise on Marine Mammals during Offshore Construction Activities for Renewable Energy Production](#) need updating to reflect

current concerns, and that potential revisions be presented to MOP10. AC28 also requested OREWG to report to MOP regarding several other points (see [AC28 report](#) para 93 and [AC28/AP6](#)).

- **Lagenorhynchus:** At AC28, it was agreed that next steps would either be a report to MOP10, and then cessation of the group or if further work is needed, it could be transferred to the Working Group on Data Deficient Taxa.

Upcoming meetings and workshops:

- **ECS/ASCOBANS Workshop: Protecting the lesser-known cetaceans of the NE Atlantic**, 8 April 2024 morning, Catania, Sicily, Italy.
- **ECS/ASCOBANS: Development of a European Marine Strandings Database - Workshop II**, 9 April 2024 morning, Catania, Sicily, Italy.
- **ECS/ASCOBANS Workshop: Recreational activities and their impact on cetaceans**, 9 April 2024 afternoon, Catania, Sicily, Italy.
- **10th Meeting of the Parties to ASCOBANS**, 10-12 September 2024, Odense, Denmark.
- **Joint ACCOBAMS-ASCOBANS workshop with national navies and NATO**, 8-9 October 2024 (tbc), Toulon, France.
- **5th Meeting of the ASCOBANS Common Dolphin Group**, 14-15 January 2025, Galway, Ireland.