

Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals

48th Meeting of the Standing Committee

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REPORT OF AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF SMALL CETACEANS OF THE BALTIC, NORTH EAST ATLANTIC, IRISH AND NORTH SEAS (ASCOBANS)



Progress Report on Relevant Activities Undertaken within the Framework of ASCOBANS for the 48th Meeting of the CMS Standing Committee

Introduction

The Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic, North East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas (ASCOBANS) is one of the binding regional agreements under the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), itself a Multilateral Environmental Agreement under the UN environment with 126 Parties and in force since 1983. ASCOBANS has been in force since 1994 and has ten [Parties](#) to date.

ASCOBANS targets whales, dolphins and porpoises, with individual measures being contained in a conservation and management plan annexed to the agreement and individual Resolutions being passed by each of the Meeting of Parties (MOP9 is due in 2020). In addition, ASCOBANS implements three Action Plans to which a fourth on Common Dolphins will be added shortly (Draft Conservation Plan for the Common Dolphin): the Conservation Plan for Harbour Porpoises in the North Sea; the Conservation Plan for the Harbour Porpoise Population in the Western Baltic, the Belt Sea and the Kattegat; and the Recovery Plan for Baltic Harbour Porpoises (Jastarnia Plan).

This document summarizes the outcomes of the 23rd Meeting of the Advisory Committee to ASCOBANS in September 2017, as well as other relevant meetings, workshops and policy developments which are of relevance to CMS.

A. Institutional Bodies

Advisory Committee

1. The **23rd Meeting of the ASCOBANS Advisory Committee (AC23)** met from 5-7 September 2017 in Le Conquet, France. In line with the updated national reporting system (see [Resolution 8.1](#)) the AC23 focussed on the following topics: underwater noise, ocean energy, marine spatial planning and unexploded ordnance. All relevant documents can be accessed at: <http://www.ascobans.org/en/meeting/AC23>.
2. The following standing working groups report to the Advisory Committee:
 - **Jastarnia Group (covering harbour porpoises in the Baltic proper)**
This group was established in 2003 to carry forward the Agreement's Recovery Plan for Baltic Harbour Porpoises (Jastarnia Plan). Reports of the annual meetings, which contain recommendations to the Advisory Committee of the Agreement, can be accessed at <http://www.ascobans.org/en/workinggroup/jastarnia-group>. The most recent meeting (JG14) was held from 12-14 March 2018 in Copenhagen, Denmark. Reports of the meeting can be accessed at <http://www.ascobans.org/en/meeting/JG14>. All Parties were represented at the meeting and provided updates on national implementation of the two Action Plans which the Jastarnia Group is tasked with supporting, namely the [Recovery Plan for the Baltic Harbour Porpoises](#) (Jastarnia Plan)

and the [Conservation Plan for the Harbour Porpoise Population in the Western Baltic, the Belt Sea and Kattegat](#) (WBBK Plan). The 15th Meeting of the Jastarnia Group is taking place next year (18-20 March 2019, location TBC).

ASCOBANS closely monitors implementation in its Parties, such as an ongoing programme to reduce harbour porpoise bycatch along the German Baltic coast of its most northerly country, Schleswig-Holstein. Since April 2017 about 1,700 Porpoise Alerting Devices (PALs) have been handed out to fishermen and fishermen using PALs are starting to market their fish as “harbour porpoise friendly” This was done in the context of a voluntary agreement for the conservation of harbour porpoises and diving sea ducks, which 234 fishermen have signed to date. In April 2018 the Jastarnia group recommended to the German authorities to put an appropriate long-term monitoring programme in place to assess the effectiveness of PALs to mitigate bycatch and the potential habituation of harbour porpoises to the device ([AC24/Inf.3.3.a](#) ; [AC24/Inf.3.3.b](#)).

- **North Sea Group**

This group was formed to facilitate the implementation of the ASCOBANS Conservation Plan for Harbour Porpoises in the North Sea and started operating in late 2010. Reports of the annual meetings can be accessed at <http://www.ascobans.org/en/workinggroup/north-sea-group>. The most recent meeting (NSG5) was held back-to-back with the 13th Meeting of the Jastarnia Group in June 2017 in Wilhelmshaven, Germany. The 7th Meeting of the North Sea Group is taking place imminently (24 September 2018, Vilnius, Lithuania) and will focus on reviewing the status of implementation, see <http://www.ascobans.org/en/meeting/NSG7>.

- **Bycatch Working Group**

Created in 2010, this group is providing expert advice to the AC regarding tackling the number one threat to the species covered by ASCOBANS. The group recommends background studies, reviews proposals, provides ad hoc advice and more generally assists in all aspects of developing strengthened bycatch policy, in close cooperation with all stakeholders involved. Shortly the group will be merged into a Joint Working Group together with ACCOBAMS (Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the Black Sea, Mediterranean and Contiguous Atlantic Area) to expand the horizon and impact of this important working group. The groups’ progress reports are all accessible through <http://www.ascobans.org/en/workinggroup/bycatch-working-group>.

- **Noise Working Group**

This working group jointly serves the needs of the two cetacean Agreements, ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS, as well as of the Scientific Council of the Convention on Migratory Species. Established in 2009 with the terms of reference updated several times, the annual progress reports of the group can be accessed at <http://www.ascobans.org/en/workinggroup/underwater-noise-working-group>.

- **Extension Area Working Group & Informal Working Group on Large Cetaceans**

First established in 2011, the experts supporting this activity produce joint reports, mainly related to the western extension of the Agreement Area, which came into force in 2008. This working group also considers the issue of ship strikes. Since ASCOBANS only covers small cetaceans, the work relating to large cetaceans aims to identify major issues likely to be having a negative effect upon large cetacean populations in the Agreement Area, assessing the extent to which they can be addressed alongside small cetaceans, and making informal recommendations of appropriate mitigation measures. Reports can be accessed at <http://www.ascobans.org/en/workinggroup/extension-area-working-group> and <http://www.ascobans.org/en/workinggroup/informal-working-group-large-cetaceans>.

- **Pollution Working Group**

This working group is formed ad-hoc at each Advisory Committee Meeting, producing

a compilation of recently published articles related to chemical pollution to be annexed to the meeting report as a resource for the Parties. More information can be accessed at <http://www.ascobans.org/en/workinggroup/pollution-working-group>.

- **Steering Committee for the Common Dolphin**

This group was established in line with [Resolution 8.4](#) on the Conservation of Common Dolphins and has been developing a draft Action Plan for the North-East Atlantic Common Dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*). The document is currently review through national consultations in the ten ASCOBANS Parties and is due to be discussed and adopted at AC24 in September 2018.

3. AC23 further mandated the following work streams:

- A joint workshop organized by ACCOBAMS, ASCOBANS and RAC-SPA (Regional Activity Center for Specially Protected Areas, Barcelona Convention) during the European Cetacean Society (April 2018, La Spezia, Italy) on synergies between global and regional intergovernmental organisations and NGOs on the topics of marine debris and cetacean strandings. The workshop focused on stranding networking, improvement of general methodology for necropsies, addressment of data gaps and identification of research needs with future proofing.
- AC23 agreed the establishment of a new consultancy: a Coordinator for the three Harbour Porpoise Action Plans. Coordination is being provided through the SeaWatch Foundation and Dr. Tiu Similä, the primary incumbent, started her new position in February 2018. Coordination is due to be extended at AC24 as a long-term engagement based on a project plan, however this is dependent on voluntary contributions from the ten ASCOBANS Parties.

4. The **24th Meeting of the ASCOBANS Advisory Committee** (AC24) will meet in autumn 2018 (25-27 September 2018, Vilnius, Lithuania). All relevant documents are available at <http://www.ascobans.org/en/meeting/AC24>. In line with Resolution 8.1 the meeting will focus on: bycatch, resource depletion, marine debris, surveys/research and use of bycatches and strandings. The meeting will *inter alia* discuss a draft conservation plan for the Common Dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*), hold a special species session on Atlantic white-sided dolphins and a further session on white-beaked dolphins, as well as hear first results of the development of a new web-accessed database for marine mammal stranding and necropsy data.

B. Implementation of the Work Programme

5. At each meeting of the Advisory Committee, the Secretariat produces an overview of progress made in the implementation of the **Work Plan** adopted by the MOP, which focuses on tasks for the Advisory Committee, its Working Groups and the Secretariat. The AC Meetings also make recommendations on actions to be taken by Parties. The most recent progress report is available as [AC24/Doc.1.3](#).
6. ASCOBANS continues to place great emphasis on **outreach- and education-**related activities. Details can be found in the most recent report of the Secretariat on outreach and education activities, published as [AC24/Doc.10.1](#).
7. While annual calls for project proposals have been suspended, ASCOBANS still had the opportunity to fund a few **research and conservation projects**. The following projects have been recently concluded:
- Fully-costed proposal for a Web accessed Database for Marine Mammal Stranding and Necropsy Data ([AC23/Inf.9.1.a](#))

- BALHAB: Baltic Sea Harbour Porpoise Foraging Habitats ([AC24/Inf.11.1.a](#))
8. Cooperation with relevant International Organizations remains a priority for the Agreement. Representation at their meetings is one important way in order to facilitate close contacts, and reports both by the Secretariat and members of the Advisory Committee are presented annually to the AC.
 9. There is also mutual exchange of information as opportunities and needs arise with HELCOM, IWC, OSPAR, NAMMCO, the European Commission and other bodies as foreseen by the current workplan ([Resolution 8.2](#)). Given the limited time and financial resources available for cooperation, ASCOBANS has especially benefited from the participation of the CMS Secretariat in many conferences and meetings.
 10. The Secretariat continues to collaborate with a number of NGOs, such as Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme (CSIP), Coalition Clean Baltic (CCB), Humane Society International (HSI), NABU, OceanCare, Sea Watch Foundation, Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC), Wild Migration, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Zoological Society of London (ZSL). Representatives of other NGOs so far not directly involved with the Agreement have agreed to participate in working groups when approached by the Secretariat.
 11. Many NGO representatives play a key role in the implementation of the work plan of the Advisory Committee, chairing and participating in ASCOBANS working groups, taking part in drafting groups, organizing or supporting workshops, developing and submitting reports and papers, and engaging in important outreach and education activities. Without this support, much less progress would have been possible on many tasks assigned to the Advisory Committee and Secretariat.
 12. Further, close links with the European Cetacean Society are maintained, including regular attendance at their meetings and organization of joint workshops, such as a workshop on marine debris and cetacean stranding, with the objective to strengthen collaboration between global and regional intergovernmental organisations and NGOs.