

52nd Meeting of the Standing Committee

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**REPORT OF THE AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF SMALL CETACEANS OF THE
BALTIC, NORTH EAST ATLANTIC, IRISH AND NORTH SEAS TO CMS STC52**



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1. This document contains a report 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 the 13th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CMS (COP13).

Status of Ratifications / Agreement Area Extension

2. Eight of the ten Parties¹ to ASCOBANS have ratified the Amendment to the Agreement (area extension to North East Atlantic and Irish Sea). The two remaining Parties, Belgium and Lithuania, are in advanced stages of the ratification process. The situation has not changed since COP13.

Meeting of the Parties

3. Meetings of the Parties to ASCOBANS take place every four years. The 9th Meeting of the Parties (MOP9) to place online on 7-11 September 2020. The Parties adopted a new [work plan](#) for the Advisory Committee and resolutions on [marine debris](#), [food availability and resource depletion](#), and [Baltic Proper Harbour Porpoise](#). The Parties also updated existing resolutions on bycatch, conservation of the common dolphin, national reporting, EIA for noise-generating activities, and stranding response. With that, Parties also adopted the [Best practice on cetacean post-mortem investigation and tissue sampling](#), a joint ASCOBANS-ACCOBAMS document; and the [CMS Family Guidelines on EIA for marine noise-generating activities](#). The resolutions are available on the [MOP9 website](#) with the meeting report.

Advisory Committee

4. The ASCOBANS Advisory Committee meets annually (except for MOP years) and includes both scientific and institutional sessions. The 26th Meeting of the Advisory Committee (AC26) will take place on 8-12 November 2021, online, as agreed by Parties at MOP9. Topics on the agenda include underwater noise (impulsive and continuous / ambient), ocean energy, unexploded ordnance, and marine spatial planning. Species-specific discussions are anticipated on the Bottlenose Dolphin, Beaked Whales, and Lagenorhynchus species (White-beaked Dolphins and Atlantic White-sided Dolphins, including the recent hunt of the latter species in the Faroe Islands). One of the items also to be discussed is a text for the proposal for listing of the Baltic (and Iberian) population of the Harbour Porpoise on CMS Appendix I, to be submitted to the CMS COP14.

¹ Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Implementation of the Work Plan

5. The ASCOBANS Work Plan for the AC, its Working Groups and the Secretariat for 2021-2024, adopted by MOP9 in [Resolution 9.1](#), covers all areas of the Agreement's work, as laid out in its Conservation and Management Plan. The Work Plan focusses on tasks for the AC, its Working Groups and the Secretariat. The most [recent report on evaluation](#) of the implementation was tabled at MOP9 regarding the 2017-2020 Work Plan. The AC meetings also make recommendations on action to be taken by Parties. Some of the achievements since COP13 relate to:

a) **Fisheries-related threats:**

- The Joint Bycatch Working Group of ASCOBANS and ACCOBAMS held its first meeting in February 2021, online. During the first two days experts shared their experiences in monitoring and mitigating cetacean bycatch in different areas and for different fishing gears – these sessions were open to observers. The third day was dedicated to the Working Group Members to discuss and decide on the priorities to be addressed during the next years. The meeting recommendations are available [here](#).
- In addition, the Secretariat recently published a report [Monitoring Cetacean Bycatch: An Analysis of Different Methods Aboard Commercial Fishing Vessels](#), commissioned by the Secretariat (as requested by the AC), and authored by Grant P. Course. Another report on mitigation measures in fisheries with high bycatch, authored by Fiona L. Read, is anticipated to be published in the coming few weeks.

b) **Workshops:** The ASCOBANS Secretariat, jointly with the Finnish Ministry of the Environment, WWF Germany, WWF Sweden, Coalition Clean Baltic, the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process, organised a *Workshop on Management of Marine Protected Areas for Small Cetaceans*. It was held online on 18 May (part I: Criteria and clear options for well-formulated conservation objectives) and 7-9 June 2021 (part II: A toolbox of ambitious and innovative practical conservation measures). The purpose of the workshop was to act as an open brainstorming session, allowing for innovative ideas rather than focusing on restrictions, in a group of experts on cetaceans, experts on threats to cetaceans, and MPA managers. It also reviewed and shared experiences on best practice approaches to MPA management. The outcomes are being finalised and will be shared soon on the [workshop page](#).

c) **Strandings:** The *Best practice for cetacean post-mortem investigation and tissue sampling*, a joint ASCOBANS and ACCOBAMS protocol, was adopted by ASCOBANS MOP9 in [Resolution 8.10 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#). The document is not designed to replace existing protocols, particularly those of longstanding and well-established laboratories and stranding networks, but offers a framework for post-mortems aiming for consistency across Europe when conducting examinations on dead cetaceans.

d) **Project funding:** Thanks to voluntary contributions from Parties, complemented by the ASCOBANS core budget, Secretariat has been able to support the following ongoing projects since COP13:

- Coordination of the ASCOBANS Conservation Plan for Harbour Porpoises (*Phocoena phocoena* L.) in the North Sea, and
- Coordination of the ASCOBANS Recovery Plan for Baltic Harbour Porpoises and the Conservation Plan for the Harbour Porpoise Population in the Western Baltic, the Belt Sea and the Kattegat.

In March 2021, the Secretariat circulated a call for proposals for project funding through ASCOBANS. Thirteen applications were received. The prioritisation and potential funding of these projects will be discussed at AC26.

6. Cooperation with relevant international organizations remains a priority for the Agreement. Representation at their meetings is one important way to facilitate close contacts, and reports both by the Secretariat and members of the AC are presented annually to the AC meeting.
7. Many NGO representatives play a key role in the implementation of the work plan of the AC, chairing and participating in ASCOBANS working groups, taking part in drafting groups, organising 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.
8. There is also mutual exchange of information as opportunities and needs arise with ACCOBAMS (Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Contiguous Atlantic Area), the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (HELCOM), the International Whaling Commission (IWC), the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (OSPAR), the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO), the European Commission, and other bodies as foreseen by the current workplan.

Working Groups

9. The following [working groups and steering groups](#) report to the AC:
 - a) **Jastarnia Group (JG)**
 Established in 2003, the Steering Group carries forward the implementation of the ASCOBANS 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 Kattegat ([WBBK Plan](#)). Reports from the annual meetings, containing action points, can be accessed on the [Jastarnia Group webpage](#). The most recent meeting (JG17) was held online in May 2021. The meeting heard updates from the European Commission and from BALTFISH (The Baltic Sea Fisheries Forum), and discussed the concern raised by some Baltic national navies over the use of acoustic deterrent devices and their alleged interference with military underwater acoustic activities². The next meeting will be held in April 2022 in Gothenburg, Sweden.
 - b) **North Sea Group (NSG)**
 The Steering Group for the ASCOBANS Conservation Plan for Harbour Porpoises in the North Sea ([North Sea Plan](#)) started in 2010, to facilitate implementation of the North Sea Plan. Reports of the annual meetings, containing priority recommendations, can be accessed on the [North Sea Group webpage](#). The most recent meeting (NSG9) was held online in January 2020. Parties reported on implementation of the Actions listed in the Conservation Plan, and the meeting suggested that regarding monitoring trends in distribution and abundance, Parties should consider doing larger analysis together with many countries. SCANS IV -survey (Small Cetaceans in European Atlantic waters and the North Sea) was planned for summer of 2022, and countries were requested to put aside funds to be able to participate in this project³. The next meeting (NSG10) will be held in December 2021, again online.
 - c) **Common Dolphin Group**
 Established in February 2019, the Steering Group of the Species Action Plan (SAP) for the North East Atlantic Common Dolphin ([Common Dolphin Group](#)) aims to coordinate and drive the implementation of the [SAP](#). Its second meeting (CDG2) was held in December 2020. Comprising of experts from France, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and the UK, and IGO and NGO representatives, the group reported on progress in SAP implementation,

² <https://www.ascobans.org/en/news/17th-meeting-jastarnia-group>

³ <https://www.ascobans.org/en/news/9th-meeting-north-sea-group>

activities contributing towards its implementation, relevant ICES and OSPAR meetings, and what kind of action countries were planning to take with regards to the ICES Special Request Advice regarding emergency measures to prevent bycatch of common dolphins⁴. Non-Party Range States (Ireland, Portugal, Spain) are invited to participate in implementation of the SAP. The next meeting is yet to be scheduled.

d) **ACCOBAMS-ASCOBANS Joint Bycatch Working Group**

Established in January 2019 with the ACCOBAMS Secretariat, this joint working group replaced the [ASCOBANS Bycatch Working Group](#) that has operated since 2010. The Joint Bycatch Working Group aims to address mandates of relevant resolutions; provide updates on bycatch mitigation measures and their effectiveness; review information on illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; and provide technical support when needed to facilitate dialogue with relevant bodies. The latest report of the Working Group is available [here](#). Its first meeting was held in February 2021⁵ (see above, paragraph 6.a).

e) **Resource Depletion Working Group**

With a mandate from AC24, this Working Group was established in 2019 to (i) review new information on resource depletion and its impacts on small cetacean populations and (ii) make recommendations to Parties and other relevant authorities for further action. The working group submitted an interim report to MOP9, accessible [here](#), which served as the scientific basis for [Resolution 9.4](#) (2020).

f) **Intersessional Working Group on Beaked Whales**

The topic of beaked whales was raised at MOP9 because of the Unusual Mortality Events (UMEs) recorded in 1990-2020 in the Northeast Atlantic. Many of the species concerned are categorised as Data Deficient by IUCN, reflecting that the level of monitoring at sea is inadequate and given the recent number of strandings and what we know of beaked whale biology, there is considerable concern about the status of populations. The group has convened online several times since MOP9, and submitted a report to the IWC Scientific Committee. IWC SC endorsed the recommendations presented in the report, and an updated report will be presented to AC26 in November.

g) **Intersessional Working Group on Data Deficient Taxa**

MOP9 agreed to establish an intersessional working group to identify the barriers to understanding and improving conservation status of data deficient species of small cetaceans. This will include identifying which species and populations are of particular concern and how their status might be best remedied. Please contact [the ASCOBANS Secretariat](#) if you are interested in contributing your expertise to this group.

h) **CMS/ACCOBAMS/ASCOBANS Joint Noise Working Group (JNWG)**

The working group jointly serves the needs of the two cetacean Agreements, ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS, as well as of the CMS Scientific Council. Established in 2009 with the [terms of reference](#) updated several times (last in 2020), its progress reports can be accessed at the [ASCOBANS website](#). The most recent report was submitted to the ACCOBAMS MOP7, which took place in November 2019. Currently, the CMS Secretariat (who is leading the coordination of the JNWG) is seeking new members to the Industry Advisory Group on Underwater Noise through bilateral consultations. The next report of the JNWG is anticipated for [AC26](#).

Communication, Education and Public Awareness

10. Awareness-raising is seen as one of the tools for achieving the conservation targets of the Agreement. The Secretariat's activities and outreach events are reported to each meeting of the Advisory Committee. Some of the recent activities are:

⁴ <https://www.ascobans.org/en/news/ascobans-common-dolphin-group-meets-online>

⁵ <https://www.ascobans.org/en/news/sharing-experiences-bycatch-accobams-and-ascobans-areas>

- a) The winner of the 2020 ASCOBANS Outreach and Education Award is 'Marine Mammals Science Education' project. This is an EU-funded project, which aims to engage young people in natural science to prevent future shortages of specialists in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). The ASCOBANS Outreach and Education Award was granted in September 2020, for the sixth time. The aim of the award is to recognize individuals or organizations that have contributed to promoting and supporting educational activities and to increasing public awareness to achieve a better understanding of the need to conserve small cetaceans⁶.
- b) The annual ASCOBANS outreach event 'International Day of the Baltic Harbour Porpoise' (IDBHP) continues to be celebrated in institutions around the Baltic Sea on the third Sunday in May. The IDBHP aims to promote public support through (national) institutions staging various events and exhibitions at museums and scientific institutions around the Baltic Sea. The Secretariat shares events taking place throughout the Baltic Region, that have been reported to the Secretariat. It is hoped that, ultimately, the IDBHP will be observed by at least one notable institution in every country around the Baltic Sea. The Secretariat encourages Baltic Range States to organise various events to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the IDBHP next year.

Synergies with CMS

11. A number of the activities and achievements mentioned above are carried out in direct collaboration with CMS, showing the benefit to the Agreement Secretariat of being part of the Aquatic Species Team. In addition, the Joint CMS + AEWA Communications, Information Management and Outreach Team has provided support related to promoting ASCOBANS meetings and events. Through collaboration within the CMS Family, ASCOBANS can achieve greater specialization and far better outcomes. Another benefit of the integration of ASCOBANS into the CMS Aquatic Species Team and the CMS Secretariat as a whole is that it facilitates representation at meetings of mutual interest.

⁶ <https://www.ascobans.org/en/news/ascobans-outreach-and-education-award-2020-marine-mammals-science-education>