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Agenda Item 10.3

**REPORT OF THE AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF SMALL CETACEANS OF
THE BALTIC, NORTH EAST ATLANTIC, IRISH AND NORTH SEAS TO CMS COP14**

(Prepared by the ASCOBANS Secretariat)

Summary:

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).

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Status of Ratifications / Agreement Area Extension

1. 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

2. Meetings of the Parties to ASCOBANS take place every four years. The 9th Meeting of the Parties ([MOP9](#)) to ASCOBANS was held online (due to COVID-19 pandemic) in September 2020. This was the first ever governing body meeting of the CMS Family that was held online.
3. The Parties adopted a new work plan for the Advisory Committee and the Secretariat, 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.
4. MOP10 will be hosted by Denmark, in September 2024.

Advisory Committee

5. 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](#)) took place in November 2021, online, as agreed by Parties at MOP9. For the meeting, Parties reported on the following pressures and threats to small cetaceans: underwater noise, ocean energy, unexploded ordnance, and marine spatial planning. The special species session focused on the bottlenose dolphin. The meeting agreed on 29 Action Points and 19 Recommendations in its Scientific Session, with four additional from the Institutional Session.
6. [AC27](#) was held online in September 2022. Through the annual National Reports, Parties reported on bycatch, resource depletion, marine debris, strandings, and surveys. The meeting agreed on 18 Action Points and Recommendations in its Scientific Session, with nine additional points from the Institutional Session.
7. [AC28](#) was held in Bonn, Germany, in September 2023. Parties reported on cetacean watching industry, recreational sea use, pollution, ship strikes, climate change, physical habitat change, MPAs, and outreach. The special species session focused on the Risso's dolphin. The meeting agreed on 12 Action Points and Recommendations in its Scientific Session, with five additional points from the Institutional Session.

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

8. 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 AC meetings also make recommendations on action to be taken by Parties. Some of the achievements since CMS 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](#).
- The project *Using fishers' knowledge to understand the use of alternative gears to static gillnets in the ASCOBANS region* aims to engage with fishers in Germany, the UK, and the Atlantic coast of Spain, to identify alternative gear(s) that static gillnets fishers would be willing to trial and potentially to switch to, in order to reduce cetacean bycatch. The final report is expected in 2024.
- The following ASCOBANS Technical Series publications were released:
 - [Monitoring Cetacean Bycatch: An Analysis of Different Methods Aboard Commercial Fishing Vessels](#) by Grant P. Course (September 2021).
 - [Cost-benefit Analysis for Mitigation Measures in Fisheries with High Bycatch](#) by Fiona L. Read (December 2021).

b. Disturbance

The project *Prediction of the cochlear frequency maps of harbour porpoise* deals with identifying the possible sound sources of lesions found in the inner ear that are due to noise exposure, and predicting hearing ranges of marine mammals whose audiograms are not yet known. Anthropogenic noise can negatively affect marine mammal populations in several ways, such as masking the vital information transmitted by them, by affecting their behaviour or by causing hearing loss, temporary or permanent. It is important to improve our knowledge on the hearing capabilities, and implement a routine protocol to be able to determine the presence of lesions associated to noise overexposure in harbour porpoises. The final report of the project is available [here](#).

c. Marine Protected Areas

- 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 report is available on the [workshop page](#).

- The *Second Workshop on Management of Marine Protected Areas for Small Cetaceans* was organized from 31 May to 2 June in Helsinki, Finland. The purpose of the workshop was to continue to develop and discuss examples of ambitious and innovative practical conservation measures for small cetacean MPAs, including Natura 2000 sites, building on the results from the first workshop. The aim is to collate a more complete and more concrete toolbox of conservation measures for small cetacean MPAs. The output will be made available on the [ASCOBANS website](#).

d. **Biological information**

The aim of the project *Status of the Iberian harbour porpoise* is to investigate morphological and demographic parameters in the Iberian harbour porpoise, and compare the Iberian population to porpoises in the North Sea and the Bay of Biscay. This project also contributes to the CMS CA 13.7 (Concerted Action for the harbour porpoise in the Baltic Sea and the Iberian peninsula). Final report is expected in 2024.

e. **Project funding**

In addition to the above-mentioned projects, the Secretariat has been able to support the following ongoing projects since CMS COP13, thanks to voluntary contributions from Parties, complemented by the ASCOBANS core budget:

- 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.
- Coordination of the ASCOBANS Species Action Plan on the North-east Atlantic Common Dolphin

f. **Workshops and meetings**

Since CMS COP13, ASCOBANS has organized 14 meetings and 8 workshops:

- 9th Meeting of the Parties
- Meetings of the Jastarnia Group: JG16, JG17, JG18, JG19
- Meetings of the North Sea Group: NSG9, NSG10, NSG11
- Meetings of the Common Dolphin Group: CDG2, CDG3
- Meetings of the Advisory Committee: AC26, AC27, AC28
- 1st Meeting of the Joint Bycatch Working Group of ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS
- ASCOBANS Workshop 1 & 2 on Management of MPAs for Small Cetaceans

- ASCOBANS-ACCOBAMS Marine Debris Workshop: New and Emerging Aspects
 - ECS/ASCOBANS Workshop on Scoping the Development of a European Marine Strandings Database
 - ECS/ACCOBAMS/ASCOBANS Workshop: Current cetacean bycatch issues in European waters
 - Workshop to recommend small cetacean conservation objectives in relation to anthropogenic removals – Part 1 & Part 2
 - Technical Workshop to Develop Guidelines for Cetacean-friendly Marine Spatial Planning for the ASCOBANS Area
9. 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.
10. 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, co-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.
11. There is also exchange of information as opportunities and needs arise with Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Contiguous Atlantic Area (ACCOBAMS), 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

12. The following [working groups and steering groups](#) reported to the AC in 2020-2023:

a. **Jastarnia Group (JG)**

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 (JG19) took place in March 2023, online. The next meeting (JG20) will be held in March 2024 in the Netherlands, back-to-back with the North Sea Group meeting.

b. **North Sea Group (NSG)**

The Steering Group for the ASCOBANS Conservation Plan for Harbour Porpoises in the North Sea ([North Sea Plan](#)) facilitates 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 (NSG11) was

held online in February 2023. The next meeting (NSG12) will be held in March 2024 in the Netherlands.

c. Common Dolphin Group

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 third meeting (CDG3) was held in November 2022. Non-Party Range States (Ireland, Portugal, Spain) are invited to participate in implementation of the SAP. The next meeting will be held online in January 2024.

d. Joint Bycatch Working Group of ASCOBANS and ACCOBAMS

Joint Bycatch Working Group (JBWG) aims to address mandates of relevant resolutions of both Agreements; 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 first meeting of the JBWG was held online in February 2021. The Working Group reports are available [here](#).

e. Intersessional Working Group on Resource Depletion

This Working Group was established 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 WG submitted an interim report to MOP9, which served as the scientific basis for [Resolution 9.4](#). The final report was presented at AC27 (2022) and is available [here](#). A relevant poster was presented at the 34th Conference of the European Cetacean Society in April 2023.

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. An [updated report](#) was presented to AC26 (2021), and the AC endorsed the recommendations presented in the report. The WG was further tasked, by AC28, with drafting a relevant resolution for MOP10.

g. Joint Noise Working Group (JNWG) of CMS, ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS

The JNWG progress reports can be accessed at the [ASCOBANS website](#). The most recent JNWG update was given to AC26 in November 2021. An Industry Advisory Group (IAG) on Underwater Noise was established in October 2021, to facilitate consultation with industry experts on the technical feasibility of proposed measures as well as any alternative measures or solutions.

h. Offshore Renewable Energy

AC27 requested the Secretariat to establish this WG to review the interactions between all forms of marine renewables and small cetaceans, given the considerable current interest in the further rapid development of marine renewables all across the agreement area. Their report is available [here](#). The group was further

tasked with assessing whether the existing relevant Resolutions 8.6 and 6.2 need updating, to reflect current concerns.

i. Recreational Speed Crafts

This WG was established by request of AC27 to provide guidance materials to interested Parties on the best ways to mitigate impacts in light of rapid increases in recreational speed craft (RIBs, power boats, and personal watercrafts) in many parts of the ASCOBANS Agreement Area, and concerns for the potential negative impacts upon small cetaceans and other marine wildlife through disturbance (including risk of physical injury). Their report is available [here](#). AC28 requested the WG to continue and to prepare a draft resolution for MOP10.

Communication, Education and Public Awareness

13. 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 highlights since COP13 include:
 - a. The 2020 ASCOBANS Outreach and Education Award was given to the '[Marine Mammals Science Education](#)' project at MOP9 in September 2020. 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). In 2024, the ASCOBANS Outreach and Education Award will be granted for the seventh time. The jury formed by AC28 will select the winner from nominations received by the Secretariat. The winner will be announced at MOP10 in September 2024. 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 cetaceans.
 - b. The annual ASCOBANS 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 IDBHP in 2024.
 - c. The Secretariat made a poster presentation at the 15th International Scientific Wadden Sea Symposium (ISWSS15), which took place in a virtual platform from 30 November to 2 December 2021. The [poster](#) explored potential synergies between ASCOBANS and the Trilateral Wadden Sea Cooperation regarding the work on conserving the harbour porpoise.
14. In March 2022, ASCOBANS celebrated its 30th anniversary. The Secretariat launched a dedicated [webpage](#), articles on the ASCOBANS website, [a Twitter account](#), social media messages and visuals, and a press release. The anniversary webpage contains a snapshot timeline, a brief history of ASCOBANS, and messages and videos received from 15 Parties and Partners, including the UNEP Executive Secretary. In addition, the Secretariat produced a short [anniversary video](#).

Synergies with CMS

15. 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 Information Management, Communication and Awareness-raising (IMCA) Unit has helped promote ASCOBANS meetings and events through social media, and did the publication design for the two ASCOBANS Technical Series publications. Through collaboration within the CMS Family, ASCOBANS can achieve greater specialisation and better outcomes. The integration of ASCOBANS into the CMS Secretariat as a whole also facilitates representation at meetings of mutual interest.