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

Summary:

The Secretariat is circulating herewith, for the information of the 13th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CMS, a report provided by the Secretariat of the Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic, North East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas.

The report is provided unedited in the format and language that it was submitted.



UNEP/CMS/COP13/Inf.4.4

Report of the Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic, North East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas to CMS COP13

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 12th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CMS (COP12).

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 COP12².

Meeting of the Parties

3. Meetings of the Parties to ASCOBANS take place every four years. The 9th Meeting of the Parties (MOP9) to ASCOBANS is scheduled for 8-10 September 2020 in Brussels, Belgium. The meeting is expected to table draft resolutions on marine debris, resource depletion, the ecosystem approach to addressing pressures on small cetaceans, harmonizing cetacean post mortem protocols, the Harbour Porpoise in the Baltic, the work plan 2021-2024 for the Advisory Committee (AC) and the Secretariat, and options for future meetings of the AC. It is also expected to update existing resolutions on conservation of the Common Dolphin, and on national reporting.

Advisory Committee

4. The 24th Meeting of the AC was held on 25-27 September 2018 in Vilnius, Lithuania. It focused on bycatch, resource depletion, marine debris, surveys and research, and the use of bycatch and strandings, in line with national reports submitted to AC24 as guided by ASCOBANS [Resolution 8.1](#). The meeting report and documents are available [online](#).
5. The 25th Meeting of the AC took place 17-19 September 2019 in Stralsund, Germany. This was the last AC meeting before the 9th Meeting of the Parties (MOP9) and prepared inputs for MOP9. It focused on the cetacean watching industry, recreational sea use, pollution and hazardous substances, ship strikes, climate change, physical habitat change, and marine protected areas, in line with national reports submitted to AC25.

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

² The report to COP12, however, mistakenly stated that only seven Parties had ratified the amendment.

6. One of the items discussed was a proposal for listing of the Baltic (and Iberian) populations of the Harbour Porpoise on CMS Appendix I at COP13. Some Parties had planned to submit a proposal but ran out of time. AC25 also saw updates on the implementation of EU nature, marine and fisheries policies relevant to ASCOBANS activities; the ACCOBAMS/ASCOBANS Joint Bycatch Working Group; development of the best practice on cetacean post mortem investigations and tissue sampling; and on the establishment of the Resource Depletion Working Group and the Steering Group for the ASCOBANS Species Action Plan for the North East Atlantic Common Dolphin. A special species session was held on Beaked Whales. This meeting was attended by both the Directorate-General (DG) for the Environment and the DG for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries of the European Commission.
7. The ASCOBANS AC meets annually (except for MOP years) and includes both scientific and institutional sessions. However, as requested by AC24, the Secretariat presented options for future meetings at AC25, and sought advice on how to proceed. After feedback, the Secretariat was instructed to provide slightly revised options for discussion at MOP9. The report of the meeting, including adopted action points and recommendations, is available [online](#).
8. The 26th Meeting of the AC is scheduled to take place in 2021. The Secretariat would welcome offers to host AC26.

Implementation of the Work Plan 2017-2020

9. The ASCOBANS Work Plan for the AC, its Working Groups and the Secretariat for 2017-2020, adopted by MOP8 in [Resolution 8.2](#), covers all areas of the Agreement's work, as laid out in its Conservation and Management Plan. The most recent update from September 2019 on progress made under the current plan can be found in [ASCOBANS/AC25/Doc.10](#). 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 relate to:
 - **Common Dolphin Action Plan:** The ASCOBANS Species Action Plan (SAP) for the North East Atlantic Common Dolphin was developed over two years, with a mandate from [Resolution 8.4](#), and adopted intersessionally in August 2019. The SAP is available at <https://www.ascobans.org/en/documents/action-plans>.
 - **Bycatch:** In February 2017, ASCOBANS organized an Expert Workshop on 'Unacceptable Interactions' and Bycatch, and developed draft terms of reference (TOR) for a second workshop (not held yet) and for the ACCOBAMS-ASCOBANS Joint Bycatch Working Group (adopted in 2018). In 2019, the ASCOBANS Secretariat advertised two consultancies related to bycatch: one to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of different monitoring methods aboard fisheries with regard to cetacean bycatch, and the other to conduct a cost analysis for mitigation measures in fisheries with high bycatch levels. Results of both are expected early 2020.
 - **Strandings:** A joint workshop with ACCOBAMS was held in June 2019 (Padua, Italy) on harmonization of the best practices for necropsy of cetaceans and for the development of diagnostic frameworks. The resulting '[Best practice for cetacean post mortem investigation and tissue sampling](#)' was presented to AC25, who endorsed the process, and recommended that the final protocol be adopted at ASCOBANS MOP9 as an Annex to a resolution.
 - **Workshops:** the ASCOBANS Secretariat has organized or co-hosted the following workshops: the Joint ACCOBAMS/ASCOBANS/ECS/SPA-REC Workshop on

Marine Debris and Cetacean Stranding³ (April 2018); the Workshop of the ASCOBANS Intersessional Working Group on National Reporting (February 2018); and the Joint ACCOBAMS-ASCOBANS Workshop on Harmonization of the Best Practices for Necropsy of Cetaceans and for the Development of Diagnostic Frameworks (June 2019). Two workshops are currently planned for 2020-2021: one on the management of Marine Protected Areas for small cetaceans, and one on the conservation of Common Dolphins, jointly with ACCOBAMS. More information will be made available in due course.

- **Support to Conservation Activities:** While annual calls for project proposals have been suspended, ASCOBANS has been able to fund a few research and conservation projects since COP12, as follows: Coordination of the ASCOBANS Harbour Porpoise Action Plans (progress reports available on AC24 and AC25 websites); Web-accessed Database for Marine Mammal Stranding and Necropsy Data ([ASCOBANS/AC24/Pres.2.5.2](#); [AC25/Inf.9.1](#)); BALHAB: Baltic Sea Harbour Porpoise Foraging Habitats ([ASCOBANS/AC24/Inf.11.1a](#))
10. 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 Advisory Committee are presented annually to the AC.
 11. 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, 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. There is also mutual exchange of information as opportunities and needs arise with 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 North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO), the European Commission and other bodies as foreseen by the current workplan. Given the limited time and financial resources available for cooperation, ASCOBANS has benefited from the participation of the CMS Secretariat in conferences and meetings.

Working Groups

13. The following standing [working groups and steering groups](#) report to the AC:
 - **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 [ASCOBANS website](#). The most recent meeting (JG15) was held in March 2019 in Turku, Finland. The next meeting will be held back-to-back with the North Sea Group meeting in June 2020 in Gothenburg, Sweden.
 - **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

³ Workshop report available at <https://www.ascobans.org/en/meeting/joint-accobamsascobansecsspa-rac-workshop-marine-debris-and-cetacean-stranding> .

North Sea Plan. Reports of the annual meetings, containing priority recommendations, can be accessed on the [ASCOBANS website](#). The most recent meeting (NSG8) was held in September 2019 in Stralsund, Germany, back-to-back with the First Meeting of the Common Dolphin Group and AC25. The next meeting (NSG9) will be held in June 2020 in Gothenburg, Sweden.

- **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; collate report on the progress of implementation; encourage countries to harmonize efforts; encourage cooperation between ASCOBANS, ACCOBAMS and other Range States; promote the SAP and evaluate its effectiveness. Its [first meeting](#) was held in September 2019.

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

Established in January 2019 with the ACCOBAMS⁴ 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 first report of the Working Group was submitted to AC25, available at [ASCOBANS/AC25/Inf.3.1a](#). Its first face-to-face meeting is planned to be held in May 2020.

- **Joint ACCOBAMS/ASCOBANS Marine Strategy Framework Directive Working Group**

This working group was established in 2011 and is co-chaired by representatives of both ASCOBANS and ACCOBAMS to maximize synergies. It aims to also liaise with relevant working groups established by other international bodies, such as HELCOM, OSPAR and the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) as well as national processes. Most recent report is available at [ASCOBANS/AC25/Inf.6b/Rev.1](#).

- **CMS/ACCOBAMS/ASCOBANS Joint Noise Working Group**

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, 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.

- **Resource Depletion Working Group**

With a mandate from AC24, 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 [terms of reference](#) were adopted intersessionally in August 2019.

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

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

⁴ Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Contiguous Atlantic Area.

small cetaceans, and making informal recommendations of appropriate mitigation measures. The latest report regarding the ASCOBANS extension area was [presented at AC24](#) in 2018.

Communication, Education and Public Awareness

14. 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 listed below:

- Exhibition "The Last 300 – What Do Harbour Porpoises Mean to You?" was opened in December 2017 at the Nordsee Akademie in Leck, Germany. The art and design works on display were originally submitted for the 2013 creativity competition "The Last 300" run by the NGOs: Whale and Dolphin Conservation, NABU and OceanCare in partnership with ASCOBANS. Prior to being installed at the Nordsee Akademie, the exhibition had been at the Arche Wattenmeer (Sylt, Germany) and at the German Oceanographic Museum (Stralsund, Germany).
- A scientific symposium 'Harbour Porpoise in the Wadden Sea' was held as a part of the Harbour Porpoise Days in Wilhelmshaven, Germany, which took place for the third time in April 2019. The ASCOBANS Secretariat was invited to give one of the opening addresses. The event is held in spring, time when the Harbour Porpoises come to feed in Jade Bay in the North Sea.
- ASCOBANS anniversary volume: The book 'European Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises: Marine Mammal Conservation in Practice' was commissioned by the Advisory Committee a few years ago. It was published by [Academic Press/Elsevier](#) in late 2019 – which was also the year of 25th anniversary of ASCOBANS coming into force. The book is sold through high street bookshops and aims to be the most authoritative review of northern European cetaceans and the threats they face, whilst also giving insights into how an international Agreement is created, functions, and can meet obstacles to progress.
- 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 Secretariat monitors and shares events taking place throughout the Baltic region.
- The ASCOBANS Outreach and Education Award will be given in 2020 for the sixth time. The jury formed by AC25 will select the winner from nominations received by the Secretariat. The winner will be announced at MOP9 in September.

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 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, and often cost sharing for travel.