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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 STC53**

(Prepared by the ASCOBANS Secretariat)

REPORT OF THE AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF SMALL CETACEANS OF THE BALTIC, NORTH EAST ATLANTIC, IRISH AND NORTH SEAS TO CMS STC53

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 52nd Meeting of the CMS Standing Committee (StC52).

Advisory Committee

2. 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 on 8-12 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 species in focus at this meeting were harbour porpoise, bottlenose dolphin, beaked whales, and *Lagenorhynchus* species. The meeting agreed on [29 Action Points and 19 Recommendations](#) in its Scientific Session.
3. The Advisory Committee considered project proposals submitted to the Secretariat and agreed to provide funding to three of them: (1) Using fishers' knowledge to understand the use of alternative gears to static gillnets in the ASCOBANS region (2) Prediction of the cochlear frequency maps of harbour porpoise and (3) Status of the Iberian harbour porpoise. Funding was also granted for coordination of the ASCOBANS species action plans for harbour porpoises and the common dolphin.
4. Workshops and meetings that were agreed to be organised (may be subject to availability of funding; timing to be determined):
 - An expert workshop to recommend small cetacean conservation objectives in relation to anthropogenic removals;
 - A second workshop on management of MPAs for small cetaceans;
 - Workshop to review conservation units and their delineation for bottlenose dolphins and some other small cetacean species within the ASCOBANS region;
 - A brainstorming meeting on a strandings and necropsy database;
 - Meeting on presenting results of marine mammal indicator assessments used for reporting by EU Member States under the MSFD; and
 - Workshop with national navies to consider mitigation protocols for use of military sonar and management of other activities that can contribute to potentially harmful underwater noise, and solutions for acoustic monitoring and bycatch mitigation (deterrent devices) in synergy with national security activities.
5. The next meeting of the Advisory Committee will take place from 28 to 30 September 2022.

Implementation of the Work Plan

6. 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 StC52 relate to:

a) **Fisheries-related threats**

The project *Using fishers' knowledge to understand the use of alternative gears to static gillnets in the ASCOBANS region* started in June 2022. Its overall objective is 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.

In addition, the following ASCOBANS Technical Series publications were released in the past year:

- [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* started in July 2022. 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.

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 the *Second Workshop on Management of Marine Protected Areas for Small Cetaceans* 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 (2021). The aim is to collate a more complete and more concrete toolbox of conservation measures for small cetacean MPAs. The workshop report will be posted on the [ASCOBANS website](#) in due course.

d) **Biological information**

The project *Status of the Iberian harbour porpoise* started in June 2022. The aim of the project 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).

7. 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.
8. 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.

9. There is also 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

10. The following [working groups and steering groups](#) reported to the AC during 2021-2022:

a) **Jastarnia Group (JG)**

The most recent meeting (JG18) took place in March 2022 in Gothenburg, Sweden. The meeting discussed, among others, progress on implementation of the action plans, status of the delegated act to minimize bycatch of the Baltic Proper harbour porpoise and current discussions in BALTFISH on further measures, results of the MiniSCANS-II project, and the status of the draft proposal to list the Baltic Proper harbour porpoise to CMS Appendix I. The Action Points are available [online](#). The next meeting (JG19) will be held online on 20-22 March 2023.

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

The most recent meeting of the Steering Group for the ASCOBANS Conservation Plan for Harbour Porpoises in the North Sea (NSG10) was held online in January 2022. The meeting discussed key priorities such as the implementation of existing bycatch regulations and investigation of the effects of anthropogenic sounds on harbour porpoises. The meeting expressed concern regarding population level impacts of noise levels and exposure duration, and learned about the findings of the mass stranding event that occurred on the Dutch Wadden Sea Islands in August 2021 (read more [here](#)). Priority Recommendations are available [online](#). The next meeting (NSG11) will be held online on 31 January-1 February 2023.

c) **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](#). The next update from the JBWG will be presented at AC27 in September 2022.

d) **Intersessional Working Group on Resource Depletion**

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). The final report will be presented at AC27 in September 2022.

e) **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 in November 2021, and the AC endorsed the recommendations presented in the report.

f) **Joint Noise Working Group (JN WG) of CMS, ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS**

Established in 2009 with the terms of reference updated several times, its progress reports can be accessed at the [ASCOBANS website](#). The most recent JN WG 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.

Communication, Education and Public Awareness

11. This year, ASCOBANS celebrates its 30th anniversary. The official date was in March 2022. 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

12. 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 social media. Through collaboration within the CMS Family, ASCOBANS can achieve greater specialisation and 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.