

30th MEETING OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Bonn, Germany, 1–3 September 2026
Agenda Item 3.1

REPORT OF THE ACCOBAMS-ASCOBANS JOINT BYCATCH WORKING GROUP

(Prepared by the Co-Chairs of the Joint Bycatch Working Group)

1. The **Joint Bycatch Working Group (JBWG)** was established in January 2019 as a collaborative mechanism between ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS to advance coordinated efforts on cetacean bycatch. It is co-chaired by **Professor Peter Evans** (Sea Watch Foundation/Bangor University, UK) and **Dr. Dimitar Popov** (Green Balkan NGO/University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria), who have maintained close contact with each other and their Secretariats.

JBWG Meetings and Workshops

2. The following is a history of meetings and workshops held over the last five years:
 - **JBWG1** (10–12 February 2021, online): Attended by more than 150 participants from 31 countries. The meeting produced a **Programme of Work (PoW) for 2021–2023** and 24 recommendations.
 - **Catch-up Meeting** (18 August 2022, online): Focused on reviewing progress on the PoW.
 - **Workshop on Current Bycatch Issues in European Waters** (17 April 2023, O Grove, Spain): Organised prior to the European Cetacean Society conference, with 43 participants, including representatives from fishing communities.
 - **JBWG2** (5-6 February 2025, online): Attended by c. 100 participants from 20 countries. Following presentations, the Terms of Reference were updated, the Programme of Work reviewed and revised, with priorities established, task leads were appointed, and the Co-Chair from ASCOBANS (Peter Evans) was re-elected whilst a new Co-Chair (Dimitar Popov) was appointed to replace Ayaka Amaha Öztürk who stood down.
3. Over that period, **two ASCOBANS Conservation Objectives workshops** (April–May 2023) were held online, to evaluate bycatch thresholds. The long-term goal has always been to minimise (ultimately eliminate) anthropogenic removals. In the short term, the conservation objective has been to restore or maintain populations at $\geq 80\%$ of carrying capacity. In the past, for harbour porpoises, bycatch was targeted to remain at $< 1\%$ of the best population estimate, with $> 1.7\%$ removals considered unacceptable. For species with reduced populations or high uncertainty, thresholds could be set lower. The workshops concluded that these two thresholds were too high and should be re-examined.
4. Further work has been undertaken to assess, at what point anthropogenic removals such as from bycatch are likely to result in cetacean population declines. This will vary somewhat between species, dependent upon their life history parameters. Species with longer generation lengths will take longer to recover and therefore be more sensitive to high mortality. The modelling work is still underway but preliminary results suggest that annual mortality exceeding 0.7% of a population poses a threat.

Other Bycatch-Related Activities

5. Beyond the JBWG, several initiatives have been undertaken across the ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS areas:
 - **FAO-GFCM Fish Forum 2024** (Antalya, Türkiye): Workshop on “Mitigating multitaxa fisheries interactions in the Mediterranean”, co-organised by ACCOBAMS, GFCM, UNEP-MAP-SPA/RAC, IUCN-Med, MEDASSET, BirdLife ECA, WWF, and the Turkish Marine Research Foundation.
 - **The Future of Marine Biodiversity Monitoring in Europe workshop** (5–7 November 2024, Sitges, Spain): Organised by JRC and CINE, with ACCOBAMS Co-Chair participation. Challenges and solutions in monitoring, including fisheries, were addressed.
 - **ACCOBAMS Workshop** on the interaction between Fisheries and Vulnerable Species (28 January 2025, online)
 - **GFCM Working Group on Vulnerable Species (WGVUL)**
As a result of a gap analysis for identifying potential hotspots of bycatch occurrence in the Black Sea, data on cetacean distribution were identified as lacking during previous meetings of GFCM WGs. To address this need, contemporary data from various surveys (CeNoBS aerial survey, IMMAs in the Black Sea, etc.) and sources were presented during the meeting of WGVUL in March 2026.

ACCOBAMS Scientific Committee

6. The Scientific Committee endorsed the recommendations from the 2nd Meeting of the ASCOBANS-ACCOBAMS Joint Bycatch Working Group (JBWG2). The Scientific Committee agreed to draft recommendations aimed at specific bodies, and work to implement them.
7. The Scientific Committee reiterated the need to build on discussions from previous meetings, including SC16, and to strengthen further cooperation with FAO-GFCM and its relevant bodies (Commission, SAC, WGVUL, ACBS) to improve monitoring and mitigation of interactions between cetaceans and fisheries or aquaculture activities. Particular attention should be given to revising the 2019 FAO-GFCM Guidelines for bycatch monitoring, particularly in relation to the 0.5% minimum coverage for onboard observation, as while this threshold represents an important baseline, it may not be sufficient in all contexts to accurately assess the magnitude and patterns of cetacean bycatch.

Other Bycatch Projects

8. Several European projects on bycatch have been taking place over the last few years, the majority of which are still in progress. Projects include OBSCAMe, MedBycatch, CetAMBicion, CIBBRINA, Marine Beacon, and REDUCE. All are advancing our knowledge and producing results which are being shared with project participants, many of whom are within the JBWG framework. Each project is summarised very briefly below:
 - a) Covering the earlier projects first, the **OBSCAMe project** ran from 2020 to 2022. This was a scientific programme to better understand marine mammal bycatch in the Bay of Biscay gillnet fisheries using remote electronic devices as a monitoring tool. Its detailed objectives were to contribute to a better understanding of gillnetters and common dolphin interactions; identify the potential contribution of REM on this interaction and to better understand bycatch; test the processing chain and assess storing data issues (in a context of a large volume of data transfer and storage particularly for larger vessels), to do a scientific analysis to evaluate the opportunities to reinforce boat trip sampling with REM to better evaluate and survey common dolphin bycatches; develop automatic analysis with machine learning, and evaluate the costs of implementation of REM on a significative part of the Bay of Biscay gillnet fisheries.

- b) **MedBycatch** project Phase 2 (Understanding Mediterranean multi-taxa bycatch of vulnerable species and testing mitigation) took place between 2020 and 2022. It aimed to build on the results from the successful implementation of the observation programmes during the first phase (2017-2020), and to push forward to reduce bycatch in the Mediterranean by testing mitigation tools and techniques. Existing mitigation tools, such as circular hooks for longline fishing, turtle excluder devices (TEDs) for trawlers and LED lights for static nets were tested for their efficiency per taxa and fishing gear, as well as modifications to fishing techniques, such as deployment methods and gear set ups.
- c) The **CetAMBicion Project** aimed to contribute to reduce cetacean bycatch in the Bay of Biscay and the Iberian coast, in collaboration with the fishing industry. its objectives included collecting and analysing the information reported by each Member State under the EU legal obligations, identifying gaps and common approaches, and providing a summary of solutions (new or already developed in other regions or sub-regions). The project started in 2021 and was completed in 2024.
- d) The **CIBBRiNA Project** is funded under the EU LIFE Programme and runs from 2023 to 2029. The Coordinated Development and Implementation of Best Practice in Bycatch Reduction in the North Atlantic, Baltic and Mediterranean Regions (CIBBRiNA) project aims to minimise the bycatch of Endangered, Threatened and Protected (ETP) species in the North-East Atlantic, Baltic, and Mediterranean regions, working collaboratively as fishers, authorities, scientists, and other relevant stakeholders to achieve this. It covers not only cetaceans but also other marine mammals, marine birds, turtles, sharks, skates and rays. The project involves several case studies involving different types of fisheries (demersal and pelagic trawls, gillnetting, longlining, etc) in different regions (e.g. Greater North Sea, Baltic, Celtic Seas, Iceland, Bay of Biscay and Iberian Peninsula as well as the Azores and Mediterranean), studying impacts and testing a variety mitigation measures; there is also a bycatch risk assessment tool being developed whilst stakeholder engagement forms an important element. The JBWG Co-Chair from ASCOBANS is a partner in CIBBRiNA, focusing upon research to improve spatiotemporal risk assessments of marine mammals and birds in the Greater North Sea, Celtic Seas, By of Biscay and Iberian waters, following earlier work on this topic for the European Commission.
- e) The **Marine Beacon** project has rather similar objectives to CIBBRiNA. Its main aim is to address the impact of bycatch on the decline of marine biodiversity by producing the knowledge and tools to effectively reduce the bycatch and subsequent mortality of Protected, Endangered and Threatened Species (PETS) within European waters and beyond. The more detailed aims include engaging with key stakeholders to build mutual understanding across groups as to how to effectively mitigate against PETS bycatch; improving knowledge of PETS abundance, distribution, sensitivity to bycatch and bycatch occurrence whilst identifying gaps in data to inform how improved survey and monitoring design can fill such gaps; evaluating spatially and temporally explicit risk of fisheries bycatch and its impact on the vulnerability status of PETS; advancing next generation monitoring solutions and design optimal monitoring programmes to further improve knowledge regarding risk, and step up MS monitoring programmes towards achieving the target of the EU biodiversity strategy 2030 to eliminate or reduce PETS bycatch; developing mitigation solutions that best reduce bycatch and where possible eliminate associated mortality; and developing integrated bycatch management decision support tools for Member States Programmes of Measures. The project started in 2024 and runs until 2028.
- f) The EU Horizon funded project, **REDUCE** (Reducing bycatch of threatened megafauna in the East Central Atlantic) aims to gather the efforts of all sectors involved in this issue and to apply the most innovative interdisciplinary scientific approaches to reduce marine megafauna bycatch. In these marine regions, the search to understand megafauna

bycatch rates, the causes, their impact and ways to mitigate them has been underdeveloped compared to other areas where the EU fishing fleet operates. The project will focus specifically on developing and testing new technologies and management strategies for better assessing, monitoring and reducing the bycatch of birds, turtles, cetaceans, sharks and rays in the European long-distance fishing fleet of trawlers, purse-seiners and longliners, operating in Atlantic Ocean waters from the coasts of the Iberian Peninsula to Macaronesia (archipelagos of Azores, Madeira, Canary Islands and Cabo Verde) and the Gulf of Guinea. The project runs from 2024 to 2027.

- g) GFCM's **CetaByM** - "Pilot project to assess cetacean bycatch in Black Sea turbot gillnet fisheries and to test measures to mitigate the incidental catch of Cetaceans" project was completed and final report was published in the end of 2025. Main findings of the project include:
- The adoption of standardized fishing effort indicators (e.g. day.km) should be encouraged across Black Sea countries with integration of these metrics into national data collection mechanisms.
 - Wide-band PALs are an effective, potential mitigation tool for harbour porpoise bycatch in gillnet Black Sea fisheries. The results were consistent across countries and conditions and supported by robust GLMM analysis.
 - A preliminary economic assessment suggests that scaling up to cover 500 vessels region-wide would entail a total investment of approximately EUR 0.6-1.5 million, excluding training, distribution, and potential subsidies or replacements.

Coordination with International Bodies

9. JBWG collaborates closely with international organisations addressing bycatch, including ICES WGBYC, FAO, GFCM, IWC, OSPAR, and HELCOM. To avoid duplication, the WG integrates external efforts while focusing on filling knowledge and action gaps. Representatives from these bodies regularly attend JBWG meetings.
10. ASCOBANS Co-Chair Dr. Evans maintains liaison with NEAFC, NAMMCO, OSPAR, HELCOM, and the Marine Stewardship Council, and actively contributes to ICES WGBYC (bycatch of protected species) and ICES WGMME (marine mammal ecology), leading a Term of Reference within WGMME to support the ICES bycatch programme. He also engaged with the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) in their endeavours to review ways to set conservation bycatch thresholds.

Conclusions

11. Since its establishment, the JBWG aims to serve as a platform for harmonising actions to reduce cetacean bycatch across the ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS regions. Through its formal meetings, thematic workshops, regional projects, and coordination with international bodies, the Group attempts to advance common objectives to reduce anthropogenic removals, strengthen scientific collaboration, and ensure the effective integration of conservation targets into fisheries management.

Action requested:

12. The Advisory Committee is requested to take note of the report and provide feedback.