

Agenda Item 5.8

Review of Implementation of the ASCOBANS  
Triennial Work Plan (2007-2009)

Addressing of Threats, in particular bycatch,  
noise, pollution and ship strikes

Document 5-11

**The harbour porpoise in the southern  
North Sea: Abundance, threats, and  
research & management proposals**

**Action Requested**

- Take note of the report

Submitted by

IFAW



**NOTE:**  
IN THE INTERESTS OF ECONOMY, DELEGATES ARE KINDLY REMINDED TO BRING THEIR  
OWN COPIES OF DOCUMENTS TO THE MEETING

## **Note of the Submitting Organization**

At the initiative of IFAW, experts from the Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research (NIOZ) and the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (RBINS) have for the first time compiled harbour porpoise sightings and stranding data, up to the latest 2007 figures. The added value of analysing data from Belgium and The Netherlands in parallel is obvious, showing similar trends and complementary results. The authors discuss threats, research- and management proposals for the species in the southern North Sea.

The full report can be downloaded on the IFAW website ([http://www.ifaw.org/ifaw\\_european\\_union/save\\_animals/porpoises/harbour\\_porpoise.php](http://www.ifaw.org/ifaw_european_union/save_animals/porpoises/harbour_porpoise.php)).

# The harbour porpoise in the southern North Sea: Abundance, threats, and research- & management proposals

J. Haelters, Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences (RBINS) & K. Camphuysen, Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research (NIOZ). Report commissioned by IFAW, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, 56 pp, 2009

## Summary

The harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) is the most numerous cetacean species in the North Sea. For reasons not well understood, it gradually disappeared from the southern North Sea during the 1950s, to make a spectacular return towards the end of the 20th century. The analysis of Belgian and Dutch sighting data, together with the results of research on the hundreds of animals washed ashore yielded information on ecological aspects of the population, trends and threats.

The recent increase in numbers in the southern North Sea is probably food related, and is believed to be due to an influx of porpoises from more northern waters. Strandings data seem to indicate that the influx consists for the main part of juveniles, with significantly more males than females. However, stranded pregnant females and numerous neonates indicate that some reproduction takes place in the southern North Sea. Currently, a clear seasonal pattern is apparent in the presence of porpoises. A peak in numbers in coastal waters of the southern North Sea is reached between February and April. In late spring a northward migration towards more offshore waters is observed, and by summer the number of

porpoises in coastal waters has become low. In the Dutch Delta Area (Zeeland) a small resident population seems to have been established. Observations during 2007 and 2008 have indicated that the seasonal pattern might not be stable

Together with the return of the porpoise to the southern North Sea, a bycatch problem became apparent. Up to half of the stranded porpoises had been killed incidentally in fishing gear, a rate that justifies concerns. The main fishing gears responsible for the porpoise bycatch are gill- and tangle nets, considered otherwise as selective and relatively environmentally friendly.

Next to a lack of data on the ecology of the porpoise, data are lacking on the true level of bycatch, and on the extent, and spatial and temporal distribution of relevant fishing methods. To obtain such data, research initiatives should be coordinated and standardised internationally. Basic research funds should be structural and be provided for a long time span.

Currently protection initiatives are dispersed in many international nature conservation fora. Perhaps the best forum for the coordination of scientific research efforts in relation to porpoises in the North Sea would be ASCOBANS. For further developing measures, the most appropriate framework

would be the European Community, given its competence in, and responsibilities for both fisheries and environmental matters. Also measures to prevent bycatch in recreational fisheries should be coordinated internationally. One of the most promising bycatch prevention measures is the use of pingers (acoustic alarms). However, many problems with their use remain, and currently they are not mandatory for most gill and tangle net fisheries in the southern North Sea.

While currently only few Belgian and Dutch fishermen use gill- and tangle nets, this is gradually changing, due to environmental concerns of beamtrawling and especially the soaring gasoline prices (up to the end of 2008). Therefore it is likely that without effective protective measures, the porpoise bycatch in certain areas in the North Sea will increase. It is clear that disentangling the problems the harbour porpoise is facing, is a challenging task, given the combination of environmental, social, economical, political, legal and technical factors involved. -