

Agenda Item 6.4: Southward extension of the Agreement Area

M. Sequeira, "Portuguese waters in ASCOBANS: a preliminary report"

Submitted by: Portugal



ASCOBANS

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

Portuguese waters in ASCOBANS: a preliminary proposal

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With an extensive coastline to the Northeast Atlantic and well-known traditions in seafaring, the Portuguese would be expected to have developed a very special interest in the scientific study of marine mammals. Unfortunately this was not always the case and most attention was diverted to commercial whaling and other forms of hunting.

Until 1981 marine mammals were regularly caught by fishermen along the Portuguese coast and sold at fish markets. The meat was used either for human consumption or as fish bait. Following national and international pressures to stop all forms of whaling and hunting of small cetaceans an important piece of national legislation was passed in 1981 prohibiting any killing of cetaceans. This measure had an immediate positive impact on species such as the common and striped dolphins, but its effectiveness upon other species was much more difficult to assess. This holds especially true for the harbour porpoise, a species well known for its coastal habits and frequent involvement in accidental drowning in gillnets set by small boats close to the shore. In this case the law possibly brought no significant benefits and may simply have resulted in placing any cetaceans found dead by fishermen in their nets automatically beyond reach of cetologists.

Regular surveys for cetaceans along the Portuguese coast were initiated in 1976 with the setting up of a national stranding network. This was possible due to the cooperation of many individuals and some official departments including the Portuguese Navy and the National Customs. In recent years this network has been improved considerably and the actual number of entities and individuals reporting strandings includes many NGOs, universities and public institutions covering the entire coastline. In some areas dedicated surveys on foot are organised during winter time as a regular activity. The data collected by the stranding network is centralised on a database at the Institute for Nature Conservation, and stranding reports are produced regularly. Particular attention has been given in recent years to live strandings and a national network aimed at rescuing and rehabilitating marine mammals is being set up at this moment.

The study of marine mammals in Portugal also includes regular surveys at sea over the continental shelf. These surveys are made using opportunistic platforms (mainly oceanographic vessels from the Fisheries Institute) and cover the entire coastline. Data already collected, both from the stranding network and from the surveys at sea, along with the international commitments made by the Portuguese government in terms of the conservation of marine mammals have pointed to the urgent need of changes in the actual national legislation protecting marine mammals. Definitions of clear competences in terms of marine mammals handling, disturbance of natural populations and accidental by-catches are

some of the aspects that need a careful attention and will be considered in the new legislation text already in preparation.

The future ratification of the Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Contiguous Atlantic Area (ACCOBAMS) will constitute a major point in the conservation efforts towards a proper management of many cetacean populations in Portugal. However the geographical area of this Agreement only covers the southern coast of Portugal (Cape S. Vicente to the Spanish border) leaving the entire western coast out of any specific international conservation measures and programmes. The Portuguese western coast concentrates the higher number of cetaceans and this is also the region with major problems in terms of by-catches and habitat degradation. Thus, the southwards extension of the ASCOBANS agreement area is of utmost importance for the conservation of cetaceans in the NE Atlantic and will be most welcome by the Portuguese government. Although still considered as a preliminary version, the area proposed for inclusion (see map) will cover the entire Portuguese continental shelf with its major canyons and most important areas in terms of biological richness. Nevertheless, the final version must be articulated with the Spanish proposal, especially in the region near the northern border in order to have a geographical unit in terms of cetacean's requirements.

