

**REPORT OF THE 7TH MEETING
OF THE
ASCOBANS NORTH SEA GROUP**

**Vilnius, Lithuania
24 September 2018**



**Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans
of the Baltic, North East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas**

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**REPORT OF THE
7TH MEETING OF THE STEERING GROUP FOR THE ASCOBANS
CONSERVATION PLAN FOR HARBOUR PORPOISES IN THE NORTH SEA
(NORTH SEA GROUP)**

1. Welcome and announcements

The Chair, Peter Evans (Sea Watch Foundation) welcomed participants and thanked Lithuania for hosting the meeting at their new National Visitors' Centre of the State Service of Protected Areas. A tour de table was conducted allowing participants to introduce themselves. On behalf of the Secretariat, Aline Kühl-Stenzel welcomed all participants and mentioned that Sinéad Murphy (Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology) would join the meeting remotely via Skype later in the day.

1.1 Adoption of the Agenda

There were no comments on the agenda. It was adopted as presented.

1.2 Appointment of Rapporteur

Melanie Virtue (Secretariat) was appointed rapporteur for the morning session; Simon Delany (report writer for AC24) took over for the afternoon session.

2. Approval of the Report of the 6th Meeting of the North Sea Group

There were no comments on the meeting report, and it was adopted as presented.

3. Review of the North Sea Group membership

The Chair invited members to brief the meeting on any changes in affiliation and to alert the group to any interest by potential new members to join. Eunice Pinn (SeaFish) stated that while she had in the past been part of the UK delegation, she was now representing the Sea Fish Industry Authority in the UK. Sami Hassani (France) pointed out that it would be good to have a representative of Ifremer¹ present at future meetings.

4. Implementation Review: Bycatch estimation (Actions 3 and 4)

4.1 New information on bycatch estimates (as reported at ICES WGBYC)

The Chair invited members to update others on new information on bycatch estimates. Kelly Macleod (UK) referred to the [AC24 presentation](#) on the ICES Working Group on Bycatch of Protected Species, in which, together with her fellow Co-Chair Sara Königson, she outlined the latest report from the meeting held in May 2018 ([AC24/Inf.2.1.b](#)) and information that was of relevance to ASCOBANS.

Ms. Macleod further elaborated that the data which ICES WGBYC makes use of are broader than just the North Sea. They come primarily through Regulation 812/2004, but increasingly came from fisheries monitoring and discard programmes under the Data Collection Framework (DCF).

Focusing on the UK, she pointed out that the greatest attention for harbour porpoise monitoring was in the south-west given that the risk for bycatch was highest, but there were

¹ Institut français de recherche pour l'exploitation de la mer, <https://wwz.ifremer.fr/>.

some data available for the North Sea (for further details see the UK's report under Regulation 812). The bycatch estimates from the UK's dedicated monitoring programme were orders of magnitude higher than through the discards programme. It was rare for any bycatch to be reported through the discards programme. For 2016 and 2017 there were no bycatch records for the North Sea (bycaught harbour porpoises were recorded in the south-west of the UK). In 2016, there had been six vessels mandated to use pingers; in 2017, five vessels. Warnings had been given to a UK and a French vessel in 2017 following infringements in pinger use. In one case the pingers were on board, but not deployed. In the other case the pingers were deployed, but the guidelines for deployment had not been applied (the spacing was incorrect).

In future, monitoring effort for the eastern Channel would increase, not least due to the presence of a new Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Data from Scotland had not been available, but it was hoped that this situation would improve in future.

Regarding the difference in bycatch rate obtained from dedicated and non-dedicated surveys, Ms. Macleod further elaborated that this was a major concern and that this had been discussed repeatedly at ASCOBANS, ICES, and other meetings. Currently, bycatch was underestimated if dedicated observers were not present. The key to solving this dilemma was in improving sampling protocols (see [AC24 presentation](#) and the [PETSAMP workshop](#)).

Jan Haelters (Belgium) reported that for Belgium there was no static gear monitoring, there was only strandings monitoring. 6 per cent of all stranded animals had been bycaught. Out of the total number of animals necropsied, bycatch was the cause of death for 26 per cent (see [AC24/Inf.2.e](#) for details). There were only two Belgian fishermen using static nets in Belgian waters and these did not report any bycatch. During the ensuing debate the Chair pointed out that no accurate map of fishing effort by gear type was available for the North Sea. Sometimes the definitions of gear type varied between different data sources, but this could be resolved.

For France, Mr. Hassani highlighted that there was an observer programme for 5 per cent of the fishing effort. The levels of harbour porpoise bycatch were very low, the majority of bycatch being seals. Most monitoring effort focussed on strandings. Following the recent mass strandings things were changing and there was now a Working Group (including fishermen and scientists) focusing on bycatch monitoring, including the use of innovative pingers. The Group would cover all of the Bay of Biscay (i.e. the entire French EEZ).

For the Netherlands, Meike Scheidat outlined that monitoring results were available for a Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) project (running from June 2013 to March 2017) with 14 vessels equipped (not necessarily the same ones over time). In total, there were 8133 REM-monitored fishing days representing 11 per cent of all fishing days. Five harbour porpoises had been registered in the analysed fishing days. Net length was used as a measure of effort. Bycatch was found in both trammel and gill nets. This study concluded that there had been an estimated 98 animals bycaught during the project period, with 26 animals per year (confidence interval of 1-50). Eight harbour porpoises were necropsied out of the total 14 bycaught porpoises during the study. The study further elaborated that given a mortality rate of 0.063%, the range of bycatch in the Netherlands was between 0.013 – 0.198 per cent, i.e. the highest bycatch estimate was 0.2 per cent (of the national estimate of harbour porpoise abundance). These results, however, did not include gillnetters from recreational fisheries or non-Dutch vessels. It was later noted that such national estimates were arbitrary and that estimates at the population level were much-needed to get a complete picture, not least to be able to make management recommendations.

Recommendations resulting from this Dutch REM project were: improve international standards on data collection for fisheries effort, to assess other sources of bycatch in Dutch waters; develop an improved, more cost-effective REM system (possibly mobile such as

“CatchCam”); and develop an adequate monitoring framework of all protected species within the Data Collection Framework.

Continuing for the Netherlands, Ms. Scheidat gave an update on strandings and necropsies: 10-15 per cent of all stranded animals were necropsied; only those which were relatively fresh (i.e. decomposition code of 1-2) were necropsied, freezing was avoided where possible. Out of those necropsied animals for which the cause of death was known, it was estimated that 7.1-8.3 per cent were bycaught (this came to a total estimate of 19-30 animals bycaught per year in the Netherlands, which was similar to the above-mentioned estimate from REM monitoring).

For Germany, Patricia Brtnik reported that there were a small number of observers active in line with Regulation 812/2004 but the majority of the German fleet does not fall under the regulation because of vessel size. Monitoring should be focusing more on the Baltic rather than the North Sea, given lower fishing activities with gillnets in the latter. There are stranding programmes, but it was often difficult to determine bycatch as the cause of death. There was an older report² analysing data from 2003-2011 (total sample size: more than 300 animals, but only about 80 animals were suitable for necropsy) which estimated that from the necropsied animals for which the cause of death was known, 50 per cent had been bycaught.

Reporting for Denmark, Signe Sveegaard quoted from the ICES WGBYC report that there was no specific bycatch monitoring in the gillnet or trawl fishery under Regulation 812/ 2004. However, there was indeed monitoring of incidental bycatch. For vessels above 15m length and a coverage of 9.4 per cent, zero bycatch had been recorded. For vessels below 15m length, 32 harbour porpoises had been recorded using REM in the 3a area (Kattegat, Skagerrak). For the Kattegat region, the bycatch estimate for harbour porpoises was well below 1 per cent in 2017.

Ms. Murphy joined the meeting via skype and mentioned that Sveegaard et al. had done a review of appropriate ICES assessment units in the WBBK region.

Reporting for Sweden, Julia Carlström highlighted results from a pilot study of onboard observers focusing on bycaught marine mammals and birds from 2017 to 2019 (covering areas 21, 24, possibly 25 also). Thus far, two harbour porpoises had been caught in either gillnet or trammel nets during 33 trips.

Regarding necropsies in Sweden, Ms. Carlström further reported that in 2016 one animal had been bycaught and landed by a fisherman (on the border of Kattegat and Skagerrak). Boats in the study were below 15m length. In 2016 and 2017 there had been two unsuccessful rescue attempts of live-stranded harbour porpoises. In total in 2016, 59 harbour porpoises were recorded as stranded. In 2017, 104 harbour porpoises were reported as stranded. Four out of ten stranded animals in 2016 were likely to have been bycaught. In 2017, nine out of 20 were likely to have been bycaught. Julia noted, however, that Sweden did not estimate bycatch rates from strandings data.

The meeting agreed that in order to improve reporting on bycatch and strandings data, two tables would be produced to provide a straightforward and comparable overview across all Parties. Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom confirmed that they would provide the relevant data for the two tables. Ms. Scheidat would compile the strandings table for the North Sea Group in time for the final report of the meeting and Ms. Macleod would compile the bycatch table (including REM data). Extra support would be provided by the Harbour Porpoise Coordinator, whose list of tasks included to “review latest available information on harbour porpoise bycatch from the fleets operating

² https://www.lung.mv-regierung.de/dateien/sektionsergebnisse_schweinswal_mv.pdf;
https://www.lung.mv-regierung.de/dateien/totfundmonitoring_meeressaeuiger_2015_mv.pdf
(available in German only).

in the North, Belt and Baltic Seas”, as well as to “collate regional information on life history parameters (e.g. age structure, age at sexual maturity, reproductive information” for harbour porpoises in the areas covered by the three plans, ensuring synergies with other fora”. More generally, two table formats should be agreed well in advance of the next North Sea meeting to make reporting more straightforward and to make these important data easily accessible to anyone interested.

Sarah Dolman (WDC) pointed out that such tables would be very valuable, not least since Regulation 812 only covered larger vessels and smaller vessels were not adequately monitored through other means. Such tables would also be a useful tool to compare different monitoring techniques, different regions and metiers. Others confirmed the value of such tables.

4.2 Monitoring Projects

4.2.1 Remote Electronic Monitoring Projects

4.2.1.1 Update on Danish REM Projects

In addition to the information already provided above, Ms. Sveegaard reported that the REM monitoring programme had changed as a result of funding and the number of voluntary fishermen available. Finn Larsen and Lotte Kindt-Larsen were preparing a report which would highlight seasons and types of fishing gear which were most problematic. The report was not yet finished, but the data collection had been done.

4.2.1.2 Update on Dutch REM Project

In addition to the information already provided above, Ms. Scheidat noted that due to the low fishing effort (low cod density) the bycatch estimates had possibly also been low. The REM study had only covered harbour porpoises, not seabirds.

4.2.1.3 Update on Any Other REM Projects

For Sweden, there was no REM employed in the North Sea (nor in the Baltic).

There was a discussion on bycatch data accessibility following an intervention from Ms. Murphy to brief the meeting about the forthcoming NAMMCO workshop on a stock assessment for harbour porpoises in the North Atlantic, which had been discussed at AC23 (see e.g. [AC23/Inf.7.1.b](#)).

4.3 Voluntary Reporting

Ms. Carlström reported for Sweden (with input from Ms. Königson) on the voluntary pinger programme, which had started in 2017 along the west coast of Sweden. Nine fishermen had been involved from the start of the programme – in 2018, there were about double that number of fishermen taking part in the programme (lumpfish and cod gillnetters). The fishermen reported on catch, bycatch, fishing effort and pinger use. Unfortunately, there was no control since this process was driven by fishermen (rather than scientists).

There was a study which had started in 2015 to investigate the effect of pingers on harbour porpoises in the commercial lumpfish industry (south-west coast of Sweden). C-PODs had been deployed in parallel with the nets with pingers for acoustic monitoring of harbour porpoises. The initial results showed that harbour porpoise presence was lower when pingers were used. The displacement varied from several minutes to days (the latter was more common). The pingers used were modified banana pingers (higher frequency than the original; not audible to seals). In autumn, the pingers would be tested on a larger scale in a commercial fishery.

4.4 Assessment of Bycatch in the North Sea – Knowledge Gaps

There was a discussion on how the meeting could not only highlight the well-known knowledge gaps, but instead initiate action by the Parties to close these gaps. Concrete proposals would no doubt be helpful, such as a workshop on more cost-effective monitoring in a specific area.

4.5 Common Fisheries Policy – current status in relation to cetacean bycatch

The meeting discussed the importance of close communication and collaboration between environment and fisheries at the national level, and in turn between those attending ASCOBANS and EU-level negotiations. There was general agreement that all Parties should send a fisheries expert (especially those engaged at the EU level) to future North Sea meetings. There was also a discussion on how best to raise cetaceans on the agenda of the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF).

4.6 Recommendations

The meeting started refining recommendations mentioned thus far and collected further ideas. Many of the final [Action Points adopted by AC24](#) under the bycatch session were discussed during this session.³

5. Implementation Review: Development of Alternative Mitigation Methods

5.1 Update on German projects

Ms. Brtnik reported that about 1,700 Porpoise Alerting Devices (PALs) were being used by fishermen to reduce the bycatch of harbour porpoises along Schleswig-Holstein's Baltic coast. There might be an independent monitoring project to accompany this PAL programme, in line with the letter from the Jastarnia Group ([AC24/Inf.3.3.a](#)). In the coming 1-2 months the outstanding questions that were currently delaying the monitoring project would be resolved. Another project on the German Baltic coast, STELLA, would run at least until the end of 2019; there were no new results to present. Regarding the PALs, the currently available research data suggested that the method worked in the Baltic, but not in the North Sea. It was unclear why this was.

Ms. Macleod briefed the meeting that there had been a trial of PALs in a cod-gillnet fishery which generally had high levels of harbour porpoise bycatch in Iceland based on information that had been submitted to the ICES WGBYC. This trial had failed to show the desired effect – in fact it appeared that especially adult males had been attracted to the PALs. Two vessels were used in the trial, with 12 harbour porpoises caught in the gillnets with PALs and 11 harbour porpoises caught in the gillnets without PALs. In the nets equipped with PALs, 8 out of the 12 harbour porpoises were adult male and were found very close to the devices.

Ms. Brtnik reported from the Baltic trial reports available which indicate that there had been a 70 per cent reduction of bycatch, but she did not know the sex ratios. It was not known why the trials in the Baltic and North Sea had such different results. The original recording of a call used in the PAL had come from an adult female to its calf. The meeting agreed that further examination of the matter was needed.

³ Recommendations from the 7th North Sea Group meeting to the 24th Meeting of the Advisory Committee can be found in Annex 1 of this report.

5.2 Update on Dutch projects

Ms. Scheidat reported that the use of pingers was not promoted in the Dutch fleet; there was only one fisherman who still had pingers and did not use them regularly.

5.3 Update on Belgian projects

There were no relevant projects to be reported for Belgium.

5.4 Update on UK projects

There was a [presentation](#) from Alice Doyle on behalf of the UK on two projects: firstly, on how harbour porpoises behaved around nets and secondly how the mesh size had an impact on harbour porpoise bycatch (Defra funded projects undertaken by SMRU). On the first project work was ongoing to further refine the use of a 3-dimensional acoustic tracking device (sound trap) and accompanying software. Regarding the second project, the theoretical prediction was that the smaller the mesh size and thinner twine diameter was, the less bycatch there should be, since it would be easier for harbour porpoises to break out. Initial results from the monkfish/turbot fishery in Cornwall confirmed that less bycatch was seen in nets with thinner twine. The full report was foreseen for 2019.

5.5 Update on changes in fishing procedures (France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden)

Ms. Sveegaard reported for Denmark that a new type of net had been developed, which would not have a negative impact on fishing rate but might reduce bycatch. Other pods and traps were also being trialled to reduce bycatch in Sweden and in addition reduce the conflict with seals. A more detailed report would be provided in 2019.

The UK brought to the group's attention research on the effect of net height in the North Sea carried out by Danish researchers at DTU Aqua – a reduction in net height did not reduce turbot catch nor harbour porpoise bycatch. The net would be further redesigned and tested.

The Chair pointed out that within the ASCOBANS Bycatch Working Group there had been a discussion on reviewing mitigation methods by gear type, including the associated costs. The focus would be on regional fisheries with known high bycatch rates in the ASCOBANS region. Draft Terms of Reference had been developed, which were available for the group to review.

Mark Simmonds briefed the meeting on the IWC's Bycatch Mitigation Initiative (global focus) which had secured further funding to continue. Close cooperation with the IWC's initiative would no doubt be beneficial. Ms. Dolman pointed out that the focus of the IWC's Bycatch Mitigation Initiative would be on small-scale fisheries outside of the ASCOBANS region and so the bycatch mitigation work under ASCOBANS and IWC would be complementary. The meeting agreed that regular communication and exchange of information would be beneficial.

6. Presentation by Graham Pierce reviewing variation in harbour porpoise life history parameters and diet in NW Europe

The Chair warmly welcomed Graham Pierce, Instituto de Investigaciones Marinas, who was this year's invited speaker for the North Sea meeting presenting on variation in harbour porpoise life history parameters and diet (the full presentation is available [here](#)). Mr. Pierce provided a thorough overview of reproductive biology, diet, life cycle and general population dynamics and compared the populations in the North-East Atlantic and beyond. General messages included that females outgrew males and that Iberian individuals were generally larger. Throughout the presentation Mr. Pierce illustrated which datasets were available,

what questions could be analysed and highlighted the potential biases in the data used, such as when using stranded animals.

During questions it became apparent that fresh data from Portugal were currently missing. There was significant concern that the average age at death was just higher than the average age at sexual maturity, meaning that many animals would not become old enough before they had a chance to breed.

Ms. Murphy (remotely via skype) provided additional information on life history parameters and data presented, with a focus on UK, Celtic and Irish waters. She pointed out further potential biases in the strandings data. That being said, one could account for many uncertainties and it was clear that in the UK, the life span of harbour porpoises had notably declined and that pregnancy rates were relatively low in UK, Celtic and Irish waters (e.g. compared to Norwegian waters).

7. Other activities contributing to the conservation of the harbour porpoises in the North Sea

7.1 EU Habitats Directive

7.1.1 Review of North Sea SCIs/SACs concerning harbour porpoise

The UK had six new SACs now formally accepted by the European Commission (EC) – they were now classified as Sites of Community Importance (SCIs). There was only one in the North Sea (largest site with 37,000 km²). These sites were already treated as if formally designated, for example when windfarm developments were being proposed. Conservation objectives were being drafted.

In Denmark there had been a recent review of 16 areas in Danish waters to assess the relevance for harbour porpoises. Harbour porpoises might be included in additional areas. Maps from the report were being presented by Signe Sveegaard. 86 marine areas had been included in the evaluation. Areas smaller than 5 km² were considered too small. The analysis including data from 1997-2017, showed that all marine areas were relevant for harbour porpoises. The Wadden Sea was listed as an area relevant for harbour porpoises, albeit at a low density. High Density areas seemed to be relatively stable.

Some areas had initially been designed around reef habitat, with harbour porpoises being identified later. In these reef areas gillnets were often being used, but the fishing effort was declining. Regulations might in future be designed specifically for conflict areas, where there were high densities of gillnets and of porpoises.

7.1.2 Progress in designing conservation objectives, management plans and conservation measures (e.g. noise disturbance, fisheries management) for harbour porpoises in Natura 2000 area

Ms. Doyle gave a [presentation](#) on behalf of the UK on SCIs for harbour porpoises, following on from the earlier presentation under 7.1.1. Conservation objectives for the individual sites were still in draft but would be finalised soon. The key draft objectives were: 1) to ensure that harbour porpoise remain a viable component of the site, 2) to ensure that there is no significant disturbance, and 3) to maintain prey and the supporting habitat. JNCC and UK had contracted a number of projects to collect evidence in support of management of these sites in light of the conservation objectives. These including one investigating the potential management options of using pingers and or closed areas to mitigate harbour porpoise bycatch in gillnet fisheries in the sites. Currently, bycatch rates inside and outside the North Sea site were similar. If pingers were used throughout all the porpoise SACs, the estimated reduction in bycatch would be from about 99 to 5-30 animals annually.

There was another project investigating the condition of the supporting habitat and availability of prey, which was challenging due to the complexities of the system. A review of

harbour porpoise diet was produced and the relationship between prey species and habitat was being explored. A report would be published shortly. The Chair offered to share findings from his own research team on fish prey diet and habitat modelling.

Mr. Simmonds raised the issue of Brexit and what the status of SAC designations would be afterwards. He did not think there was a clear commitment. Ms. Macleod commented that EU legislation had been transposed into UK law.

Ms. Brtnik reported for Germany that the details of fishery measures of the management plans for three SACs in the EEZ in the North Sea were currently being negotiated with other Member States. Finding agreement on fishery measures was particularly challenging.

7.2 New Surveys – monitoring trends in distribution & abundance (Action 7)

Mr. Hassani reported for France that there had been new pelagic surveys in the French North Sea related to windfarm development. Results were expected this year. A decision had been made to have an aerial survey of the entire French coast every six years – the next one was due in 2022. Research vessels were also surveying distribution (not abundance) every year.

The Chair showed a map of 2018 surveys in the Netherlands. Ms. Scheidat explained that they were trying to conduct a survey every year. The 2018 survey was flown in July. In 2016, there was a gap because of the SCANS survey (which used the same method, but the strip width was different).

Ms. Brtnik (Germany) presented data from the long-term aerial surveys in the North Sea. Aerial surveys of EEZ Natura 2000 areas were done twice every year (spring and summer), while the complete area was monitored every two years. Germany would shortly switch to digital methods (high definition surveys, rather than observers). An interactive database for abundance and distribution was now available where one could add layers, combine years, and assess other parameters.

Mr. Haelters (Belgium) gave a presentation on the aerial surveys from 2017 and 2018. On 1 June 2017, there had been a survey during which 117 harbour porpoises were seen, including many calves (n=21), which was surprisingly early. In August and September, densities had been relatively low. High densities were observed in April 2018, with 404 animals observed. The area with the highest densities had been reserved for offshore windfarm development. The harbour porpoise distribution was notably located outside shipping lanes.

Pile driving for wind farm development was not permitted in Belgium between 1 January and 30 April. A new noise mitigation measure was currently being tested. Trammel nets targeting sole were the primary fishery in the relevant waters in Belgium.

Denmark reported that it was behind in publishing monitoring surveys. Analysis of C-POD data from the past six years was ongoing. Denmark was developing a new monitoring method using C-POD data rather than aerial survey data. The initial analysis of results was promising, indicating that this method was sufficiently powerful to pick up population trends.

Ms. Macleod presented slides on designing a monitoring programme for the SACs in the southern North Sea, an area with several windfarms in planning or have been consented (the work had been undertaken by CREEM and SMRU for JNCC).

Objectives were to determine year-round use (relative abundance), collect data on seasonal distribution, and detect changes in harbour porpoise use over time and space, within and outside the site. Different methodologies had been compared and the project team looked at the power to detect changes in relative abundance. A grid of passive acoustic monitoring stations had been proposed, but the power to detect even a drastic decline was poor. If one had more than one abundance estimate per year (e.g. one summer and one winter estimate over many years), the power was much improved. However, the cost implications were very

significant given that POD deployment and maintenance was very expensive (the starting cost was GBP 3 million per annum). In Denmark, there were many more abundance estimates (e.g. weekly), which had proven to have a much greater power.

Sweden did not have any monitoring results to report for the North Sea since there was no monitoring taking place in this part of Swedish waters.

Denmark monitored all the SACs by aerial survey annually, but the results were delayed.

7.3 Update on MSFD and marine mammal indicators

Denmark reported that it was working on the HELCOM indicator for harbour porpoise abundance this year. Later in the year there was a workshop planned to look at the OSPAR indicator for harbour porpoise abundance. There was close collaboration between both groups.

Mr. Hassani reported that for the interim MSFD assessment France had concluded that Good Environmental Status had not improved. A final assessment was due in 2020.

7.4 Certification schemes – Liaison with Marine Stewardship Council

The Chair reported that the Secretariat and himself (as Chair of the Bycatch Working Group) had had a skype session with MSC and that a representative (Matt Gummery) would be present at the Advisory Committee meeting the next day. There was concern about high risk fisheries being given certification. The profile of the ASCOBANS bycatch perspective needed to be raised. The hope was that, in future, ASCOBANS Parties and experts would have more involvement in MSC certification.

8. Overall Progress in the Implementation of the Conservation Plan

The Chair invited comments on the Coordinator's assessment of progress under the plan ([AC24/Doc.3.2.b](#)).

Ms. Dolman noted that underwater noise was likely to be a threat to harbour porpoises in the North Sea. It was a shame that this matter was not considered at all. Maybe one should focus on different topics in different years as the meetings of the Advisory Committee now did.

The Chair agreed that issues such as noise needed to be reviewed at regular intervals (e.g. every two or three years). Bycatch was such a fundamental threat that this was reviewed and discussed every year. France agreed that the focus topics under the North Sea Group should correlate with national reporting (like the AC).

Ms. Dolman pointed out that cumulative impacts were another important topic to consider. The Chair pointed out that this had been covered in the 6th Meeting of the North Sea Group.

The Secretariat pointed out that every threat was covered once in the three years following a Meeting of Parties (MOP). In the year prior to the Meeting of Parties, updates on all threats were being reported by Parties. The next MOP was in 2020, then in 2024.

The meeting agreed to align with the national reporting cycle, i.e. to discuss the same focus subjects that were being covered by the Meetings of the Advisory Committee/Parties in the North Sea Group.

9. Calendar of Actions 2018-2019

The Chair opened discussion on the draft priority recommendations for the North Sea Plan, and invited comments ([AC24/Doc.3.2.b](#)). Additional recommendations had been collated during the day and were available in a draft format.

Ms. Scheidat recommended that the first recommendation should include net length and landed fish tonnage (as an example).

Regarding the process, the Chair clarified that he was looking for review and endorsement on the recommendations from the Working Group, in order for the AC then to take on these recommendations for Parties and other stakeholders to implement.

Ms. Dolman and others noted that some of today's discussions would provide more details to the recommendations. It was also noted that the Bycatch Working Group might have comments to add. The meeting did a general review of the total list of recommendations, ensuring which actors should be tasked with which action.

Everyone agreed that all the draft recommendations (those from the report and those from today) would need to be consolidated and reviewed by the entire Working Group. The only practical way to do this would be by email. Another ad-hoc meeting of the Working Group would be feasible during the AC meeting in the coming days in time for the North Sea Group agenda matter at the AC (3.2 scheduled for 26 September).

The Chair provided an update on the Harbour Porpoise Coordinator, a new position which had been created following the decision of AC23 in 2017 (see [AC24/Doc.3.0](#) for background information). The Sea Watch Foundation had been contracted to provide Harbour Porpoise Coordination; the organization had subcontracted Ms. Tiu Similä in February 2018 to *inter alia* produce the progress report for the North Sea Plan. Unfortunately, Ms. Similä was unable to continue due to a number of tragic family matters and due to ill health. Peter Evans (Sea Watch Foundation) took over and would continue to take care of North Sea Plan coordination.

The Secretariat added that two Parties had thus far provided voluntary contributions to fund the Coordinator. Further funds were urgently needed for the position to become a long-term one, which was the aim of Parties. The forthcoming AC would discuss the matter in depth.

Mr. Simmonds thanked the Chair and Sea Watch Foundation for taking on the coordination role, and suggested that appreciation should be sent to Tiu from the Group, with which everyone agreed.

10. Communication

11. Next SG meeting

Regarding the timing of future meetings of the North Sea Group, it was agreed to have back-to-back meetings with the Jastarnia Group in years when there was a MOP (e.g. 2020 and 2024), and back-to-back with the AC in the other years.

12. Close

After expressing thanks to the hosts, the Secretariat, and all who had contributed to the organization and smooth running of the meeting, the Chair closed the meeting at 18:45.

Annex 1: Priority Recommendations from NSG7

1. Work nationally (e.g. through work plans) and regionally (through Regional Coordination Groups) to improve quality and availability of fishing effort data (e.g. by region, gear type, net length, vessel size category, season, and country).
2. Investigate options for more robust but cost-effective bycatch monitoring in the ASCOBANS region by commissioning a cost-benefit analysis of available and potential monitoring tools to be used aboard fishing vessels (e.g. observers, mobile REM). The method needs to be suitable for vessels of less than 15 metres length. The results of the study should be discussed at the Part II Bycatch Workshop on “Unacceptable interactions”.
3. Assess how Parties can individually and collectively draw on fisheries funding from the EU (e.g. EMFF) to jointly implement better bycatch monitoring and mitigation, with assistance from DG Environment).
4. Investigate gear specific solutions to mitigate bycatch, including alternative fishing methods to static gillnetting, by commissioning a review of available mitigation that could be applicable to fisheries within the ASCOBANS Agreement Area.
5. Recommend to Parties to address the challenges for monitoring cetacean bycatch as a consequence of working under the EU-MAP. These include an appropriate sampling design (taking account of areas, métiers, number of vessels to be sampled, amount of sampling days/hauls, etc), and ensuring that trained and dedicated observers are deployed in adequate numbers and adequately engaged in monitoring cetaceans, drawing upon knowledge of high-risk areas and fisheries.
6. Encourage Parties to pass on bycatch monitoring and mitigation recommendations under ASCOBANS, at a national level, to the appropriate persons to facilitate engagement internationally, particularly in discussions with the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) and the European Commission.
7. Recommend to Parties that at future meetings of the Advisory Committee and the North Sea Group a fisheries representative from the respective Party is present. The Terms of Reference of the North Sea Group shall be updated accordingly in the intersessional period.
8. Recommend that North Sea-wide information on life history parameters be collected and analysed from strandings and bycaught animals in order to assess for evidence of temporal changes in those parameters that may have resulted from anthropogenic activities.
9. Improve the information relevant to the Conservation Plan provided to ASCOBANS by Parties to facilitate collation and assessment of the North Sea status by the Coordinator.
10. Ensure greater coordination of activities between countries within the ASCOBANS Agreement Area.

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