

Agenda Item 3.3

Species Action Plans

Conservation Plan for Harbour Porpoises
in the North Sea (North Sea Plan)

Information Document 3.3a

**Priority Recommendations from the
10th Meeting of the North Sea Group**

Action Requested

Take note

Submitted by

Secretariat



Secretariat's Note

The Priority Recommendations from the 10th Meeting of the Steering Group for the ASCOBANS Conservation Plan for Harbour Porpoises in the North Sea (North Sea Group) were circulated to Parties in January 2022 for intersessional consideration. In the absence of objections, the document was adopted.

The Priority Recommendations can also be found on the relevant meeting page:

<https://www.ascobans.org/en/document/priority-recommendations-10th-meeting-north-sea-group>

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE 10TH MEETING OF THE NORTH SEA GROUP

(Adopted by the Advisory Committee)

Evaluation on fisheries with respect to extent of porpoise bycatch

1. Parties and Non-Party Range States to focus monitoring and mitigation effort on high-risk fisheries and areas bearing in mind that the latest bycatch estimates for porpoises in the North Sea indicate the annual numbers bycaught likely exceed thresholds indicated from RLA analysis¹. There still remains great uncertainty around all bycatch estimates in the region.

Finalise a management procedure approach for determining maximum allowable bycatch limits in the region

2. Attention is needed to revise the current ASCOBANS conservation objectives to incorporate a timeframe for their achievement, and in any management procedure approach to take account of the long-term objective to drive anthropogenic removals towards zero
3. Parties, Non-Party Range States, and relevant national bodies to engage and take into regard stakeholder interests, in particular fishing industry, to reach common solutions to fulfil conservation aims.

Development of alternative pingers and gear modifications (including other mitigation measures)

4. Parties to support further investigations of approaches to mitigate harbour porpoise bycatch taking into account potential adverse impacts on other taxa such as birds and seals.
5. Parties to support the testing of bycatch mitigation actions at a fleet level and implement those that have proved to be effective and practical.
6. Parties to support more research on the behaviour of harbour porpoises around fishing gear, especially static nets, including their sensory capabilities and auditory health, for a better understanding of factors leading to bycatch.

Monitoring trends in distribution and abundance

7. Parties are encouraged to collaborate on analyses of regional trends in porpoise distribution and abundance at a North Sea-wide scale, and examine potential explanations for any observed changes.
8. The North Sea Group to note any information on trends in abundance and distribution from the forthcoming OSPAR QSR2023, and consider the implications of the findings.

Investigation of the health, nutritional status and diet

9. Parties are encouraged to do collaborative research on the extent and potential reasons for grey seal predation on harbour porpoises.

¹ ICES workshop on mortality of marine mammals (WKMOMA) 2021.

10. Parties to facilitate rapid collaboration with stranding networks in the event of an unusual mortality event to identify potential causes of death. These should include new potential sources such as bacterial infections, e.g. *Erysipelothrix rhusiopathiae*.
11. Parties are encouraged to further support North Sea-wide monitoring of life history parameters through the collection and analysis of stranded and bycaught animals in order to assess evidence of temporal changes in those parameters and explore links to anthropogenic drivers.

Investigation of the effects of anthropogenic sounds on harbour porpoises

12. In the light of recent studies demonstrating acoustic trauma in porpoises due to explosions in the Baltic, serious concern is expressed over similar activities occurring in the North Sea. Surviving animals might have impaired hearing which, among other things, could affect their ability to detect nets and find prey. The Secretariat is asked to bring these studies to the attention of all North Sea States and relevant bodies carrying out explosions.
13. Parties to make every effort to mitigate the effects on porpoises of activities involving explosions.
14. Collaborative studies are encouraged to quantify the impact of both impulsive and continuous noise on harbour porpoises.
15. Parties and Non-Party Range States to encourage research to establish the population level impacts of noise levels and exposure duration.
16. Parties and Non-Party Range States to encourage international harmonisation of noise thresholds for regulatory purposes.