



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

THE ASCOBANS AGREEMENT

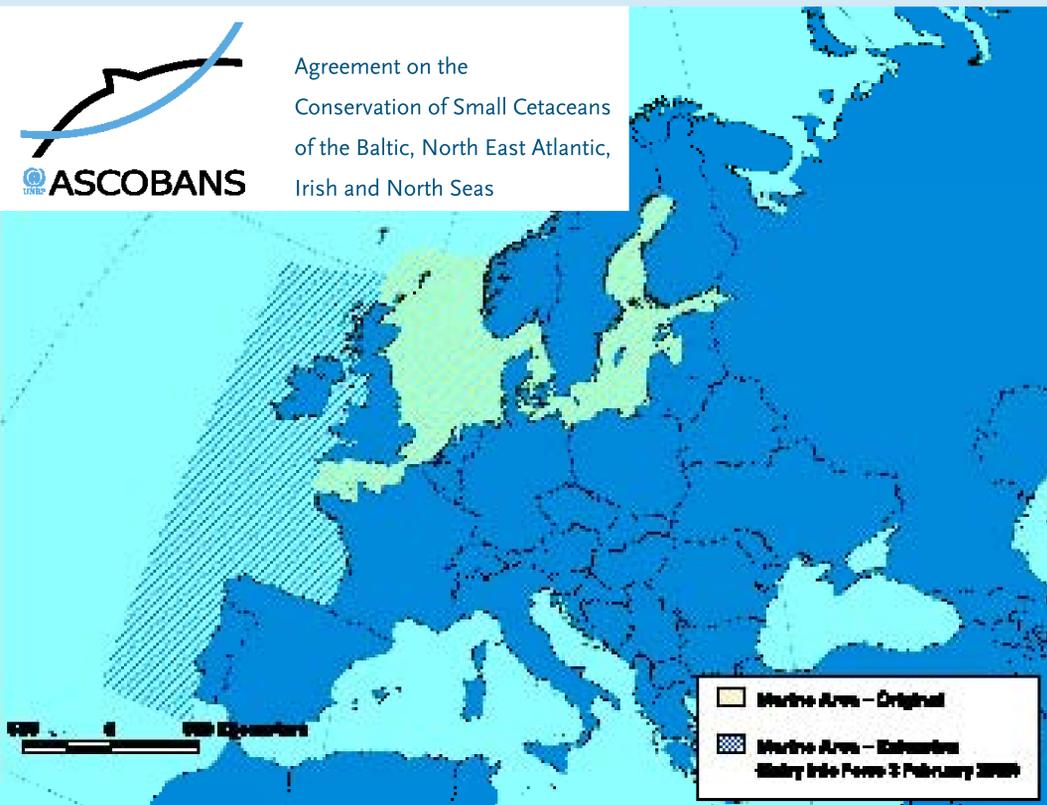
ASCOBANS is a regional intergovernmental treaty working to protect small whales, dolphins and porpoises in the Baltic, North and Irish Seas and the North-East Atlantic.

When the Agreement came into force in April 1994, it covered only the Baltic and North Seas. In 2008 the Agreement area was extended westwards to include important habitats adjacent to the original area, address threats to small cetaceans more effectively and improve the international coordination of conservation measures.



Common dolphins (*Delphinus delphis*) © IFAW

Common dolphins often occur in large groups. In the ASCOBANS area they are most often seen to the southwest of the British Isles and in the English Channel.



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

AS OF 2008, ASCOBANS HAS 10 PARTY STATES:

- >> Belgium
- >> Denmark
- >> Finland
- >> France
- >> Germany
- >> Lithuania
- >> Netherlands
- >> Poland
- >> Sweden
- >> United Kingdom

ASCOBANS also collaborates with the Range States which are not (yet) Party to the Agreement: Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, Norway, Portugal, Russian Federation and Spain.

www.ascobans.org

STRUCTURE OF ASCOBANS

THE AGREEMENT IS MADE UP OF THREE MAIN BODIES:

» The **Meeting of the Parties (MOP)** is the decision-making body of the Agreement. Representatives of the Party states meet every three years to review progress made and decide on policy and administration. Non-Party Range States and relevant organisations are welcome to send observers.



Pilot whales (*Globicephala melas / macrorhynchus*) © Heidrun Frisch

The two species of pilot whales, long-finned and short-finned, are not readily distinguishable at sea. The long-finned pilot whale is more common in the ASCOBANS Area.



Risso's dolphin (*Grampus griseus*) © Sabina Airoidi / Tethys

Risso's dolphins are among the species protected through ASCOBANS. As they age, they can become completely white with more and more scars covering their bodies.

The three bodies also collaborate between meetings to ensure that the aims of the Agreement are being met as effectively and efficiently as possible. Reports and outcomes of these meetings are regularly updated and posted on the www.ascobans.org website.

» The **Advisory Committee (AC)** meets annually and provides scientific and policy advice to the MOP and the Secretariat. Each Party appoints one member, who can be accompanied by advisors. Non-Party Range States and other observers are welcome. The AC can also form regional and thematic working groups.

» The **Secretariat** acts as the coordinating body of the Agreement. It is based in Bonn, Germany and administered by the United Nations Environment Programme, UNEP.

WHY AN INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENT?

KEY ISSUES

Cetaceans are highly mobile animals which regularly cross national boundaries. Therefore, their effective protection can only be achieved by international cooperation. The aim of the Agreement is to promote close cooperation amongst Parties to achieve and maintain a favourable conservation status for small cetaceans.



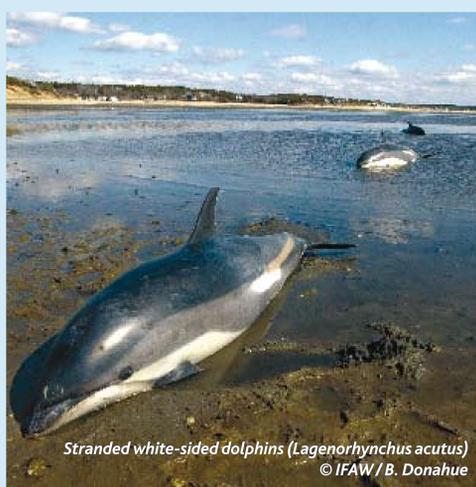
Rescue operation © IFAW/B. Donahue

ASCOBANS Parties are encouraged to develop stranding networks, in cooperation with NGOs and scientists, in the endeavour to ensure a quick response if cetaceans are in distress.



Cetacean survey © Peter Evans/Sea Watch Foundation

Surveys are carried out to gather data on distribution, abundance, trends, population structure and migrations of cetaceans. This knowledge is needed for effective conservation.



Stranded white-sided dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus acutus*) © IFAW/B. Donahue

Thousands of cetaceans strand each year on European beaches. ASCOBANS Parties are asked to carry out autopsies on as many as possible to determine the cause of death and learn more about their biology.

MAIN ACTIONS

» It is important to note that ASCOBANS itself is not an implementing body. However, the Agreement cooperates with and offers its support to a number of conservation projects. It also provides a platform for Parties to coordinate their conservation and research action, collaborate for maximum efficiency and share best practice. In order to achieve this, the Agreement includes a Conservation and Management Plan encouraging Parties to work in the fields of habitat conservation & management, surveys & research and public information.

THREATS TO SMALL WHALES, DOLPHINS AND PORPOISES

Cetaceans face a number of man-made threats. The most serious of these is bycatch. Every year, thousands of cetaceans in the Agreement Area accidentally get entangled in fishing gear, and drown.



Stranded killer whale (Orcinus orca)
© Niels Knudsen, Fiskeri- og Søfartsmuseet, Esbjerg

Many stranded cetaceans are already dead when they land ashore. But they can also get beached alive, due to factors such as disease, storms, disorientation – often caused by loud noise – or frightening experiences.

Another serious threat is posed by marine pollution, which can have adverse impacts on the health of the animals, their reproductive success, their habitats and prey.

Cetaceans are also affected by underwater noise e.g. from shipping, seismic and industrial activities or naval sonar. Very intense sounds can harm them physically, but since hearing is their main sense, even less intense noise disturbs them and makes it hard for them to communicate or hunt.

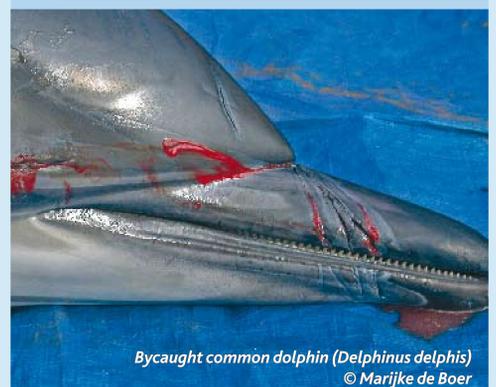
As the number of ships increases, so do the incidents of collisions between vessels and cetaceans. Such ship strikes are of growing concern to those working for the conservation of cetaceans.



Harbour porpoise (Phocoena phocoena) © Ulrik Ramsing / GSM

The increase in shipping causes high levels of underwater noise. Collisions, especially with fast vessels, also happen more and more frequently.

- The cumulative effects of human activities are widely unknown, but it is clear that cetaceans are under additional pressure from prey depletion, habitat degradation and climate change, with detrimental consequences for small cetaceans.



Bycaught common dolphin (Delphinus delphis)
© Marijke de Boer

Net marks are a clear sign that this dolphin became entangled in a fishing net. Without being able to come to the surface to breathe, cetaceans drown.

SPECIES COVERED BY ASCOBANS

The Agreement covers all species of toothed whales in the Baltic, North-East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas apart from the sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*), due to its size. The most common species found in the Agreement Area are:

Cetacean (from the Latin “Cetacea”) is the term for the group of marine mammals that includes whales, dolphins and porpoises. Two sub-orders of Cetacea exist today:

- >> Mysticeti (baleen whales) and
- >> Odontoceti (toothed whales)



Harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*)
© IFAW / A. Friedlaender



Bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)
© Tilen Genov / Morigenos



Atlantic white-sided dolphin (*Lagenorhynchus acutus*)
© Luca Lamoni



Common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*)
© IFAW / M. Danbolt



White-beaked dolphin (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*)
© IFAW / M. Danbolt



Killer whale (*Orcinus orca*)
© Hal Sato



Striped dolphin (*Stenella coeruleoalba*)
© Julia Neider / WDCCS



Risso's dolphin (*Grampus griseus*)
© IFAW / O. Boisseau



Long-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala melas*)
© Simone Panigada / Tethys

Several species of beaked whales (Ziphiidae) also live in the ASCOBANS Area, for example:



Northern bottlenose whale (*Hyperoodon ampullatus*)
© L. Kyhn / Sea Watch Foundation



Cuvier's beaked whale (*Ziphius cavirostris*)
© Natacha Aguilar / La Laguna University



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

THE HARBOUR PORPOISE (*PHOCOENA PHOCOENA*)

The harbour porpoise is the flagship species of the Agreement. It is the most abundant species in the Agreement Area and the only cetacean species native to the Baltic Sea.

The Jastarnia Plan, a Recovery Plan for Baltic Harbour Porpoises, was drawn up under the auspices of ASCOBANS in close collaboration with other organisations.

The Baltic Range States are trying to restore the population of harbour porpoises in the Baltic Sea to at least 80 % of the carrying capacity. To do this, they aim to reduce bycatch, support research, establish a network of marine protected areas, educate and engage the public and cooperate with relevant stakeholders.

Only about 600 specimens are estimated to be left in the central Baltic Sea, so a clear need to protect the species has been internationally acknowledged.



Harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) © Preben Toft

Harbour porpoises are among the smallest cetaceans, being usually less than 1.8 metres long and weighing between 45 and 70 kg.



Harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) © Florian Graner / GSM

Harbour porpoises are widespread in cool coastal waters, but are seldom noticed as they rarely approach boats. They are particularly vulnerable to bycatch in bottom-set gillnet fisheries.

>> The populations of harbour porpoises living in the North Sea also face serious man-made pressure (including, but not limited to, bycatch). Therefore, a Conservation Plan for Harbour Porpoises in the North Sea is due for completion in 2009.

www.ascobans.org

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE BALTIC HARBOUR PORPOISE

Since 2003, schools, museums, NGOs, institutions and individuals in countries bordering the Baltic Sea have celebrated the "International Day of the Baltic Harbour Porpoise" (IDBHP) on the 3rd Sunday in May of every year.



Roland, 2008

Information stand with a harbour porpoise model and free tins of sprats from porpoise-friendly fisheries – involving the general public and stakeholders.

Over the years, many different activities have taken place, organised by several institutions or groups. ASCOBANS greatly appreciates the dedication and participation that has been shown in this event. For inspiration or to publicise your own plans (and their outcome), visit www.ascobans.org or contact the Secretariat.



Latvia, 2008

Children testing their knowledge in a quiz and competing for the best harbour porpoise picture – educational activities for the conservationists of tomorrow.



Poland, 2005



Sweden, 2005

Lecture on the ecology of the harbour porpoise and threats – informing the people living along the shores of the Baltic Sea about their little known "neighbour".

In addition to the policy and scientific work done under ASCOBANS, raising awareness of the critical situation and the sharp decline of the Baltic harbour porpoise is one of the most important activities to ensure the survival of the population. It can be protected only if people know and care about it.



Harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) © Preben Toft

Many people know little or nothing about the small whale in the Baltic Sea.

HELP US PROTECT CETACEANS

YOU CAN...

... make sure you don't pollute the oceans. Don't throw plastic bags and other rubbish anywhere but in a bin, even inland.

... find out about the cetaceans in your region and organise a Dolphin Day, e.g. in your school.



First aid to cetaceans is different from that for humans – learn more from the ASCOBANS Secretariat or marine stations in your country.

... support the work of marine protection organisations.

... call for help and provide first aid to live stranded cetaceans until help arrives – keep the animal wet, the blowhole free and shield it from unnecessary stress.

... buy fish only from sustainable fisheries.

... report online if you saw a live animal at sea.

... immediately report any stranded cetaceans to institutions such as marine stations, coastal authorities, marine or zoological museums, NGOs or other related research institutions.



Please visit www.ascobans.org and contact the Secretariat at ascobans@ascobans.org for more information.

SMALL WHALE FACTS FOR KIDS

Dolphins, whales and porpoises live in the water, but are not fish. They breathe air just like you do, but through a blowhole on top of their head. To do this, they have to swim up to the surface of the water. Underwater, dolphins can hold their breath for up to 10 minutes and beaked whales even for more than one hour!

When a baby whale or dolphin is born, its tail comes out first. This is to make sure that the newborn doesn't drown. Most dolphins live in very close-knit family groups.



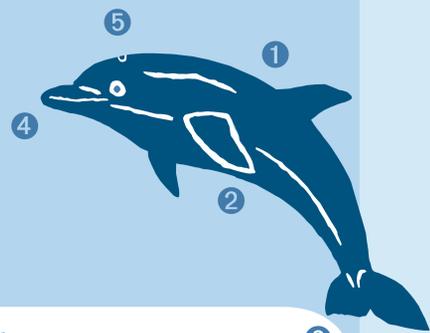
Striped dolphin (*Stenella coeruleoalba*) © Giovanna Pesante / Tethys



Bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) © Tilen Genov / Morigenos

Baby dolphins stay close to their mothers – most of the time. They suckle high-fat milk, until they have grown big enough to catch fish or squid.

A striped dolphin comes to the surface to breathe. Can you see the bubbles from its blowhole?



DID YOU KNOW?

The triangle on a dolphin's back is called a dorsal fin ①, the fins on the side are called flippers ② and the tail fin is called a fluke ③. The teeth are in the dolphin's beak ④ but it breathes through its blowhole ⑤.



Pilot whales (*Globicephala sp.*) © Sabina Airoidi / Tethys



Bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) © Charlie Phillips

The small harbour porpoise grows to be only 1.8 metres long. The killer whale, which can grow up to 9 metres, is the largest member of the dolphin family.

Most whales and dolphins are very sociable animals which live in groups called schools or pods. Pilot whales spend their whole lives with their families and stick close even to sick group members. This sometimes causes huge numbers of them to get beached.

All whales and dolphins protected through ASCOBANS are predators, which means they catch and eat fish or squid. They have teeth in their mouths – that is unusual, because most of the big whales don't! Instead, they have big baleen plates to filter their tiny food from the water.



© Maurizio Wurtz / Artescienza



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

FACTS AND FIGURES ABOUT CETACEANS

Cetaceans are air-breathing mammals spending their entire life in the water. Today more than 80 species inhabit the world's oceans and river systems.

Mysticeti, or baleen whales, are characterised by baleen plates filtering food from the water. The blue whale, reaching more than 30 metres and weighing more than 160 tons, is the largest animal ever to have lived on earth.



Blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*) © Thomas Jefferson / WDCC

Blue whales are baleen whales and feed mainly on krill – an adult can eat up to 3,600 kg in a single day. Calves can weigh over 2.5 tons at birth and can gain as much as 90 kg in weight every 24 hours.

Most odontoceti, or toothed whales, are considerably smaller. They include dolphins, some of the world's most intelligent and social animals. The sperm whale, which can grow up to 20 metres long, is the only "large" toothed whale.

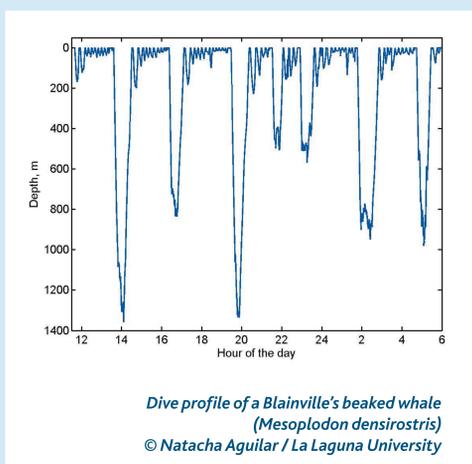


Sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) © IFAW / J. Gordon & L. Steiner

The sperm whale is the only toothed whale occurring in the ASCOBANS Area that is not covered by the Agreement.

Visibility underwater is poor, so hearing is the dominant sense for cetaceans. Many species use a sensory mechanism called echolocation, which means they use sound to "see" the world around them.

Some cetaceans are physiologically adapted to very deep and long dives – e.g. beaked whales can stay below the surface for over an hour and dive deeper than 1 kilometre.



A male Blainville's beaked whale was tagged with a suction-cup off El Hierro in the Canary Islands. Beaked whales dive very deep to forage for food and stay under water for very long times. Because they prefer deep-water habitat and only come to the surface for brief periods, they are very difficult to observe, and little is known of most species.

Dive profile from joint research of the La Laguna University and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution off El Hierro, with a permit of the Canary Islands Government.