



**AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION
OF SMALL CETACEANS OF THE
BALTIC, NORTH EAST ATLANTIC,
IRISH AND NORTH SEAS**

ASCOBANS/AC29/NR.8
18 June 2025

29th MEETING OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Online, 16-18 September 2025
Agenda Item 2

2024 NATIONAL REPORT: BELGIUM

2024 ASCOBANS National Report

ASCOBANS

Online Reporting System

Party: Belgium

Submitted Date: 2025-06-18



2024 ASCOBANS National Report

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Introduction

[Year 1 \(2024\) ASCOBANS National Report](#)

1 January to 31 December 2024.

As outlined in ASCOBANS Resolution 10.1 *National Reporting 2025-2028*, this form will cover information from 2024 (Year 1), and the following topics included in the Annex to the Resolution:

- High-level Summary of Key Messages
- General Information (Section I)
- Noise (impulsive i.e. piling and continuous/ambient i.e. shipping) (Section II B3)
- Ocean Energy (Section II B4)
- Unexploded Ordnance (Section II C8)
- Marine Spatial Planning (Section II D15)
- Other Matters (e.g. burning issues) (Section IIV)

The National Reports submitted will inform discussions at the 29th Meeting of the ASCOBANS Advisory Committee, 16-18 September 2025 (held online).

- All questions apply to the **reporting period from 1 January to 31 December 2024.**
- Region in the tables refers to the sub-regions as defined by the HELCOM and OSPAR, and Areas refers to the sub-areas as defined by ICES. An overview and maps of these can be found in [Annex A](#). Species can be chosen from the drop-down list provided, based on ASCOBANS species list, see [Annex B](#).
- Throughout the form, please include relevant web links and add rows where applicable.
- The deadline for the submission of National Reports is **31 May 2025.**

Where possible, National Coordinators should consult with, or delegate to, experts for particular topics so as to ease the reporting burden.

For any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the [Secretariat](#).

High-level Summary of Key Messages

In your country, for 2024 (Year 1), what does this report reveal about the most successful aspects of implementation of the Agreement?

(list up to five items)

- Cooperation with neighbouring countries;
- Cooperation with the NGO's involved in ASCOBANS;
- Involvement in issues that are only marginally relevant to Belgium;
- Feeding the regulatory framework, including MSFD;
- The existence of a strandings scheme and international contacts to facilitate work with small cetaceans.

In your country, for 2024 (Year 1), what does this report reveal about the greatest challenges in implementing the Agreement?

(list up to five items)

- Keeping the strandings network up and running.
- Reporting obligations (MSFD, Natura 2000, OSPAR, ...) are currently very high, with challenges for civil servants to be as efficient as possible and to avoid duplication of efforts, with a high risk of losing momentum and efficiency.
- Keeping a balance between obligations in different fora, such as those related to the protection of species and habitats, and those related to climate change (eg. the requirements concerning renewable energy).
- The overlap with other conventions, agreements, directives, ... as also obvious in the reporting to ASCOBANS.

In your country, for 2024 (Year 1), what does this report reveal about the main priorities for future implementation of the Agreement?

(list up to five items)

- To deal with overlap with other work and/or obligations in international fora, such as those in OSPAR, IWC, ICES and MSFD – ASCOBANS could find niches with preparatory work for other fora, or newly emerging threats, instead of working on similar issues as other international fora?
- Finding a balance between species protection and issues related to climate change.
- The maintenance of the strandings scheme, and the keeping up of monitoring efforts in an area that is increasingly used for industrial activities.

Section I: General Information

A. Country Information

1. Name of Party / Non-Party Range State:

Belgium

2. Details of the Report Compiler

Details of the report compiler

Name	Jan Haelters
Function	Scientific collaborator

Organization	RBINS
Postal address	Vautierstraat 29, 1000 Brussels
Telephone	
Email	jhaelters@natura lsciences.be

Does the Report Compiler act as ASCOBANS National Coordinator (i.e. focal point)?

Please select only one option

- Yes
- No

3. Details of contributor(s)

Please provide the following details per contributor: Name, Function, Organization, Postal Address, Telephone, Email, and Topic(s) contributed to.

Name: Nele Desplenter
Function: Policy Advisor Marine Environment
Organization: FPS Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment - Marine Environment Department
Postal Address: Galileelaan 5/2, 1210 Brussel, Belgium
Telephone: +32 2 524 96 64
Email: nele.desplenter@health.fgov.be

Section II: Habitat Conservation and Management (threats and pressures on cetaceans)

A. Fisheries-related Threats

1. Bycatch

AIM: to illustrate progress on understanding, monitoring and mitigating bycatch of small cetaceans.
 Relevant Resolutions: [10.4](#), [9.2 \(Rev.MOP10\)](#), [8.5 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.4 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.3](#), [7.3](#), [7.1](#), [6.1](#), [5.8](#), [5.7](#), [5.5](#), [3.3](#)

Bycatch, the entanglement of an animal in fishing gear, is identified as a major cause of mortality in small cetaceans. Every effort should be made to reduce bycatch towards zero as quickly as possible. Parties to ASCOBANS have agreed on a number of resolutions that highlight the importance of mitigating bycatch of small cetaceans in the Agreement Area, as available data indicates that levels of bycatch pose a considerable threat to their conservation status. Parties have agreed that modifications of fishing gear and relevant practices shall be applied in order to reduce negative impacts where data indicates unacceptable interaction. The Agreement Area requires improved monitoring, collation of data, and consideration of appropriate mitigation measures, while also taking into account similar work in other areas.

To better understand the extent of the impact of bycatch on small cetaceans, monitoring and mitigation measures in place, and ongoing work in the Agreement Area, countries are requested to provide relevant information.

Note: This section includes bycatch in recreational fisheries.

1.1. How is bycatch assessed/monitored in your country?

	Used? (Yes/No)	Percentage (% by monitoring method, of total bycaught animals, by gear type if applicable)

Dedicated observer schemes	No	no observer scheme due to very small fleet (1 static gear fisherman)
Fisheries observes	No	None
Remote Electronic Monitoring	No	None
Self-reporting by fishermen	No	This has been requested, but there has not been a response.
Pathological investigation	Yes	On every stranded animal in a condition that warrants a necropsy.
Assessment at stranding site	Yes	Images of most stranded animals are available. These are used in the decision process to collect or not. In certain cases they can hint at a cause of death (e.g. predation by grey seal).

Comments:

Bycatch as a cause of death is assessed during necropsy.

Mortality by bycatch of marine mammals in Belgian waters and/or by Belgian fisheries is not immediately considered a priority problem. In Belgium, recreational fishermen are no longer allowed to use gill- and tangle nets, the types of net that pose the greatest risk of entanglement for marine mammals, and there are very few professional Belgian fishermen that use these nets. However, this type of fishery is very popular in adjacent waters, especially in other nations bordering the extreme southern waters of the North Sea and the eastern Channel. Foreign fishermen have access to Belgian waters outside territorial waters, with Dutch fishermen also allowed to fish within the 12 mile-zone. As bycaught animals in other nation's vessels are not documented in the Belgian monitoring schemes, the regional scale is the preferred scale to evaluate bycatch.

1.2. Which species of small cetaceans were recorded as bycatch by commercial fishing in the reporting period?

Please provide details in [this table](#) - download and then attach it using the blue 'clip' button.

Tick all that apply

- AWSD - Atlantic white-sided dolphin
- BBW - Blainville's beaked whale
- BD - Bottlenose dolphin
- CBW - Cuvier's beaked whale
- CD - Short-beaked Common Dolphin
- FKW - False killer whale
- GBW - Gervais' beaked whale
- HP - Harbour Porpoise
- KW - Killer Whale

- LFPW - Long-finned pilot whale
- NBW - Northern bottlenose whale
- PKW - Pygmy killer whale
- PSW - Pygmy sperm whale
- RD - Risso's dolphin
- RTD - Rough-toothed dolphin
- SBW - Sowerby's beaked whale
- SD - Striped dolphin
- SFPW - Short-finned pilot whale
- TBW - True's beaked whale
- WBD - White-beaked dolphin
- Not Applicable
- Others _____

1.4 Has there been any notable incidents/issues related to bycatch during the reporting period in your country?

Please select only one option

- No
- Yes

1.5. Are there any mitigation measures in place?

If you select 'Yes', please provide details in [this table](#) - download and then attach it using the blue 'clip' button.

Please select only one option

- No
- Yes

1.6. Have there been changes in fishing effort (for fisheries known to have an impact) in the reporting period?

Please select only one option

- No
- Unknown/not applicable
- Yes

1.7. Relevant new research/work/collaboration on bycatch in your country.

List initiatives/ projects (incl. PhD, MSc); publications (reports, theses, papers in journals, books) from any study; web links to other relevant information

Bycatch of marine mammals (Haelters J. et al., 2024) https://odnature.naturalsciences.be/msfd_media/documents/D1-ANS-BE-MAMM-BYCATCH-2024-Bycatch_of_marine_mammals.pdf

1.8. Is the perceived level of pressure from bycatch in your country increasing, decreasing, staying the same or unknown?

Status relative to previous years. Please provide the nature of the evidence and describe per species ([Annex B](#)) where applicable.

Species	Increasing/Decreasing/Staying the same/Unknown	Nature of the evidence (e.g. strandings, observer schemes)
Harbour porpoise	decreasing	fewer number of stranded animals

2. Resource Depletion

AIM: to determine areas where, and to what extent, depletion of fish stocks have occurred during the reporting period. In addition, identify ongoing mitigation efforts regarding detrimental implications for small cetaceans.

Relevant Resolutions: [10.3](#), [9.4](#), [8.9](#), [8.3](#), [7.1](#), [6.1](#)

Depletion in fish stocks due to overfishing and other factors generates pressure on the favourable conservation status of small cetaceans (through possible food shortage). More integrated management and reductions in fishing effort (also prompted by concern about fish stock depletion or other ecosystem considerations) have been encouraged, especially in areas of known risk. Further research, effective fishery regulations and innovation within certain fishing methods are considered to be helpful steps towards mitigating this pressure.

Parties to ASCOBANS have agreed on a number of resolutions that (1) determine the impact of the depletion of fish stocks on small cetaceans, (2) encourage fishing effort reductions and (3) review new information on these depletions to make recommendations. Resource depletion in the Agreement Area requires improved monitoring, collation of data, and consideration of appropriate mitigation measures, while also taking into account similar work in other areas.

It is of particular interest to ASCOBANS to understand the extent of prey depletions, any related ongoing work, monitoring and mitigation measures in the Agreement Area. Countries are requested to provide relevant information.

B. Disturbance (incl. potential physical impacts)

3. Noise (impulsive i.e. piling and continuous/ambient i.e. shipping)

AIM: to illustrate progress on understanding, monitoring and mitigating negative effects on small cetaceans from underwater noise during the reporting period.

Relevant Resolutions: [10.3](#), [9.2 \(Rev.MOP10\)](#), [8.11 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.9](#), [8.6 \(Rev.MOP10\)](#), [8.4 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.3](#), [7.1](#), [6.2 \(Rev.MOP10\)](#), [6.1](#)

Small cetaceans are especially susceptible to underwater noise due to their high responsiveness to sound and wide hearing range. Good environmental status, as defined by the European Union, suggests that the introduction of energy, including underwater noise, is at levels that do not adversely affect the marine environment. Anthropogenic noise pollution has generally increased in recent times and generates a broad range of frequencies due to a wide variety of human activities. Impulsive and continuous noise present different impacts on small cetaceans, which include communicative masking, behavioural response and physiological injury. Noise in marine environments potentially impedes communication, affects distribution and hence feeding and reproduction of small cetaceans. Studies show that not only cetaceans but also fish and other marine life may be negatively impacted by anthropogenic noise.

Parties to ASCOBANS have agreed on implementation of measures through a number of resolutions that (1) highlight the potential impact that noise pollution may have on small cetaceans in the Agreement Area and (2) commit to reduce the pressure presented by underwater noise. The Agreement Area requires improved monitoring, collation of data, and consideration of appropriate mitigation measures.

To better understand the extent to which noise negatively impacts the health of small cetaceans, and to learn about new work relevant to the topic, countries are requested to provide related information.

3.1. To which noise registers/databases has your country contributed to date?

[ICES Impulsive Noise Register \(for HELCOM and OSPAR Parties\)](#)

Please select only one option

- Yes
- No
- Not Applicable

National registry

Please select only one option

- Yes, please specify (e.g. JNCC noise registry)
-
- No

Not Applicable

Other

Please select only one option

Yes, please specify: _____

No

3.2. Any instances/issues in the reporting period including information on planned or completed significant developments/activities, including the details of monitoring in place before, during and after the project:

If you selected 'Yes', please provide details in [this table](#) - download and then attach it using the blue 'clip' button.

Please select only one option

No

Yes

3.3. Relevant new research/work/collaboration on underwater noise in your country.

(List initiatives/ projects (incl. PhD, MSc); publications (reports, theses, papers in journals, books) from any study; web links to other relevant information)

None

3.4. Report on noise management for cumulative impacts, including relevant regulations and guidelines, seismic shot point densities and level of impact deemed acceptable.

No assessment of cumulative effects, given that only SSS, MBES and sparkers are used.

3.5. Is the perceived level of pressure from underwater noise in your country increasing, decreasing, staying the same or unknown?

Status relative to previous years. To be done per species basis ([Annex B](#)) where applicable.

Species	Increasing/Decreasing/Staying the same/Unknown	Nature of the evidence
	increasing	increasing human activities

4. Ocean Energy

AIM: to understand the extent and development of current and planned ocean energy projects, and progress in monitoring and mitigation of their negative effects on small cetaceans during the reporting period.

Relevant Resolutions: [8.11 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.9](#), [8.6 \(Rev.MOP10\)](#), [8.3](#), [6.2 \(Rev.MOP10\)](#)

Renewable energy is a necessary component of the efforts to supply the energy needs of human populations while combatting climate change. Efforts to harness renewable energy sources, however, should be conducted in a way that does not have a harmful impact on biological diversity and the marine environment. There are potential adverse effects of ocean energy on small cetaceans from such energy projects. In regard to small cetaceans, this can include potential lethal interactions or injury, negative behavioural impacts from displacement and changes in fecundity,

calf survival and juvenile and adult mortality. There remains uncertainty regarding quantifying the (magnitude of the) pressure from ocean energy production on small cetaceans.

Parties to ASCOBANS have agreed to introduce precautionary measures and procedures for activities surrounding the development of renewable energy in marine environments in order to minimise and mitigate possible effects on small cetaceans, by following best practices. Parties have committed to investigating such pressures and robustly monitoring and mitigating them through environmental impact assessments. Addressing all aspects relevant to the conservation of protected species in regard to ocean energy and collaboration with other organizations working on or potentially interested in the issue is to the benefit of small cetaceans in the Agreement Area.

It is of particular interest to ASCOBANS to understand current and ongoing renewable energy projects in the Agreement Area, mitigation measures and procedures in use and other work relevant to the topic. Countries are requested to provide information relevant to their activities.

4.1. Were there any new wind energy farms in development/construction during the reporting period?

If you select 'Yes', please provide details in [this table](#) - download and then attach it using the blue 'clip' button.

Please select only one option

- No
- Yes. Please provide details in the table.
- Not Applicable.
- Comments: _____

4.2. Were there any new wave power installations in development/construction during the reporting period?

If you select 'Yes', please provide details in [this table](#) - download and then attach it using the blue 'clip' button.

Please select only one option

- No
- Yes. Please provide details in the table.
- Not Applicable.
- Comments: _____

4.3. Were there any new tidal energy installations in development/construction during the reporting period?

If you select 'Yes', please provide details in [this table](#) - download and then attach it using the blue 'clip' button.

Please select only one option

- No
- Yes. Please provide details in the table.
- Not Applicable.
- Comments: _____

4.4. Were there any new tidal lagoon/barrage installations in development/construction during the reporting period?

If you select 'Yes', please provide details in [this table](#) - download and then attach it using the blue 'clip' button.

Please select only one option

- No
- Yes. Please provide details in the table.
- Not Applicable.
- Comments: _____

4.5. Has there been any other instances/issues related to ocean energy during the reporting period in your country?

Please select only one option

- No
- Yes

4.6. How is the pressure managed, incl. relevant regulations / guidelines and the year of implementation (current and planned)?

There is an extensive legislation concerning EIA procedures that has been reviewed in 2024 (Koninklijk Besluit van 26 april 2024 betreffende de procedure tot instelling van mariene beschermde gebieden, tot Natura 2000-toelating en Natura 2000-goedkeuring en tot milieuvergunning in

de Belgische Zeegebieden).

Clear legislative framework including public consultation and Espoo consultation.

<https://odnature.naturalsciences.be/mumm/en/windfarms/#legislation>

4.7. Relevant new research/work/collaboration on ocean energy in your country.

(List initiatives/ projects (incl. PhD, MSc); publications (reports, theses, papers in journals, books) from any study; web links to other relevant information)

At the end of 2023, an extensive report on monitoring of offshore windfarms was published:

Degraer, S., Brabant, R., Rumes, B. & Vigin, L. (eds). 2023. Environmental Impacts of Offshore Wind Farms in the Belgian Part of the North Sea: Progressive Insights in Changing Species Distribution Patterns Informing Marine Management. Memoirs on the Marine Environment. Brussels: Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, OD Natural Environment, Marine Ecology and Management, 115 pp.

This report has a chapter on harbour porpoises:

Haelters, J., Paoletti, S., Vigin, L. & Rumes, B., 2023. Seasonal distribution of harbour porpoises (*Phocoena phocoena*) and response to operational offshore wind farms in the Belgian North Sea. In: Degraer, S., Brabant, R., Rumes, B. & Vigin, L. (eds). Environmental impacts of offshore wind farms in the Belgian part of the North Sea: progressive insights in changing species distribution patterns informing marine management. Memoirs on the Marine Environment. Brussels: Institute of Natural Sciences, OD Natural Environment, Marine Ecology and Management: 61-83.

Yearly reports on the results of monitoring published; see <https://odnature.naturalsciences.be/mumm/en/windfarms/>

4.8. Mark the perceived level of pressure from ocean energy in your country to the table below.

For example, active construction of new developments could increase the pressure, while decommissioning or addition of mitigation measures to pre-existing projects could decrease the pressure.

	Status in year relative to previous years [Increasing, Decreasing, Staying the same, Unknown, Not Applicable]	Nature of the evidence
Wind energy	Staying the same	No construction in 2024
Wave power	NA	
Tidal energy	NA	
Tidal lagoon/barrage	NA	

Comments:

4.9. Has there been any other instances/issues related to ocean energy during the reporting period in your country?

Please select only one option

No

Yes

4.10. How is the pressure managed, incl. relevant regulations / guidelines and the year of implementation (current and planned)?

There is a clear legislation on EIA, and permits include conditions and a monitoring programme.

4.11. Relevant new research/work/collaboration on ocean energy in your country.

(List initiatives/ projects (incl. PhD, MSc); publications (reports, theses, papers in journals, books) from any study; web links to other relevant information)

Yearly reports on the results of monitoring published; see <https://odnature.naturalsciences.be/mumm/en/windfarms/>

4.12. Mark the perceived level of pressure from ocean energy in your country to the table below.

Status relative to previous years. For example, active construction of new developments could increase the pressure, while decommissioning or addition of mitigation measures to pre-existing projects could decrease the pressure.

	Status in year relative to previous years [Increasing, Decreasing, Staying the same, Unknown, Not Applicable]	Nature of the evidence
Wind energy	Staying the same	No construction in 2024
Wave power	NA	
Tidal energy	NA	
Tidal lagoon/barrage	NA	

Comments:

Difference between questions 4.9 --> 4.12 and 4.5 --> 4.8 is unclear

5. Cetacean Watching Industry

AIM: to determine if the developing cetacean watching industry poses a threat to small cetaceans.
 Relevant Resolutions: [10.3](#), [8.9](#), [6.1](#), [5.4](#)

Whale and dolphin watching is a global industry that can provide socio-economic benefits to local communities by attracting tourism, as well as strengthening public awareness of conservation needs. However, it also has the potential of being harmful when it interferes with the behaviour of animals in their natural environment and may even lead to injury or death. As the cetacean watching industry is still scarcely developed in some countries, collecting this data now allows tracking the development of the industry.

It is of particular importance to ASCOBANS to obtain an overview of the current scale of the activities and to monitor the development of the industry in the future. This is done by quantifying the number and locations of operators, reporting negative interactions and providing information on the development and implementation of any guidelines regarding cetacean watching.

Filling out this section accurately and completely will help to detect any indications of potential threats, allow timely mitigation action and enable Parties and Non-Party Range States to work towards a coordinated approach regarding the development of cetacean watching guidelines in the Agreement Area.

Note: We are here only addressing commercial cetacean watching activities which take place from vessels and include viewing of small cetacean species. Operators are defined as those offering trips with a primary focus: they advertise specifically with the aim to see small cetaceans, or a secondary focus: they advertise either for other taxa, such as birds or seals, or large cetaceans, or more general for wildlife, but mention the opportunity to see small cetaceans.

6. Recreational Sea Use

AIM: to determine whether recreational sea use is detrimental to small cetaceans and, if so, to identify types of activity and areas of concern.
 Relevant Resolutions: [10.6](#), [10.3](#), [8.9](#), [8.3](#), [7.1](#), [6.1](#), [5.4](#)

Recreational use of the sea by humans includes a wide variety of activities, some of which are known to have a potential negative impact on small cetaceans. This includes the use of RIBs (rigid-hulled inflatable boats), hard-hulled boats exceeding 10 knots in speed, yachts and personal watercrafts such as jet skis, kayaks and surfboards; and excludes recreational fishing and sea-angling.

Interactions can cause animals to change behaviour and move away, but can also have more serious impacts, such as injury or even death due to collision. ASCOBANS has agreed on a number of resolutions that highlight the importance to review all available information on recreational use of the sea. Obtaining an overview of best practices and guidelines will enable comparisons to be made across the Agreement Area, and ultimately may lead to the provision of overall, consistent guidelines that might be developed at a regional or national level. In this section we strive to obtain an overview of potential risk areas and national sources that have data on incidents with small cetaceans related to recreational sea use.

7. Other Sources of Disturbance

AIM: to identify new sources of disturbance that could be a threat to small cetaceans.

Relevant Resolutions: [10.7](#), [10.3](#), [8.9](#), [8.3](#), [7.1](#), [6.1](#)

Overlap of small cetacean and human habitat use is not covered by the questions above, while human activities in the seas are increasing, particularly in the coastal zone. Human activities can, for example, cause a small cetacean to change behaviour, or it can cause physical harm or death. This section aims to identify new sources of disturbance that could be a threat to small cetaceans. The issue of noise is covered under section B3.

C. Habitat Change and Degradation (incl. potential physical impacts)

8. Unexploded Ordnance

AIM: to provide information on the mitigation, management and potential negative impacts of unexploded ordnance on small cetaceans during the reporting period.

Relevant Resolutions: [8.11 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.9](#), [8.8](#), [8.3](#)

Unexploded chemical and conventional munitions present a threat to small cetaceans. Hazards exist from unexploded munitions, which release chronic contaminants, and upon detonation, which is physically hazardous from extreme underwater noise and a sudden release of toxic substances. Unexploded ordnance is a notable threat in many areas, such as the Baltic Sea, where the quantity is unknown, though estimates are high. Information on disposal, state of corrosion and quantities of dumped munition is limited, as are meaningful data on the measured environmental impacts. The significance of this pressure's impact on small cetaceans requires further quantification. However, it is clear that mitigation measures are necessary to support alternatives to detonations, and when no alternative is feasible, to reduce negative impacts on small cetaceans.

In the ASCOBANS Area, millions of tons of unexploded ordnance are present in the marine environment and thousands of sea users, such as fishermen, encounter such munitions every year. Parties have agreed on resolutions to support (1) research investigating the pressure on marine animals and habitat and (2) mitigation measures regarding effects of disintegrating submerged munitions on the marine environment. Parties are to strive towards providing relevant information to required bodies and supporting efforts to address the negative implications from this pressure in other regional and international organizations and waters.

8.1. To which registers/databases covering conventional and chemical munitions has your country contributed to date?

Please select only one option

- OSPAR
- HELCOM
- None
- Unknown
- Other, please state: _____

8.2. How many UXOs were detonated / released at sea?

Provide link to database if available.

Please select only one option

- 1-9 See OSPAR database _____
- 10-49 _____
- 50-99 _____
- 100+ _____

8.3. Have there been any other instances/issues related to the issue of unexploded ordnance during the reporting period in your country?*Please select only one option*

- No
- Yes

Please provide details:

Confirmed leakage of toxic chemicals from disintegrating ammunition

8.4. How is the issue of unexploded ordnances being managed?

(incl. mitigation measures, relevant regulations/guidelines, year of implementation; may include planned management – please distinguish between a) management of single UXOs and b) management of big amounts of ammunitions in one place e.g. munition dumpsites)

a) single UXO:

Evaluation of the UXO and consider whether the UXO can be recovered and brought ashore for destruction in a processing installation. If not possible, the UXO is detonated at sea. Prior to detonation, the area is observed visually for the presence of marine mammals, and detonation is only taking place in case no marine mammals are observed.

b) big amounts of ammunition:

The munition dumpsite and war wrecks carrying ammunition are closely monitored with the measurement of released toxins and risk assessments i.a. ecotoxicity studies.

8.5. Is your country monitoring the chemical contaminants released from discarded munition material and unexploded ordnance? (including at munition dumpsites, war wrecks carrying ammunition, UXO detonation zones)*Please select only one option*

- No
- Yes

Please provide details:

See reports to OSPAR.

Yearly monitoring of the munition dumpsite Paardenmarkt with the measurement of munition related toxins in sediment and water.

Measurement of toxins in sediment, water and biota at a wreck carrying a big amount of ammunition.

8.6. Relevant new research/work/collaboration on the issue of unexploded ordnance in your country.

(List initiatives/ projects (incl. PhD, MSc); publications (reports, theses, papers in journals, books) from any study; web links to other relevant information)

No work relevant to cetaceans.

8.7. Is the perceived level of pressure from unexploded ordnance in your country:*Please select only one option*

- Increasing
- Decreasing
- Staying the same
- Unknown
- Not applicable.
- Comments: _____

Please provide the nature of the evidence where applicable:

No new UxOs are added.

Levels of toxins measured at sites with big amounts of ammunition remain the same.

9. Marine Debris (ingestion and entanglement)

AIM: to illustrate progress, during the reporting period, on understanding, monitoring and mitigating impacts of marine debris on small cetaceans.

Relevant Resolutions: [10.3](#), [10.4](#), [9.3](#), [8.8](#), [8.3](#), [7.1](#), [6.1](#)

Marine debris, such as macroplastics and discarded fishing gear, poses a threat to small cetaceans due to the potential for these materials to be ingested or to cause entanglement. Commercial fishing operations, recreational fishing and cargo shipping are notable sources of this material, of which the majority is plastic and ghost nets. However, it is assumed that most of the marine litter worldwide comes from land, although this differs per region. Even small amounts of macroplastics that have been ingested may present serious effects on small cetaceans, such as detrimental influence on the gastrointestinal tract or leaching pollutants into the body, potentially leading to mortality or reduced body condition. Entanglement is well-established as a threat to small cetaceans as plastic debris continues to accumulate in aquatic environments, and may cause physical injuries, reduced survival or drowning.

To better understand the impact of marine debris on small cetaceans and measures in place to mitigate these effects, countries are requested to provide relevant information.

Note: Includes macroplastics and discarded fishing gear. Microplastics are covered under Section C10 Pollution and Hazardous Substances.

10. Pollution and hazardous substances (incl. microplastics)

AIM: to illustrate progress on understanding, monitoring and mitigating impacts of important current and emerging pollution-related hazards on small cetaceans. during the reporting period

Relevant Resolutions: [10.3](#), [10.4](#), [8.9](#), [8.8](#), [8.7](#), [8.4 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.3](#), [7.4](#), [7.1](#), [6.1](#), [5.7](#)

Marine environments have been subject to a wide range of different types of pollution over the last decades. Top predators, such as small cetaceans that feed on higher trophic prey, tend to accumulate many of these potentially hazardous substances. There are a number of contaminants and pathogens that are known, or suspected, to have impacts on small cetacean health, immune status or reproduction. These include, for example: polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and other persistent organic pollutants (POPs), oil pollution (polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons), toxins from harmful algal blooms (HABs), sewage, radionuclides, toxic elements, tri-butyl tin (TBT), morbillivirus, and Brucella. In addition, micro- and nano-plastics are also present in marine environment and their impacts are presently poorly understood.

Monitoring can be done using body tissue from small cetaceans obtained from live animals through biopsies, or from dead animals that are generally found on the shore. Necropsies allow the sampling of different types of tissue such as blubber, muscle, kidney or liver and these can be analysed subsequently.

To better understand the impact of contaminants on small cetacean health, to detect new emerging hazards and to work towards a common protocol for analysing samples, countries are asked to provide information on their programs.

Note: Includes microplastics. Macroplastics and discarded fishing gear are covered under Section C 9 Marine Debris.

11. Ship Strikes

AIM: understanding the potential risk of ship strike as a cause of injury/death in small cetaceans.

Relevant Resolutions: [10.6](#), [8.9](#), [6.1](#), [5.4](#)

Ship strikes are collisions between vessels and cetaceans. In the last decades, evidence has emerged that ship strikes might occur more often than previously thought and can have a significant impact on small resident cetacean populations. Most research so far has focused on large cetaceans as those animals are often carried visibly into port at the bow of a vessel. For small cetaceans, ship strike events are not well documented.

Ship strike occurrence is directly linked to the frequency of shipping activity, including such directed at cetaceans, i.e. cetacean watching. To quantify this pressure, it is important to know what kind of vessels are involved in the strike, as well as the type, size and speed of the vessel. But it is also important to have information on the small cetaceans involved, in particular if the animals were engaged in certain behaviour such as feeding.

Ship strike can cause direct death or injury in cetaceans. Even collisions that are non-fatal might leave individuals with a reduction in their chance of survival. To determine the occurrence of ship-strikes, different sources are used. For small cetaceans, direct observations are the rarest. Necropsies of stranded animals can find evidence of characteristic trauma and photographs of animals that survived ship strikes can show typical injuries, such as marks left by propellers. One way to quantify how many animals in a population are impacted by ship strike is to assess the percentage of animals in a photo-identification catalogue that bear ship strike marks.

As this is still a not well documented threat, this section aims to obtain an overview of what kind of data and research is available and ongoing in the countries.

12. Climate change (incl. ocean acidification)

AIM: to illustrate progress on understanding, monitoring and mitigating negative effects of important and emerging climate change related impacts on small cetaceans.

Relevant Resolutions: [10.3](#), [8.9](#), [8.4 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.3](#), [7.4](#), [7.1](#), [6.1](#), [5.7](#)

It is certain that climate change is altering the habitat of cetaceans. However, our understanding of how the predicted changes will impact different species and populations can be further developed by identifying issues and trends through reporting. CMS3 highlights the importance of addressing potential issues through the engagement of (1) researchers to better understand the underlying processes, as well as (2) conservation managers and policy makers to monitor changes and to mitigate negative impacts. Focus should be given to understanding tangible climate change effects relevant to cetaceans, such as changing ocean temperatures, prey depletion / prey range shifts, ocean acidification, increased frequency and intensity of ocean storms, changes in sea ice and weakening of the North Atlantic Drift. Such occurrences require that we gather evidence on the existence and nature of climate change effects on small cetaceans and evaluate current monitoring programmes and mitigation measures.

This section aims to provide an overview of what kind of activities are already ongoing in the member states to address climate change. The focus is on those actions specifically regarding cetaceans as well as the most likely impacts on their habitat and prey. Climate change possibly represents one of the most important future threats to the status of cetaceans in the ASCOBANS region. Direct effects may arise due to ocean warming, resulting in distribution shifts (generally northward) so that the animals continue to occupy waters with temperature regimes compatible with their thermal niches. Key indirect effects will result from changes in prey distribution and abundance due to ocean warming, ocean acidification and changes in ocean current systems.

13. Physical Habitat Change (e.g. from construction)

AIM: human activities in the Agreement Area have the potential to impact upon small cetaceans. Tracking those activities that cause physical habitat change and improving our understanding of their relative impacts will help shape any necessary mitigation action required.

Relevant Resolutions: [10.3](#), [8.11 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.9](#), [8.6 \(MOP10\)](#), [8.4 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.3](#), [7.1](#), [6.2](#), [6.1](#), [5.7](#)

This section aims to review new information on physical habitat change, e.g. from construction, and its impacts on small cetaceans, their prey and their habitat, and make recommendations to Parties and other relevant authorities for further action.

The collation of this information will contribute to the development of risk maps showing the spatial and temporal (by season) distribution of activities that have an impact on small cetaceans, including information provided in National Reports, taking into account the work done by other organizations.

Note: In the term "physical habitat change", we include a) coastal/marine construction – artificial islands, harbours, bridges, oil/gas platforms, wind turbines, tidal turbines; and b) seabed damage – dredging, bottom trawling.

14. Other issues

D. Management of Cumulative Impacts

15. Marine Spatial Planning

AIM: to provide information on existing and proposed marine spatial plans and processes during the reporting period that may impact small cetaceans.

Relevant Resolutions [10.5](#), [10.3](#), [8.9](#), [8.6 \(Rev.MOP10\)](#), [8.4 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.3](#)

A growing demand for use of maritime space increases pressure on ecosystems and marine resources. Marine ecosystems with good environmental status provide notable benefits to a number of economic outputs. Implementation of an integrated spatial planning and management approach can better mitigate negative impacts from maritime activities on marine environments. Spatial planning can support sustainable marine development through coordinated, coherent and transparent decision-making and the encouragement and identification of multi-purpose uses in relevant projects. Marine spatial planning is essential when selecting the most appropriate siting for marine-based projects. Particular attention should be given to critical habitat and relevant species, such as small cetaceans, in order to achieve good environmental status.

ASCOBANS Parties have agreed on a number of resolutions that support the integration of marine spatial planning into development processes. Small cetaceans benefit from good marine spatial planning, and this is highlighted in the resolutions. Countries are requested to provide information relevant to their country in this regard.

15.1.1. Please provide information in regard to current and foreseen marine spatial planning.

National plan(s) and processes in force:

Current plan 2020-2026; future plan: 2026-2034;
see <https://www.health.belgium.be/nl/marien-ruimtelijk-plan> and <https://www.health.belgium.be/nl/koninklijk-besluit-mrp-2026-2034>

15.1.2. Please provide information in regard to current and foreseen marine spatial planning.

National plan(s) and processes in preparation:

MSP 2026-2034 in preparation. Public consultation took place between 28 May 2024 and 27 August 2024. Entering into force foreseen for 20 March 2026.

Current plan 2020-2026; future plan: 2026-2034; see <https://www.health.belgium.be/nl/marien-ruimtelijk-plan> and <https://www.health.belgium.be/nl/koninklijk-besluit-mrp-2026-2034>

15.1.3. Please provide information in regard to current and foreseen marine spatial planning.

Further information, including links to online resources and maps where available:

see previous answer

15.2. Does your national MSP include a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)?

Please select only one option

- No
 Yes

15.2.1. In the box below, list the species covered by ASCOBANS which are explicitly assessed.

If those species present in your national waters are not explicitly assessed in your SEA, explain why.

Harbour porpoise

15.3. Does your MSP include specific provisions such as reservation or priority layers for the management of one or more ASCOBANS listed species (e.g. such as the reservation areas for harbour porpoises in the German MSP)?

Please select only one option

- No
 Yes

15.3.1. In the box below, explain how these will be applied, including specific management actions, and whether or not these provisions are restricted in time (e.g. selected period of months).

In the Special Area of Conservation 'Vlaamse Banken' activities are permitted that do not cause significant harm to the species or habitats for which the area was designated. An appropriate assessment must be carried out for each plan or project that could potentially have significant effects on the area. The assessment must take into account the conservation objectives of the area concerned, and non-area-specific conservation objectives for species such as the harbour porpoise. Specific restrictions may be imposed on certain activities, e.g. only allow activities during a selected period of the year. Restrictions on activities in the Natura 2000-area Vlaamse Banken are decided on an ad hoc basis.

15.4. Does your MSP include buffer zones between areas designated for particular economic use (e.g. offshore wind, shipping) and marine protected areas (including Natura 2000 sites) or areas of particular importance for ASCOBANS-listed species?

Please select only one option

- No
 Yes

15.5. Does your MSP include provisions for the mitigation of underwater noise with regards to ASCOBANS species (e.g. for shipping, during offshore wind park construction)?

Please select only one option

- No
 Yes

15.6.1. How many MSPs does your country have?

Please select only one option

- 1
 2
 3
 4
 5

E. Area-based Conservation / Marine Protected Areas

16. Protected areas, e.g. Natura 2000 sites

AIM: to provide information on existing and proposed marine protected areas with small cetaceans as part of the selection criteria.

Relevant Resolutions: [5.7](#)

Marine protected areas (MPAs) are considered under numerous agreements (including the Convention on Biological Diversity, Habitats Directive, Bern Convention, Ramsar Convention, OSPAR Convention, HELCOM, ACCOBAMS, MSFD) as a tool to achieve conservation goals. Part of ASCOBANS remit is to provide expert advice on the conservation and management of small cetaceans. This includes inviting Parties and Range States to continue or initiate research aimed at locating areas of special importance to the survival (in particular breeding and feeding) of small cetaceans as suitable sites for the establishment of protected areas. This also includes advising on appropriate management measures in these areas, on their own or in the context of other intergovernmental bodies to ensure the protection of small cetaceans.

To monitor the progress of such work to fulfil the obligations of Resolution 5.7 and actions in the workplan, ASCOBANS requires information (e.g. location, species, status, spatial data, management plans and monitoring) on existing and proposed marine protected areas with small cetaceans as part of the selection criteria.

It is of particular interest to ASCOBANS to obtain an overview of the current scale of marine protected areas and to review best practice approaches to management of marine protected areas, in order to make recommendations to Parties.

Section III: Surveys and Research

A. Biological Information (per species)

1. Abundance estimates

AIM: to provide new information on abundance and life history parameters of small cetaceans during the reporting period.

Relevant Resolutions: [10.3](#), [8.5 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.4 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.3](#), [7.1](#), [6.1](#), [5.7](#), [5.5](#), [4.7](#), [3.5](#), [3.3](#)

Abundance estimates and information on life history are of critical importance for the determination of broader species attributes such as populations levels, health and overall status. These parameters can contribute towards determination of GES and provide a reference for mortality events. Abundance and life history parameters are typically assessed from monitoring programmes. Fluctuations in these parameters can provide insight into trends in populations. Information on abundance and life history parameters can inform the need for mitigation measures, and regional assessment of these parameters allows for a more spatially targeted and concentrated response to support national assessments.

In the ASCOBANS Area, small cetacean abundance and life history should be monitored in response to a number of ASCOBANS resolutions. Continued monitoring of these parameters is essential to understanding current status and trends.

2. New information on life history parameters

B. Monitoring and Survey Schemes

3. Overview of current monitoring and survey schemes

AIM: to provide information on the progress of monitoring programmes, relevant methodologies and aims thereof, and status of small cetaceans during the reporting period.

Relevant Resolutions: [10.3](#), [8.11 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.9](#), [8.8](#), [8.5 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.4 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.3](#), [7.3](#), [7.1](#), [6.1](#), [5.7](#)

Monitoring programmes provide important data on biological and environmental attributes, such as population status, abundance and spatial-temporal distribution. They create opportunities for new research and development, including potential improvements to methodology for monitoring in terms of accuracy, practicality and cost efficiency.

In the ASCOBANS Area, application of coherent monitoring programmes focused on small cetaceans, which collect and provide objective, robust and comparable data, is a key component in understanding and improving the conservation status of small cetaceans through appropriate management. Parties have agreed to design, implement and support relevant monitoring programmes through a number of resolutions. Such efforts are also supported by legislation from a number of bodies which identify monitoring as a requirement in management systems. Additionally, Parties have been encouraged to coordinate their monitoring programmes, which promotes international cooperation and synergies. Parties have also been encouraged to review such monitoring programmes and propose improvements for the betterment of conservation efforts.

It is the interest of ASCOBANS to understand the current monitoring programmes utilised, their outputs, and future activities in the Agreement Area. Countries are requested to provide information relevant to their activities as well as potential improvements to such programmes and efforts.

C. Other Research

Section IV: Use of Strandings Records

A. Stranding Networks and Strandings

AIM: to provide information on stranding events and demonstrate progress of stranding networks in understanding, monitoring and mitigating strandings of small cetaceans.

Relevant Resolutions: [10.4](#), [10.3](#), [8.10 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.7](#), [8.4 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.3](#), [7.4](#), [7.3](#), [7.1](#), [6.1](#), [5.7](#)

Stranding of cetaceans is an ever-present occurrence and analysis through necropsy and sampling can provide indications of reason for injury and death. Stranding numbers also provide information on population status, abundance and distribution. Effective response to strandings contributes to the maintenance of favourable conservation status of small cetaceans and also has implications for animal welfare. Comprehensive stranding networks are a critical asset in managing small cetacean strandings and have resulted in large numbers of animals rescued and returned to sea. These networks also have the capacity to guide the public on animal welfare, human health and safety considerations during stranding events.

In the effort to mitigate the anthropogenic causes of these occurrences, Parties have agreed to measures through a number of resolutions. Continued monitoring of stranding causation and further developing guidance for best practices in stranding response and necropsies was identified by Parties as important tasks to pursue, as was setting up stranding response networks. This information is to align with appropriate sampling practices and countries should ensure that the data is available for researchers. Additionally, development and support of international strandings databases and regular reporting is conducted through relevant research institutes and stranding schemes. ASCOBANS Secretariat encourages the ongoing funding and support of engagement with organizations for further development of guidelines, best practices and maintaining dataflow for capacity building across stranding networks.

To better understand the extent to which stranding events occur and how these events are managed, it is the interest of ASCOBANS for countries to provide the relevant information on these occurrences within the Agreement Area, procedures undertaken in response to stranding events, necropsies and information on stranding networks.

Section V: Legislation

A. Overview of Legislative Framework

AIM: to provide information on national, regional and international legislation and guidelines relevant to small cetaceans during the reporting period.

Relevant Resolutions: [10.5](#), [10.3](#), [9.2 \(Rev.MOP10\)](#), [8.10 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.9](#), [8.8](#), [8.6 \(Rev.MOP10\)](#), [8.5 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.4 \(Rev.MOP9\)](#), [8.3](#), [7.1](#), [6.2 \(Rev.MOP10\)](#), [6.1](#), [5.7](#), [5.4](#)

Legislation and guidelines are a key component of efforts to support favourable conservation status of small cetaceans in the ASCOBANS Area. A number of existing legislation and guidelines bear relevance to conservation efforts for small cetaceans on national, regional and international

scales. Regular updating and adaptation of guidelines and legislation (where applicable) can ensure ongoing prevention, minimization and reduction of negative impacts of marine activities on small cetaceans. In addition, these actions support transparent and reliable management.

Parties to ASCBOANS have agreed to support the requisition, development and the implementation of legislation and guidelines to assess, minimize and mitigate pressures on favourable conservation status of small cetaceans in the Agreement Area. Parties have committed to these actions through a number of resolutions regarding pressures known to be detrimental to small cetaceans. It is in the interest of ASCOBANS for countries to provide information on current and foreseen national, regional and international legislation and guidelines relevant to small cetaceans in the Agreement Area.

1.1. Please provide the applicable information regarding legislation and guidelines relevant to small cetaceans for the following questions.

1.1.1. Are national guidelines relevant for small cetaceans currently in place in your country?

Please select only one option

- No
 Yes

Please identify the guidelines concerned:

see previous reports

1.1.2. Is national legislation relevant for small cetaceans currently in place in your country?

Please select only one option

- No
 Yes

1.1.3. Are regional and/or international guidelines relevant for small cetaceans currently in place in your country?

Please select only one option

- No
 Yes

1.1.4. Is regional and/or international legislation relevant for small cetaceans currently in place in your country?

Please select only one option

- No
 Yes

1.2. Have there been any instances/issues related to national, regional and/or international legislation during the reporting period in your country?

Please select only one option

- No
 Yes

Section VI: Information and Education

A. Education and outreach

AIM: to determine if there are gaps in the outreach and education activities and if additional material should be produced in your country or by the Secretariat (e.g. on certain themes, species, regions, languages, for certain target audiences).

Relevant Resolutions: [10.2](#), [5.8](#)

The revised ASCOBANS Communication, Education and Public Awareness (CEPA) Plan (see [ASCOBANS/MOP9/Doc.5.3](#) Annex 1) was endorsed by the 9th Meeting of the Parties (2020). The purpose of the CEPA Plan is to identify realistic activities relevant to ASCOBANS and mandated by Parties, to be undertaken by the Secretariat, Parties, and relevant partners. It seeks a clearer focus amongst Secretariat, Parties, Partners, and

stakeholders regarding objectives. The purpose of this section is to highlight successes and to identify potential gaps in outreach and education activities and related materials.

Section VII: Other Matters

A. Other information or comments important for the Agreement:

Opportunity to include other information relevant to the topics covered in this form but which are missing.

B. Difficulties in implementing the Agreement:

Time constraints to participate in relevant meetings organised by ASCOBANS (AC, meetings of the North Sea Plan or bycatch), also given that many issues are discussed in parallel at other fora.

C. Burning Issues:

Annex A: Overview of the sub-regions as defined by OSPAR and HELCOM, and areas as defined by ICES

Please find Annex A [here](#).

Annex B: Species covered by ASCOBANS

Species covered by ASCOBANS

Code	Common name	Scientific name
AWSD	Atlantic white-sided dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus acutus</i>
BBW	Blainville's beaked whale	<i>Mesoplodon densirostris</i>
BD	Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>
CBW	Cuvier's beaked whale	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>
CD	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>
FKW	False killer whale	<i>Pseudorca crassidens</i>
GBW	Gervais' beaked whale	<i>Mesoplodon europaeus</i>
HP	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena</i>
KW	Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>
LFPW	Long-finned pilot whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>
NBW	Northern bottlenose whale	<i>Hyperoodon ampullatus</i>
PKW	Pygmy killer whale	<i>Feresa attenuata</i>
PSW	Pygmy sperm whale	<i>Kogia breviceps</i>
RD	Risso's dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>
RTD	Rough-toothed dolphin	<i>Steno bredanensis</i>
SBW	Sowerby's beaked whale	<i>Mesoplodon bidens</i>

SD	Striped dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>
SFPW	Short-finned pilot whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>
TBW	True's beaked whale	<i>Mesoplodon mirus</i>
WBD	White-beaked dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>