

Agenda Item 6.1

Project Funding through ASCOBANS
Progress of Supported Projects

Document 6-01 rev.1

**Progress of Projects Supported
through ASCOBANS**

Action Requested

- Take note of the report
- Comment

Submitted by

Secretariat



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

Progress of Projects Supported through ASCOBANS

1. Since 2008, Parties have been allocating the surplus of the budgets of previous years to project funding. To facilitate this, a budget line for Conservation Projects (BAL 2201) was added to the Agreement's budget, to which positive balances from previous years are rephased.
2. Following a call for proposals issued by the Secretariat, the Advisory Committee Meetings decided on the projects to be funded from these resources. In this document, the Secretariat reports on the progress of the projects that were funded through the Agreement. The document contains details of projects concluded since AC18 as well as the status of those underway.

Finalized Projects

3. Four projects have been completed since AC18.

A. Inventories of harbour porpoise *Phocaena phocaena* presence in Russian territorial waters of the Baltic Sea

4. The project was selected for funding by the 17th Advisory Committee Meeting. A funding agreement (SSFA/2010/01) was concluded with the Russian non-governmental organization Biologists for Nature Conservation in January 2011. Activities carried out under the funding agreement included preparing questionnaires for fishermen and locals working in the Russian Part of the Gulf of Finland or living near the coast line and implementing a questionnaire survey by distribution (and further collection) of questionnaires among target groups and conducting of verbal interviews, through a network of contacts with commercial fishing brigades and individual fishermen in Kaliningrad region and Leningrad region. In addition, some field observations (using boat or catamaran) around the main islands were undertaken in the Russian part of the Gulf of Finland in order to find bones or other remains of *P.p. phocaena* on the shores.
5. The final project report has been published as AC19/Doc.6-03.

B. Effects of contaminants on reproduction, Phase II

6. Thanks to funding from the German Environment Ministry, Phase II of the project by Sinéad Murphy of the University of St. Andrews (UK) commenced in late 2010. This project had been classified as a priority by AC17, but was not selected for funding from the Agreement's core trust fund. The final report of Phase I was published as AC17/Doc.6-05. The following activities were supported by means of SSFA/2010/05:
 - Analysis of histological slides processed during Phase I of suspected abnormalities in *D. delphis* ovaries
 - Detailed analysis of all additional available *P. phocoena* ovarian material with corresponding contaminant data
 - Assessment of reproductive abnormalities in all *P. phocoena* ovaries
 - Where data gaps exist, analysis of teeth samples from *P. phocoena* for age determination

- Statistical analysis incorporating age, reproductive, contaminant, nutritional and health status data in order to assess the indirect effects of contaminants on reproductive activity in female *P. phocoena* and the prevalence of abnormalities in female *D. delphis* and *P. phocoena*

7. The final project report will shortly become available as AC19/Doc.6-04.

C. Feasibility study on the creation of a web-accessed strandings database covering Agreement Party and Range States within the ASCOBANS region

8. Also upon decision of AC17 by means of a funding agreement with the Zoological Society of London (SSFA/2010/02), funds were made available for the feasibility study. The funding agreement was signed in January 2011.

9. Under the lead of Rob Deaville, a meeting with potential collaborating partner networks and other stakeholders was held in the margins of the ECS Conference in 2011 to establish common areas of data held by each network, establish current methods of data archive and dissemination, agree a defined list of fields for a potential centralised database and agree a process and outline timetable for the production of the potential centralised database.

10. The final project report will shortly become available as AC19/Doc.6-05.

D. Preparation of a Draft Paper containing background information and proposed objectives and measures for the porpoise population residing in the “gap area” currently not covered by the Jastarnia Plan

11. Based on the request of AC18 to hire a consultant to undertake this work in support of the Jastarnia Group, and after issuing a call for tender and selecting an applicant in consultation with the Jastarnia Group, SSFA/2011/04 was concluded with the University of Aarhus in September 2011. Agreed activities included the compilation of all relevant scientific publications, national reports from Sweden, Germany and Denmark; based on which a draft paper containing scientific background information on the Belt Sea porpoises and propose objectives and measures to be implemented or conducted in order to fill the gaps in the current knowledge and ensure the sustainability of the population was to be developed. In order to assist the finalisation of the draft Conservation Plan, Signe Sveegaard representing the group of researchers who prepared the first draft attended the 8th Meeting of the Jastarnia Group, after which a revised draft was prepared for submission to the 19th Meeting of the Advisory Committee. The consultant will also attend AC19.

12. The final product of the project is the Draft Conservation Plan for Harbour Porpoises in the Western Baltic, Belt Seas and Kattegat produced for the Advisory Committee's consideration, which will shortly be published as AC19/Doc.4-03.

Ongoing Projects

13. Four projects are currently ongoing.

E. Understanding harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) and fisheries interactions in the north-west Iberian Peninsula

14. The funding agreement (SSFA/2010/04) for the project, signed in February 2010, made available to the University of Aberdeen funds for the following activities:
- Age determination by counting growth layer groups in the dentine. Age data will be used to construct life tables and thus estimate mortality rate.
 - Stomach content analysis and comparison with fishery catch data to determine the potential for competition between cetaceans and fisheries e.g. catch composition, minimum landing size and geographical overlap.
 - Determination of individual reproductive status and history, which together with age data will be used to construct maturity ogives (to establish age and size at sexual maturity), and determine the pregnancy rate and the annual reproductive cycle.
 - Statistical analysis of trends in life history parameters to detect any strong trends in life history parameters over time, permitting inferences about population status. Comparison with equivalent data for other populations (notably for Scotland) for better interpretation of results.
15. The project, which is lead by Fiona Read, is expected to deliver the following milestones:
- Quantify life history parameters (age structure, age and length at sexual and asymptotic maturity, pregnancy rate, etc) in harbour porpoises for the NWIP.
 - Use age-at-death data to estimate total and fisheries mortality rate for porpoises in the NWIP.
 - Examine evidence for temporal trends in age at sexual maturity, reproductive output and mortality rates.
 - Compare life history parameters for Iberian porpoises with those from northern Europe.
 - Investigate seasonal, geographic, annual and ontogenetic variation in the diet of NWIP in relation to prey abundance and thus define their trophic role in the area.
 - Provide recommendations on conservation of porpoises along the north-west Iberian Peninsula
16. The final project report is due at the end of March 2012. An interim report will be published as AC19/Doc.6-06.

F. Distribution and relative abundance of harbour porpoises (*Phocoena phocoena*) over Dogger Bank and surrounding waters, Southern North Sea

17. This project, managed through Marine Conservation Research International under SSFA/2011/05, was selected as a priority for funding by AC18. IFAW and other project partners funded the majority of costs related to the survey, with ASCOBANS providing co-funding in order to offer a training course in planning, set-up, data collection and analysis to nominated participants, coordinate vessel surveys with aerial survey efforts where logistically possible, data analysis and preparation of reports. Outputs include practical, theoretical and boat-based training of personnel, a cruise report upon completion of vessel survey and a final report upon completion of post-process data analysis.
18. The final project report is due in April 2012. An interim report has been published as AC19/Doc.5-03.

G. Pollutant exposure in coastal top predators: assessing current levels of exposure and toxic effects

19. This final project selected for funding by AC17 is covered by SSFA/2010/03, which was concluded with the Zoological Society of London in January 2011. Activities to be carried out under the lead of Paul Jepson include:
- Determine and analyse existing pollutant exposure data for PCBs and organochlorine pesticide levels within the ASCOBANS range.
 - Compare the levels of PCBs in bottlenose dolphins and killer whales with levels of PCBs in healthy and diseased harbour porpoises in UK waters (Jepson *et al* 2005; Hall *et al* 2006) and to a proposed threshold of toxicity for total PCBs of 17mg/kg lipid weight (Kannan *et al* 2000). PCB levels will also be compared with those associated with reproductive impairment in bottlenose dolphin studies in the US (e.g. Schwacke *et al* 2002).
 - Using data from UK-stranded harbour porpoises, generate the first dose-response curve for risk assessments of lethal effects of PCBs (i.e. infectious disease mortality) in exposed populations using empirical cetacean data.
 - Undertake a risk assessment for the toxic effects of PCB exposure in bottlenose dolphins and killer whales in European water within the ASCOBANS range.
20. The output expected from this project is a final report to be submitted to the ASCOBANS Advisory Committee assessing the levels of exposure in UK/European bottlenose dolphins and killer whales and their likely toxicological impacts.
21. The final project report is due in July 2012.

H. Approaches to an Impact Indicator in the Light of Descriptor 11 (MSFD)

22. Thanks to funding from the German Environment Ministry, a funding agreement for the project (SSFA/2011/02) has been concluded with the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCCS Germany) in August 2011. Agreed activities include researching all available methods to analyse the impact of noise on marine biota and drafting a technical paper with a group of experts which can be used as a guideline in order to develop a concept for a biological indicator for Good Environmental Status under the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive.
23. The final project report is due in August 2012.