Press release on 10th of December 2014 from the SAMBAH project

Potential breeding area revealed for the critically endangered Baltic Sea harbour porpoise

The Baltic Sea harbour porpoise population has been estimated to approximately 450 animals. The estimate is based on a two-year long data collection of harbour porpoise echolocation signals by the SAMBAH project. The distribution of animals in space and time reveal that an area where porpoise presence was previously virtually unknown is the most important breeding area for the critically endangered population.

Harbour porpoises echolocate with high pitch signals like bats. Based on two years' records of these signals and two years of statistical analyses, the international SAMBAH project has now estimated the number of harbour porpoises in the Baltic Sea to 447 animals (95% confidence interval 90 – 997).

The information on the harbour porpoise echolocation signals have been recorded by acoustic data loggers called C-PODs. In total, C-PODs have been deployed at 304 locations in waters 5-80 m deep in all EU member states, making the project to one of the largest of its kind in the world and a huge collaborative effort with the aim to save the only cetacean* living year round in the Baltic Sea.

Based on spatial modelling, maps showing the distribution of porpoises in time and space have also been produced. These show a clear spatial separation of the harbour porpoise populations in the Baltic Proper and in the Western Baltic during May-December when the porpoises give birth, mate and nurse their calves. The major breeding area of the Baltic Proper population is concentrated around the Midsjö offshore banks southeast of Öland, where porpoise presence was previously virtually unknown.

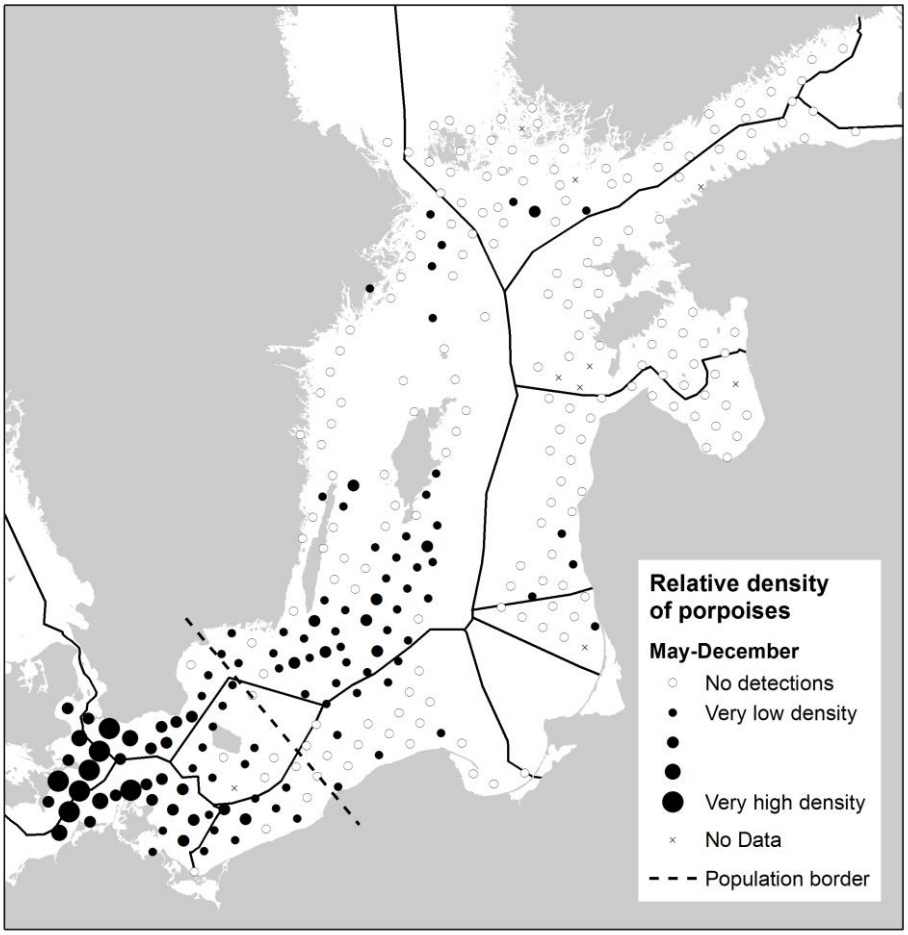
The SAMBAH results are expected to contribute to improved conservation status of the Baltic harbour porpoise, since a population estimate in combination with known distribution in space and time opens for dedicated actions in areas where conservation measures will matter. Being the largest ever passive acoustic monitoring study of any animal, the developed methodologies offer new possibilities for assessing population densities using passive acoustics.

The main findings of the project and the implications thereof are being presented at an international conference at Kolmården Wildlife Park, Sweden, on 8-9th of December 2014 (www.sambah.org/Conferences).

**Cetacean = Whales, dolphins and porpoises*

For more information, please contact Mats Amundin, mats.amundin@kolmarden.com, +46(0)107087547

Photos of harbour porpoises are available for the press at http://www.meeresmuseum.de/dmm/presse/pressemeldungen/details/?news=121. Photo credit to the name given in the file name.



The dots show the positions of the acoustic data loggers (C-PODs) recording information on the harbour echolocation signals in May – December 2011 and 2012 combined. The line indicate the likely seasonal division between the population in the Baltic Proper and in the waters west thereof, respectively.

SAMBAH = Static Acoustic Monitoring of the Baltic Sea Harbour Porpoise, www.sambah.org
SAMBAH aims to contribute to the conservation of the harbour porpoise population in the Baltic Sea. The project started in January 2010 and ends in September 2015. All EU member states around the Baltic Sea are involved in the project. The project is funded by the EU LIFE+ programme and national sources.

Harbour porpoise, *Phocoena phocoena*
The harbour porpoise is one of the smallest toothed whales, with a body length of 1.5-1.9m and a body weight of 50-70kg (females grow larger than males). It is almost black on its back and white on its belly. The head lacks a beak, and the dorsal fin is small and triangular. Its surfacing behaviour is mostly inconspicuous, and the blow almost invisible. It feeds on herring, sprat, small cod and a variety of bottom dwelling fish, like sandeels and gobies. The species has a wide distribution in temperate waters in the northern hemisphere. In the Baltic region, there are three harbour porpoise populations; (1) in the Baltic Proper and north-northeast thereof, (2) in the Western Baltic, Belt Sea and southern Kattegat and (3) in the northern Kattegat, Skagerrak and North Sea.