

Agenda Item 1: Introduction

**Opening Statement by WWF to the 10th Meeting
of the Advisory Committee to ASCOBANS**

Submitted by: WWF



ASCOBANS

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

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April 9-11th, 2003, Bonn**

One of the key reasons for the founding of ASCOBANS was the threat to the future survival of harbour porpoises throughout the range of the agreement. Since then the incidental capture in fisheries has been identified as the most significant threat facing the harbour porpoise and other small cetaceans in European and wider waters. WWF has always made clear its desire to see concrete measures implemented as soon as possible to mitigate small cetacean bycatch in fisheries.

Recovery plan for Baltic harbour porpoise (draft agenda item 4.1)

The recovery plan agreed in 2002 for the harbour porpoise in the Baltic (The Jastarnia Plan) was long awaited and much needed, given the critical status of harbour porpoises in the Baltic. During the agreement of this there was an understanding that Parties would implement the recommended measures identified as soon as possible and without waiting for adoption of the plan at the Meeting of Parties.

It is hoped that Parties will be able to report good progress on the implementation of the Plan to date and that the Secretariat will be in a position to provide feedback on Appendix 3 of the Plan which identifies important steps for the implementation of the Plan. The Baltic population of the harbour porpoise is indisputably in need of immediate measures to be taken if it is to continue to exist in the area, and this should be of the highest priority to Parties and the Secretariat.

Recovery plan for North Sea harbour porpoise (draft agenda item 6.1)

In March 2002, the 5th North Sea Conference agreed to develop a recovery plan for the harbour porpoise in the North Sea (BD §30)ⁱ. At its 9th meeting the Advisory Committee noted a willingness to help progress this and that enquiries would be made as to how this would be possible. To date WWF is aware of little progress to develop this recovery plan and is concerned at the lack of action on this matter. At the last Meeting of the Committee of North Sea Senior Officials (CONSSO)ⁱⁱ, WWF raised concern about the delay in the establishment of a North Sea Issue Group on Fisheries that *inter alia* should address the implementation of the North Sea Ministerial commitments to protect the harbour porpoise (also see section on bycatch reduction below). It is hoped that ASCOBANS will be able to assist in progressing this recovery plan in association with the North Sea Ministerial process.

Commission regulation to reduce incidental bycatch of small cetaceans (draft agenda item 4.3)

The 5th North Sea Conference (BD §29)ⁱⁱⁱ also endorsed the essence of MOP3 Resolution on Incidental Take of Small Cetaceans and consequently incorporated the target “*to reduce annual bycatch levels of harbour porpoise to levels below 1.7% of the best population estimate*” into a set of Ecological Quality Objectives to be pursued under the pilot project on an ecosystem approach to the management of human activities in the North Sea (to be reviewed by the OSPAR Commission). WWF is aware that the European Commission intends to bring forward a regulation to address the bycatch of small cetaceans in European waters and by European vessels in other waters. WWF encourages the Advisory Committee to take the opportunity to respond formally to this consultation to ensure that the most effective mitigation measures form part of the regulation and that funding is made available for the trialling of

alternative gear specifically targeted at reducing small cetacean bycatch. As the only international institution dealing exclusively with small cetacean conservation ASCOBANS has an obvious role to play in such a consultation. Indeed the Committee are mandated under Resolution 8 from MOP3 to offer advice on such matters.

Aspects related to the Joint OSPAR-HELCOM Ministerial Meeting (JMMC, Bremen, Germany, 25-26 June 2003)

The urgent need to draw up and implement conservation measures for small cetaceans in general and the harbour porpoise in particular, both in terms of recovery plans for certain populations and bycatch reduction at a broader scale, is expected to be recalled by Environment Ministers from Baltic and North-East Atlantic states at their first joint meeting. In addition, the harbour porpoise has been included in the draft OSPAR List of Threatened and/or Declining Species and Habitats (cf. Annex 6, Summary Record, Biodiversity Committee 2003). JMMC 2003 will provide added value for the conservation of small cetaceans as the meeting is anticipated to deliver respective commitments for the full range of the Agreement and beyond^{iv}. However, WWF believes that the implementation of measures already adopted in the context of ASCOBANS and NSC must not be further postponed.

Protected areas (draft agenda item 5.4)

Reference is made to WWF's statement and material provided to the 8th Meeting of the Advisory Committee. In that document, the interrelationship between spatial protection measures such as the designation of Natura 2000 sites for the harbour porpoise on the one hand and general management measures such as bycatch reduction required to ensure "favourable conservation status" on the other hand was discussed and clarified. In line with DG Environment's expert advice of December 2000, WWF recommends that ASCOBANS continues to help select European sites that are clearly identifiable areas representing the physical and biological factors essential to life and reproduction (e.g. calving, rearing of calves and feeding) of harbour porpoise. Beyond well known examples such as the waters west of the German islands Sylt and Amrum in the North Sea, these criteria are also met for e.g. the Odra Bank / Pomeranian Bay in the Baltic where high abundance of harbour porpoise reaching appr. 15% of the endemic population is observed during early summer calving season, according to recent scientific evidence.^v

Pollution threats and harbour porpoise (draft agenda item 5.1)

In its statement to the 7th Meeting of the Advisory Committee, WWF had noted with satisfaction that the ASCOBANS Secretariat had raised flags of concern at OSPAR and HELCOM level with regard to the accumulation of organotin compounds and brominated flame retardants (BFR) in the marine food web and cetacean tissue. It is a well known phenomenon that pollutants accumulate in the body tissues of cetaceans.

Over the past three years, WWF has been funding a large scale project with the London Zoological Society looking at potential impacts of pollutants on harbour porpoise^{vi}. Although the project is still to be completed, data on immune deficiency impacts correlated to specific pollutants has already been published. These impacts have mainly been associated with PCBs and mercury. In light of this, WWF would urge the meeting to continue considering the threats to cetaceans from emerging hazardous chemicals such as BFRs which can be structurally similar and exhibit similar hazard properties to PCBs. The precautionary principle must be evoked as the

newer generation of chemicals such as BFRs are persistent and bioaccumulative particularly in cetaceans. Lessons should be learnt from chemicals such as PCBs: once effects are discovered it is too late as these chemicals have bioaccumulated. Cetaceans are still suffering from their legacy today even though a ban on use has been imposed.

Further to the initiative taken by ASCOBANS to support OSPAR's and HELCOM's work on chemicals for priority action in previous years, WWF would therefore ask Parties to fully support the necessary follow-up actions to regulate these chemicals particularly under the new EU Chemicals Strategy.

ⁱ § 30 Bergen Declaration: *Furthermore, the Ministers **will develop** and **adopt**, as soon as possible and in cooperation with all competent authorities, a recovery plan for harbour porpoises in the North Sea.*

ⁱⁱ Summary Record, CONSSO NOV 2002: *It was considered not appropriate to start the work of the Issue Group on Fisheries since the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy is ongoing. Instead a network consisting of interested North Sea States and Observers should commence the preparatory work on fisheries. To this end a written reporting procedure should be initiated by the Secretariat possibly in May – June 2003 with the purpose of analysing the reform of the CFP and identify issues relevant for the work of CONSSO.*

ⁱⁱⁱ § 29 Bergen Declaration: *As an interim objective, the Ministers **agree** to aim at reducing the bycatch of harbour porpoises below 1,7% of the best population estimate. On the same basis the Ministers **agree** on a precautionary objective to reduce bycatches of marine mammals to less than 1% of the best available population estimate, and **urge** the competent authorities to develop specific limits for the relevant species. In this context, the Ministers **welcome** the initiative taken at the 9th Trilateral Wadden Sea Conference to further improve gill-net fishery practices in order to reduce bycatch of marine mammals and birds.*

^{iv} Draft text on Fisheries for the Ministerial Declaration of the 2003 Joint Ministerial Meeting of HELCOM and OSPAR (February 2003): *In this context, the Ministers [urge/invite] the relevant fisheries management authorities and international bodies to address the following issues as a matter of priority:... the need to minimise the bycatch of non-commercial species and to avoid damage of sensitive habitats [and to establish targets and bycatch limits for non-commercial species], by doing so contribute to the protection of those species and habitats identified by the two Conventions that are in need of protection;... the need to adopt and implement a recovery plan for harbour porpoises in the Baltic Sea and to develop and implement one in the [southern] North Sea [and the Channel];*

^v German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (2002): Auswahl der NATURA 2000 Meeresschutzgebiete. Ergebnisbericht. 2. Statusseminar im Rahmen der naturschutzorientierten AWZ-Forschung. BfN-INA Vilm.

^{vi} WWF United Kingdom (in prep.): Pollutant Body Burden and Potential Endocrine Disrupting Effects in Harbour Porpoise.