Agenda Item 8.1   Funding of Projects and Activities

                                        Progress of Projects Supported by
                                        ASCOBANS

Document 8.1   **Progress of Projects Supported
                                        through ASCOBANS**

Action Requested   • Take note
                                        • Comment

Submitted by   Secretariat

Progress of Projects Supported through ASCOBANS

1. 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 AC21 as well as the status of those underway. Previous reports can be accessed as AC20/Doc.6.1.a and AC21/Doc.6.1.

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

2. This project, selected for funding by AC17, was covered by SSFA/2010/03, which was concluded with the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) in January 2011.

3. Main conclusions are that there are still very high polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) concentrations found in stranded/biopsied bottlenose dolphins and killer whales in Europe (global PCB "hotspots"). Declines in cetacean PCB concentrations following an EU ban have now stopped in UK harbour porpoises. High and stable PCB exposures are associated with population declines in some bottlenose dolphins and killer whales in European waters. Legacy pollutants (PCBs) therefore continue to pose a major health and conservation threat to marine top predators in Europe today.

4. The final project report has been published as AC22/Inf.8.1.a.

B. Preparations for SCANS-III

5. This project was prioritized for funding by AC20, and arrangements (SSFA/2014/1) were subsequently made with the University of St. Andrews (UK), which established a focal point for organisation and communication at the Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU) to co-ordinate all administrative and technical preparatory work on behalf of project partners.

6. The key output of this work was the proposal submitted to the EU for consideration under the 2014 round of LIFE+ funding. Regrettably, in January 2016 the applicants were informed that the proposal had not been successful. Details on further plans are contained in AC22/Inf.5.1.b.

7. The final project report has been published as AC22/Inf.8.1.b.

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

8. Thanks to funding from the German Environment Ministry, a funding agreement for the project (SSFA/2011/02) was concluded with the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS Germany, now Whale and Dolphin Conservation, WDC) in August 2011. Due to unforeseen delays, only the first instalment agreed under this contract was disbursed, and activities were restricted accordingly.

9. The main result is a paper on Methodologies to Help Determine Levels of Noise Compliant with Environmental Laws, which has been made available as AC22/Inf.8.1.c. It is a technical paper drafted with a group of experts as a guideline in order to develop a concept for a biological indicator for Good Environmental Status under the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive. It was made use of by members of the Noise Working Group participating in related fora.

D.   Examine habitat exclusion and long term effect of pingers

10. This project was prioritized for funding by AC19, and arrangements (SSFA/2012/1) were subsequently made with Aarhus University (Denmark). The project aims to evaluate two hypotheses: a) that porpoises are displaced by pinger sounds by comparing the two measurements; and b) that porpoises habituate to pingers over time by analysing changes over time. With funding provided through ASCOBANS, the noise loggers required for the second phase of the project have already been purchased. Regrettably, due to delays in the deployment of pingers, in the first two years only the baseline data could be collected by means of C-PODs. The first instalment of the project funds was used for purchasing the noise loggers. Data will be collected for two years: one with pingers operational in the area, and one with only C-PODs and noise loggers.

11. An interim report on the baseline data collected so far has been published as AC21/Inf.6.1.b. For administrative reasons on both sides, it was not possible to continue the funding of this project, which is expected to be finalized in December 2017.

E.   Baltic Sea harbour porpoise foraging habitats (BALHAB) in the Baltic Region

12. Following the selection of this project for funding by AC21, in October 2014 the Secretariat started making arrangements with Aarhus University (Denmark) in order to conclude a funding agreement for the following activities:

- Examine whether porpoise feeding buzzes can be used to identify foraging habitats by comparing occurrence of buzzes at a number of the different sampling stations (304 stations)

- Investigate the temporal distribution of harbour porpoise foraging buzzes in the SAMBAH data

- Produce seasonal maps of the frequency of occurrence of foraging buzzes within the SAMBAH project area to propose foraging habitats especially important for porpoises

13. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the lead researcher had to request a postponement of the project. A new starting date has not yet been agreed, and funds are being held for the time when contractual arrangements can be completed and work can commence.