

Agenda Item 6: Matters related to Parties and Range States

Report on the meeting with the Swedish Coordinating Authority

Submitted by the Secretariat

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

Report on the meeting with Swedish representatives in Stockholm, 19 March 1999

by Holger Auel, ASCOBANS Secretariat

At the invitation of the Swedish Co-ordinating Authority to ASCOBANS, Mr. Lars Thorell from the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, a meeting between Swedish representatives and the ASCOBANS Secretary was held in Stockholm on 19 March 1999. The meeting was hosted by Peter Westman at the Ministry of Environment and consisted of two plenary sessions. The morning session was attended by representatives of governmental institutions, including Peter Westman (Ministry of Environment), Ingela Byfors (Ministry of Agriculture, Fishery Department), Lars Thorell (Environmental Protection Agency), Sune Eriksson (Environmental Protection Agency, International Secretariat), Bengt Kåmark (National Board of Fisheries, Göteborg) and the ASCOBANS Secretary. The agenda items for this session included ASCOBANS's present organisation, the co-operation between HELCOM and ASCOBANS, especially under the aspect that Sweden is the lead-country with respect to HELCOM Recommendation 17/2 regarding the protection of harbour porpoises in the Baltic, and the development of a workplan for the Baltic.

In the afternoon another session was held with the participation of Swedish scientists, e.g. Per Berggren (University of Stockholm) and Bo Fernholm (Swedish Museum of Natural History, Swedish IWC Commissioner). Representatives of Swedish NGOs, e.g. WWF, Swedish Society for Nature Conservation and Coalition Clean Baltic, were also invited to the afternoon meeting but did not attend. The agenda for the second session included the co-operation between IWC and ASCOBANS, the Advisory Committee's workplan for the Baltic, by-catch issues and monitoring projects.

1) ASCOBANS present organisation

I gave a brief overview on the development of the Secretariat since its relocation to Bonn, its current administrative organisation as part of the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation, and the co-operation with the co-located Secretariats of CMS and EUROBATS. After a short description of the general structure of ASCOBANS (Meeting of Parties, Advisory Committee and Secretariat) we discussed the possible accession of additional Parties and the co-operation with the European Commission. Details on these issues can be found in the documents 20, 21 and 22 prepared for the 6th Advisory Committee Meeting.

2) Co-operation between HELCOM and ASCOBANS

As the lead-country for HELCOM Recommendation 17/2 regarding the protection of harbour porpoises in the Baltic, Sweden is very interested in a more intense and efficient co-operation between HELCOM and ASCOBANS. In the last year some problems have occurred, particularly with regard to the reporting procedures for HELCOM Recommendation 17/2:

- Although both organisations decided that comprehensive implementation reports should be prepared by the respective parties every third year (HELCOM Recommendation 17/2, executive clause d), the actual reporting year of HELCOM (1998, 2001, 2004, ...) differs from that of ASCOBANS (1997, 2000, 2003,...).
- Different reporting formats were proposed for both organisations. To resolve this discrepancy EC NATURE 7/97 decided to use an overview by ASCOBANS to harmonise the reporting format.
- In spite of efforts made by the ASCOBANS Secretariat, national implementation reports according to HELCOM Recommendation 17/2 have so far only been submitted by Lithuania and Poland (see also Report of EC NATURE 8/98, 17/1, Paragraph 6.17).

Therefore, Lars Thorell proposed streamlining and harmonising the reporting procedures for both organisations in order to increase efficiency and to avoid unnecessary duplication of work. If the Contracting Parties to HELCOM provided implementation reports compatible with the ASCOBANS format, their national reports could be included in the regular Compilation of National Reports prepared by the ASCOBANS Secretariat. This procedure would have several advantages:

- The workload for countries that are party both to HELCOM and ASCOBANS would decrease. The same national implementation report could be submitted to both organisations.
- The HELCOM Secretariat and Sweden as lead-country would no longer have to prepare compilations of the HELCOM reports, since this would be done by the ASCOBANS Secretariat.

- ASCOBANS would hopefully also receive national reports from those Baltic countries not (yet) party to the Agreement. Thus, a more complete data set on distribution, abundance and mortality of harbour porpoises in the Baltic would be available.

In order to set the co-operation between ASCOBANS and HELCOM on a formal base, it was proposed to prepare some kind of "Memorandum of Understanding". Such a document should include detailed information on the joint reporting procedure, but might also encompass other areas of common concern and future co-operation, such as the implementation of the relevant HELCOM Recommendation, reduction of by-catch, marine pollution (great HELCOM expertise) and the development of an international workplan for the restoring of the Baltic harbour porpoise population.

3) Workplan for the Baltic

Sweden is in the process of developing a national workplan for the protection of the Baltic harbour porpoise population, which will be presented during the Advisory Committee Meeting in Aberdeen. In order to foster international collaboration and to increase the efficiency of protection strategies, Sweden would welcome an international workplan for the conservation of Baltic harbour porpoises in the framework of ASCOBANS and HELCOM. Such a plan should evaluate the suitability and potential benefits of different protection measures (such as the temporary closure of fishing areas, the establishment of protected areas and a reduction of fishing effort), as well as their cost-effectiveness. The Advisory Committee to ASCOBANS is invited to actively contribute to the development of the workplan.

4) Co-operation between IWC and ASCOBANS

The Secretary summarised the outcome of the joint IWC/ASCOBANS Workshop on the Status of Harbour Porpoise held in St. Andrews, 8 – 10 March (for details see Doc. 7). Per Berggren agreed to provide tissue samples of Baltic harbour porpoises for the genetic study recommended by the IWC/ASCOBANS Working Group.

Bo Fernholm and Per Berggren reported on the issues to be discussed at the next IWC meetings. Whereas harbour porpoises have been on the IWC's agenda since 1990, the next meeting (May 1999) will focus on the use of acoustic deterrents to reduce by-catch. Per Berggren recommended that the potentially negative side-effects of acoustic deterrents (e.g. acoustic pollution) should also be considered. For the year 2000 the IWC is planning to assess other measures for the reduction of by-catch.

5) The Advisory Committee's workplan (for the Baltic)

After a brief overview on the agenda of the coming Advisory Committee Meeting given by the Secretary, the discussion focussed on the particular need for a workplan for the Baltic (see paragraph 3).

6) By-catch issues

Bengt Kåmark reported that in the Baltic area the use of gillnets had increased over recent years. This development was at least partly a consequence of a declining catch per effort. Already now gill-netting is the most important fishing technique in the Baltic providing 50-60% of the total cod and 95% of the turbot catches. All participants expressed their shared concern that this potentially dangerous development was likely to worsen the by-catch problem. Kåmark suggested asking IBSFC, if possible, to collect and report data on harbour porpoise by-catch within the framework of their annual catch reports. Berggren announced that he would present data on harbour porpoise by-catch for cod and pollack fisheries in the Kattegat and Skagerrak during the Advisory Committee meeting. He stated that changing the fishing practise, e.g. using fish traps instead of gill-nets, might help to reduce by-catch. Fernholm said that a general limitation of fishing effort might be more effective in managing fish stocks, as well as in reducing by-catch, than the present quota system.

7) Monitoring

The participants agreed that a continuous monitoring of by-catch, if possible by independent observers, is essential to evaluate the effects of any by-catch mitigation measure or strategy. Regular assessments of the reproduction rate of harbour porpoises and their age of maturity would provide valuable and early information on potential abundance trends.

Berggren mentioned the need for a new large-scale abundance survey (SCANS 2) in the ASCOBANS area. Abundance surveys should be conducted regularly (every sixth year) in order to provide a reliable scientific base for protection measures. SCANS 2 could benefit from the high number of well-trained observers and cruise leaders, as well as from the experiences regarding survey design and strategy gained during the first survey. In view of the time needed for the preparation of a large-scale survey, Parties to ASCOBANS should already now consider the possibility of organising a SCANS 2 survey in 2001.