Update on ASCOBANS/ACCOBAMS cetacean pathology harmonization protocol

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Context

- At ASCOBANS AC24 two different protocols/best practices for the postmortem analyses on cetaceans were presented.
- Both used a multi-tier approach but needed an harmonization and a coordination in order to develop a unified document outlining European best practice on cetacean necropsy.
- A harmonization workshop, funded by ASCOBANS and ACCOBAMS was organized by Sandro Mazzariol (Italy), Lonneke Ijsseldijk (NL) and Andrew Brownlow (UK) and held 24-25 June 2019 in Padua, Italy.
- 22 invited participants from across Europe undertaking cetacean necropsy and investigations – Limited funds, small group to aid discussions
Terms of references for the workshop

a) Harmonize multi-tier best practice for basic necropsy procedure

AIM: create an accessible document comprising a harmonization of existing post mortem procedures within the two agreement areas

b) Setting up diagnostic frameworks for specific threats

AIM: Define and harmonize specific diagnostic approaches and interpretation of findings among the veterinary pathologists and other scientists performing necropsies within the two agreement areas.

c) Composing a list of experts/laboratories for technical support and advice

AIM: Provide appropriate contacts for specific issues, methodologies and techniques within the two agreement areas.
• ASCOBANS & ACCOBAMS
  • (Germany, UK, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Israel)
• IWC
• OIE - World Health Organization (WHO) collaborating center for Health of Marine Mammals
  • MARCET
Key themes from workshop

• Emphasis that the document is to augment rather than replace existing protocols
• Agreement that consistency was necessary to enable data sharing and this update was needed
• Emphasis that the assessment of the cause of death and health status is a **veterinary procedure** requiring a full post mortem investigation with additional examinations.
• Detailed investigation of fresh carcases by experienced **veterinary pathologists** remains the **gold standard** and an absolute requirement for assessing overall health.
• There is no shortcut to a complete and throughout necropsy in order to evaluate and eventually rule out all the possible causes of death.
• Not all networks have that **capacity** however, and strandings networks, run by experienced non-veterinarians, can, and have, operated successfully.
• Collection of data and samples can however be invaluable to gain information on some threats, pollutants and important biological and life-history parameters.
• Sampling and testing should be complete and throughout and interpretation should be based on the best existing literature and protocols available.
Final document

- To provide a **reference document** for veterinarians and biologists currently engaged in cetacean post-mortem investigation, summarising a recognised approach to stranding investigation across European networks;

- To highlight areas where **harmonisation of data** from existing networks could allow for analysis and inference to be made **between networks**, of particular relevance for the transboundary, mobile species;

- Provide a **start-up guide** for researchers attempting to instigate new stranding monitoring programmes, particularly in regions of the world with limited resources for extensive, top-down surveillance programmes.
What the document is... and what it is not

• A basic document for post mortem investigation and tissue sampling. ✓

• Arranged in tier structure depending on resources available
  – Tier 1: Basic measurements ✓
  – Tier 2: Detailed investigation and sampling ✓
  – Tier 3: Post-mortem examination with diagnostic aims ×

• A instruction guide for veterinary investigation of specific causes of death ×

Refer to online resource on specialist techniques and methodologies
Next steps...

• Finalisation of online repository for specialist techniques, reference centres and contact details of experts
  – recommend publication of these products in a related page of the ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS agreement.

• Generation of a DOI number

• Final draft of the document presented here at AC25 with aim the final version is presented for adoption at the MOP

• Document presented at HELCOM

• Further opinion will be asked to the International Whaling Commission Expert Panel within the ACCOBAMS MoP as a general assessment on the quality of the document.

• Presentation of document at dedicated workshop of the World Conference on Marine Mammals in Barcelona next December.