

Report of the ACCOBAMS-ASCOBANS Joint Bycatch Working Group

September 2022

The Joint Bycatch Working Group (JBWG) was established in January 2019. Dr. Ayaka Amaha Oztürk (Turkish Marine Research Foundation / Faculty of Aquatic Sciences, Istanbul University, Turkey), representing ACCOBAMS, and Dr. Peter Evans (Sea Watch Foundation/School of Ocean Sciences, Bangor University, UK) representing ASCOBANS, agreed to act as Co-chairs, and have maintained regular contact with one another and their respective Secretariats ever since.

The first formal meeting of the group was held online between 10 and 12 February 2021, attended by >150 persons from 31 countries spanning the Baltic, North Atlantic, Mediterranean and Black Seas. The first two days were devoted to 28 presentations sharing experiences in monitoring and mitigation of cetacean bycatch across the two Agreement Areas and covering different fishing gears. On the final day, members of the JBWG discussed and decided upon priorities in the form of a Programme of Work spanning the period 2021-2023. In addition, A total of 24 Recommendations were made: Five General Recommendations called for increased and more targeted sampling of high-risk fisheries (preferably minimum of 5-10% of annual fleet activity), along with urgent measures in the Black Sea and Baltic Proper, working towards eliminating bycatch in those regions; ten Recommendations to improve monitoring, including wider use of Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM), better understanding of factors relating to bycatch risk, support for strandings schemes, pathological examinations, and greater use of drift models; and nine Recommendations to prevent and mitigate bycatch by greater stakeholder engagement, area-based measures, alternative gears and new technologies.

On 18 August 2022, a second smaller catch-up meeting was held online, reviewing progress on the Programme of Work established at the first meeting, identifying Leads for the different tasks set, revising priorities for some tasks, and proposing a schedule for each. Some are ongoing tasks with no set deadline for completion; others have a prescribed timeline. An updated review of the Programme of Work can be found in [ASCOBANS/AC27/Doc.2.1b/Rev.1](#). At this meeting, an update was provided by Anne-Marie Svoboda on the status of the CIBBRINA project (involving several JBWG members) that had been submitted to the EU LIFE programme but been unsuccessful. A modified proposal with much reduced budget and greater emphasis on bycatch mitigation was being prepared for re-submission in October 2022.

By the end of 2021, two contracts had been successfully completed with reports as outputs. The first was on [Monitoring Cetacean Bycatch: An Analysis of Different Methods Aboard Commercial Fishing Vessels](#) (comparing visual and remote electronic monitoring) by Grant P. Course of SeaScope Fisheries Research. The second was a [Cost-benefit Analysis for Mitigation Measures in Fisheries with High Bycatch](#) by Fiona L. Read. A third contract, *Using fishers' knowledge to understand the use of alternative gears to static gillnets in the ASCOBANS region*, is currently being undertaken by Whale and Dolphin Conservation.

Besides national initiatives, several international bodies (e.g. ICES WGBYC, FAO, GFCM, IWC, OSPAR, HELCOM) are involved in actions relating to bycatch, and rather than duplicate those efforts (many of which already involve JBWG members), the WG aims to integrate those with initiatives that will fill gaps. To ensure regular liaison between JBWG and those bodies, representatives have participated in one or both of the JBWG meetings. Both Co-Chairs have also participated in meetings with the European Commission, and with the Regional Advisory Fisheries Councils, giving presentations. In the context of ASCOBANS, Peter Evans has attended and presented on bycatch issues at meetings of the EC Marine Expert Group, and is a member of ICES WGBYC, participating in its meetings. At the request of the European Commission, during 2021, he and his team undertook a [bycatch risk assessment](#) in the ASCOBANS region. This compared seasonal and yearly maps of fishing effort by gear type and member state with modelled density distributions of 12 cetacean species regularly occurring in the region (and a similar number of marine bird species).

There has been increasing focus by Parties upon developing and testing a variety of methods to mitigate risk of bycatch, particularly through the use of alternative gear. In 2022, in the UK a workshop was organised by Defra, [Hauling Up Solutions 2](#), which focused on gear adaptation rather than on gear switching due to financial favourability. [The workshop report](#) has now been published. Two projects on alternative fishing gears / alternative Pingers (PALs) are ongoing in Germany, including the STELLA II project funded by the Federal Agency of Nature Conservation. Sweden has also been working on developing alternative gear technologies. The FAO has also recently published [Guidelines to prevent and reduce bycatch of marine mammals in capture fisheries](#). In relation to the ACCOBAMS Agreement Area, GFCM is organising a meeting of its Working Group on Fishing Technology (WGFIT) in September 2022 that will include dedicated sessions on both monitoring and mitigating interactions (incidental catch and depredation) between vulnerable species and fisheries activities. GFCM will also present the final draft of “The Mediterranean and Black Sea catalogue of fishing gear” during this meeting.

On monitoring, ICES WGBYC continues to examine ways to improve upon the metrics used to estimate bycatch rates, working in conjunction with other ICES WG’s (e.g. WGCATCH). ICES is currently working on a special advice request from DG Environment on evaluating appropriate bycatch monitoring systems at Member State level and on regional coordination to comply with obligations under the Birds, Habitats and Marine Strategy Framework Directives (project delivery in 2024). ICES is planning two workshops for this special request, both to be held in 2023. Phase I of this special advice request, which undertook a review of monitoring for PET species bycatch, was published as an ICES Scientific Report in 2022¹. Denmark has completed its research programme on the use of REM to improve the monitoring of bycatch. A report has been published in 2022, and Lotte Kindt-Larsen is summarising the findings at ASCOBANS AC27.

During the course of 2020-21, two calls for emergency measures to reduce bycatch were reviewed by ICES WGBYC and WGMME at their respective annual meetings, followed by a workshop. The emergency measures related to reducing bycatch of the endangered population of harbour porpoise in the Baltic Proper and of common dolphin bycatch in the Bay of Biscay. In both cases, mitigation measures (primarily involving pingers) were proposed. However, the implementation of pingers in the Baltic Proper has been opposed by some governments following concerns expressed by their navies that the signals emitted by the pingers could interfere with their anti-submarine detection capabilities. Following discussions on this topic held at the 2022 IWC Scientific Committee meeting and at JBWG’s online meeting in August 2022, a new recommendation is proposed for endorsement at AC27. The draft text is that “Parties are strongly recommended that, as a matter of urgency, ways are found for porpoise acousticians and other relevant experts to engage directly at a technical level with counterparts in those navies concerned about the use of pingers.”

As regards the emergency measures called to reduce bycatch of common dolphins in the Bay of Biscay, ICES will be holding a further workshop on this late in 2022, whilst there will be an update presented at the WGBYC meeting that is taking place in September 2022, concurrent with the ASCOBANS AC27 meeting.

OSPAR’s OMMEG (Marine Mammal Expert Group) have been tasked with producing biodiversity indicators that Member States can apply and report on under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, if they wish to do so. Contracting Parties of OSPAR agreed to use the ASCOBANS conservation objective of 80% of carrying capacity as the conservation objective for small cetaceans (harbour porpoise and common dolphin) within the indicator, and undertook the assessment using a probability of 80%. In terms of setting targets for bycatch limits. As a conservation body, ASCOBANS needed to have clear conservation objectives, and means to calculate thresholds that trigger different levels of action. Although various methods such as PBR (Potential Biological Removals) and RLA (Removals Limit Algorithm), are currently used to estimate these, there are

¹ Murphy, S., Borges, L., Tasker, M. 2022. External report on the review of monitoring PETS bycatch of mammals, birds, turtles and fish for ICES under the service of EC DG Environment. ICES Scientific Reports. 4:17. 69 pp. <http://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.10075>

challenges to their application for data poor species which make up the majority of small cetaceans occurring in the two Agreement areas. Work is progressing on this topic within various fora (e.g. OSPAR, ICES, University of Washington) and ASCOBANS is planning two workshops in 2023 to address these issues. Part 1 of the ASCOBANS workshop programme would be technical, looking at means to reach threshold values (involving a small technical group, mainly modellers), and Part 2 would be a joint one with OSPAR, HELCOM, etc. to ensure a general agreement and bring in relevant users' interests. It will be necessary to address questions such as long-term definitions and threshold percentages as well as defining management/assessment units. Building on the OSPAR-HELCOM Workshop in Copenhagen in 2019.

One of the Terms of Reference forming part of the JBWG's Programme of Work was to *Provide technical support as required to facilitate dialogue with relevant bodies that have certification schemes, such as the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), by actively contributing to the assessment of relevant fisheries with respect to cetacean bycatch* Following the MSC participation to ASCOBANS AC24, there had been relatively little contact. Peter Evans had had discussions with MSC personnel and a representative had advised that Parties were welcome take part in the public, individual certification requests. However, responding to individual certifications was a very large task, and largely outside the remit of JBWG. However, since it will probably trigger changes in Ecolabelling, JBWG felt it was important for ASCOBANS and ACCOBAMS to have input where possible. A representative of MSC has been invited to present at ASCOBANS AC27.