

# **REPORT OF THE 4<sup>th</sup> MEETING OF THE ASCOBANS COMMON DOLPHIN GROUP**

**Online  
9-10 January 2024**



**Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans  
of the Baltic, North East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas**

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## **1. Opening of the Meeting**

### **1.1. Welcome and Announcements**

Jenny Renell (Secretariat) welcomed participants to the virtual meeting of the Common Dolphin Group (CDG), the first ASCOBANS meeting of the year, and delineated housekeeping rules.

CDG Co-Chair Sinéad Murphy (Atlantic Technological University, Ireland) made further welcome remarks, also on behalf of CDG Co-Chair Florence Caurant (La Rochelle University, France).

### **1.2. Adoption of the Agenda**

Co-Chair Murphy outlined the Provisional Annotated Agenda and Schedule ([ASCOBANS/CDG4/Doc.1.2b](#)), which was agreed to. Pointing to guidance from AC27 on the development of recommendations, she invited participants to think about possible recommendations throughout the meeting, building on those formulated by CDG3.

## **2. Overview of progress in SAP implementation**

### **2.1. Updates from Parties and Range States**

Co-Chair Murphy invited updates for the period November 2022 to December 2023.

#### France

Co-Chair Caurant presented an update on activities undertaken in 2023, going through each task in France's Achievements Table.

She pointed to progress on, among others:

- methodological approaches for managing removals;
- assessing the co-occurrence of common dolphins and fine-scale fishing efforts;
- assessment of sex and body size of bycaught individuals;
- the continuous monitoring of temporal trends in the abundance and distribution of strandings;
- estimating fishing effort based on soak time for static gears;
- monitoring the prey species of common dolphins;
- biopsy sampling of live animals which will be analysed with regard to organic contaminants and other ecological tracers; and
- histopathological and immunofluorescent analysis of stranded common dolphins to assess potential degenerative impacts resulting from noise.

Ms Caurant indicated that the DELphinus MOuvements GESTion (DELMOGES) project, which runs from 2022-2025, should add valuable contributions to understanding their biology and ecology, building on stomach content-, stable-isotope-, and life history analyses. The project will also look at population structure in the North-east Atlantic.

Ms Caurant recalled that France co-leads the development and assessment of two common indicators under the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East

Atlantic (OSPAR Convention), including the M6 indicator on marine mammal bycatch. Responding to Co-Chair Murphy, she confirmed France is currently using 1% of best abundance as a national level bycatch indicator for reporting under the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD).

With regard to the monitoring of fisheries activities with a high risk of common dolphin bycatch, she noted there was no change in the number of remote electronic monitors (REM) deployed compared to 2022. She specified that, under the OBSCAME project, 20 boats were now equipped with REMs, covering 3% of the fleet. She indicated the goal to have REMs on 100 boats was tentatively postponed by one year due to tensions around regulatory provisions and push back from fishers.

She highlighted the situation in France is currently “unstable,” with individual decrees contradicting each other and tense discussions between the ministry and stakeholders, especially the fishing industry, on how to resolve this.

With regard to the objective of performing necropsies, she highlighted uncertainty surrounding authorizations for fishers to land bycaught animals, with fishers—who are overall not inclined to perform such landings—arguing that the current legislation does not allow them to do so. She said this is an ongoing subject of discussion in France, with the ministry being reluctant to move forward with a reform amid push back from fishers. She noted the current context does not seem conducive for progress on the matter.

In response, Nikky Taylor (Joint Nature Conservation Committee, UK) noted parallels with the situation in the UK, where specific licences would be required for the landing of bycaught animals. She highlighted the value of streamlining the process to be able to necropsy these animals.

## UK

Nikki Taylor provided an [overview](#) of activities from November 2022 to January 2024, pointing to, among others:

- ongoing bycatch mitigation trials of net reflectors, which are mainly focused on harbour porpoises but should also help with regard to common dolphins;
- a 2023 update to the [Marine Climate Change Impact Partnership report for marine mammals](#), which highlights shifts in prey availability and range; and
- the development of a marine noise registry with new functionalities related to assessing the disturbance footprint of recorded noise and facilitating cooperation to mitigate potential exceedances of noise limits.

In terms of future work, she highlighted:

- an aerial survey of the southern North Sea and eastern Channel; and
- the commitment to introduce in-vehicle monitoring systems for under 12 fleet in English waters, which should contribute more fisheries activity data and support work on bycatch.

Ms Taylor highlighted there has been a higher number of strandings seen in every month of 2023 across England and Wales. She also pointed to a mass live stranding of eight common dolphins in August 2023 and noted seven of these dolphins could be refloated, but one female calf died, on which a post-mortem was conducted - whose results will be included in the next report.

Peter Evans (Sea Watch Foundation) added that sightings indicate that common dolphins have extended their range in the northern and central North Sea and up to Shetland, although considered unusual, such sightings have been recorded previously. He also said they are coming closer to shore in the Irish Sea.

## Ireland

Simon Berrow (Irish Whale and Dolphin Group) [reported](#) that stranding numbers of common dolphins have increased, but haven't been as high as in 2021. He said that fishers and mariners are noting

increased sightings, but that this is currently not confirmed through the IWDG sighting scheme. Data from aerial surveys and other datasets will be used to confirm the trend. In general, he noted an increase in sightings in winter and less in the summer based on the IWDG sightings scheme.

On whether dolphins are pushing further north, he noted the sightings data does not support this as of yet, except for the Northwest where there has been an increase not only in common dolphins but also large baleen whales and bottlenose dolphins. Anecdotal evidence suggests these individuals are quite small and in poor condition.

He said the sighting scheme has been running since 1991 and the release of a mobile app facilitated the reporting of sightings. However, he cautioned that the need for sufficient information to validate records seems to deter some people from using the app. He also cautioned that apps need to be updated regularly to remain available in app stores and suggested progressive web applications are better suited, also because their maintenance is ultimately less costly than that of an app.

Participants reflected on the role of the COVID-19 pandemic in bringing about more wildlife sighting reports; limitations with regard to validating group size, as these are generally reported in fairly large estimated ranges; and the role of social media and citizen science in sightings reporting.

In terms of future work, Mr Berrow pointed to a new EU Horizon project on the use of passive acoustics to monitor cetaceans and underwater noise levels.

Co-Chair Murphy [complemented](#) the report on Ireland, pointing to, among others:

- a paper by Fariñas-Bermejo et al. (2023)<sup>1</sup>, which used data from the annual Celtic Sea Herring Acoustic Survey and found the presence of common dolphins to be related to depth, while their abundance was related to sea surface temperatures and herring density;
- the histological examination and protein analysis of the adrenal glands of stranded carcasses, which showed that chronically stressed dolphins have higher cortex-medulla ratios and present hypertrophy in the adrenal cortex;
- ongoing research on the impacts of anthropogenic activities and environmental change on the foraging ecology and nutritional status of the common dolphin based on assessments of body condition, nutritional stress indicators, prey-DNA in stomach contents, and cortisol levels in the blubber; and
- a study on the diet of common dolphins that stranded during the 2017-2019 period, which showed that sexually immature common dolphins were observed to consume significantly more *gobiidae spp.*

In terms of future work she highlighted:

- a Horizon Europe funded project focused on the monitoring and elimination of bycatch of endangered and conserved species in the northeast and high seas Atlantic region (Marine Beacon), which will run from January 2024 to June 2028. The project is coordinated by the Irish Marine Institute. The Atlantic Technological University (ATU), one of 21 project partners, will further develop best practice guidelines for bycatch monitoring of PETS and undertake an environmental impact assessment on the use of pingers 'en masse', which will feed into establishing a framework for their use in mitigation devices. Marine Beacon also includes next generation monitoring of bycatch in protected, endangered, and threatened species through artificial intelligence and molecular approaches.

## Portugal

Catarina Eira (University of Aveiro, Portugal) [shared insights](#) from the northern part of Portugal, noting that the monthly distribution of strandings of common dolphins was unusually high in July and August 2023, whereas it usually was highest in the first trimester of the year, and that there were also more adults stranded in summer. She pointed to some atypical environmental conditions in

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/marine-science/articles/10.3389/fmars.2023.1033758/full>

2023, including uncharacteristic sea surface temperatures, emphasizing the need to consider data for 2024 to assess trends.

Ms Eira said the causes of strandings were mostly incidental captures. Where such assessment was possible, examination of carcasses showed that most animals died due to entanglement in gillnets and trammel nets. She emphasized there is normally a high density of fishing operations in the region, especially near to the coast.

She noted the preliminary abundance estimate from aerial surveys in September 2023 indicated a higher abundance of common dolphins in the coastal area, compared to 2011-2015 estimates.

Ana Marçalo (University of Algarve, Portugal) noted that in the south of Portugal there were less strandings of common dolphins compared to ten years ago. She suggested climate change might play a role in this, possibly leading to a northward shift of the species. Incidental capture also was the main cause of death in the region, mostly related to interactions with bottom-set nets from small-scale artisanal polyvalent fisheries. Ms Marçalo said that the seasonal increase in mortality in the summer months was also related to the purse seine sardine fishery.

Marina Sequeira (Institute for Nature Conservation and Forests, Portugal) shared that the central area of the country also recorded a higher number of common dolphin strandings compared to previous years, most of which showed clear signs of being bycaught such as in the form of amputated tails.

## Spain

Graham Pierce (Institute of Marine Research, Spain) corroborated the impression that there is an unusual large number of strandings, citing local news reports. He [recalled](#) the government established a national plan for reducing accidentally bycatch in 2022, which aims to:

- monitor the status of cetaceans, birds, and sea turtles in both Spanish and nearby international waters;
- gather information on fleets which are currently not well assessed, especially tracking fleets displaying a high bycatch risk;
- foster participatory processes with the fishing sector, communities, civil society, and academia to identify the problems, objectives, and potential measures to reduce interactions;
- pilot mitigation measure fleets with high bycatch risk; and
- develop plans for the release of live animals that were bycaught.

The plan also foresees the creation of a joint working group to enhance coordination between ministries. The overall objective is to prepare legislation to foster the implementation of the measures developed in the context of the national plan.

He pointed to upcoming projects related to:

- bycatch in northwest Africa with a component in Macaronesia and the Iberian Peninsula;
- monitoring health indices using methods such as eDNA, microbiome and hormone analysis, and photogrammetry;
- digestive track parasites, also with a view to consider potential effects on human health; and
- developing routine PCB concentration recording in stranded dolphins.

Echoing colleagues from France and the UK, he noted fishers seem to be reluctant to land carcasses, which limits the effectiveness of projects trying to establish a profile of bycaught animals.

Mr Pierce highlighted that national funding is now available to support stranding networks that previously had to rely on regional-level funding, which was at times insecure. The national funding scheme also foresees coordination support through the national oceanographic institute.

### 3. Updates on legislation pertinent to the common dolphin

#### European Commission

Alice Belin (European Commission) [presented](#) the EU action plan protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries<sup>2</sup> (for short: marine action plan) adopted in February 2023. She noted it is intended to support the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, and the Global Biodiversity Framework, among others.

The action plan defines a number of concrete actions to be carried out by the Commission and Member States by specific deadlines. These aim to: improve gear selectivity and limit the bycatch of sensitive species; reduce the impact of mobile bottom fishing on the seabed; support fishers in the transition to lower impact fishing; and foster research and innovation. By March 2024, Member States are supposed to develop roadmaps for the national implementation of the action plan. The Commission is convening meetings with the fisheries and environmental authorities of coastal Member States and stakeholders to support the implementation of the action plan.

The MSFD, adopted in 2017, already specified that Member States shall establish threshold values for the mortality rate from incidental bycatch per species (criterion D1C1) through regional or sub-regional cooperation by 2018 or as soon as possible thereafter. The action plan now calls on Member States to finalize this work, which is essential to ensure the effectiveness of the MSFD as a whole. It foresees a staged approach for threshold setting on:

- common dolphins, harbour porpoise, and grey seals in 2023;
- a number of other priority species, such as angel sharks and sturgeons, in 2024; and
- all remaining sensitive marine species in 2030.

The Commission set up a process in 2023 to support Member States and regional seas conventions in the development and adoption of these threshold values. Once there is agreement on regional level, Member States have to use the agreed threshold in their own determination of good environmental status. Reports due in October 2024 will provide an overview of where the process stands.

Ms Belin also pointed to an [“Article 8 assessment guidance document,”](#) which provides recommendations on integration rules for the biodiversity descriptor of the MFSD. It for example clarifies that an ecosystem component cannot be considered to be in good status if one or more of its species groups are not in good status.

Participants reflected on challenges related to population structure and data gaps on species beyond those at highest risk of bycatch. Discussions also highlighted the importance of moving ahead with protection measures to reduce bycatch in parallel to the scientific work on threshold definition, also considering that threshold values will be reviewed in light of scientific advances.

#### UK

Ms Taylor provided an [overview](#) of legislative updates from the UK, pointing to:

- the Fisheries Act adopted in 2020;
- the Environment Act adopted in 2021 for England, with operational targets updated to reflect previous assessment outcomes and indicators informed by work under OSPAR;
- the Bycatch Mitigation Initiative adopted in 2022;
- the ongoing development of a cetacean strategy, which should be published in 2024; and
- the conduct of the UK Habitat Regulations assessments, which intends to largely mirror reporting requirements of the EU Habitats Directive to allow for collective assessments of progress.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_23\\_832](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_832)



Ms Taylor emphasized the value of coordination on updated assessment methodologies for Habitat Directive assessments, including to allow for transboundary assessments for common dolphins.

#### 4. Updates from other meetings on relevant intergovernmental work

##### 4.1. OSPAR QSR 2023 Marine Mammals Thematic Assessment

Debbie Hembury (OSPAR Secretariat) [highlighted](#) the 2030 North East Atlantic Environment Strategy adopted in 2021, which includes an operational objective on minimizing and, where possible, eliminating incidental bycatch of marine mammals, birds, turtles, and fish.

She pointed to regular assessments published by OSPAR, including the recent 2023 quality status report<sup>3</sup>, which provide a health check for the marine environment in the North-East Atlantic and the human activities that affect it. She noted some products, such as datasets and indicator assessments, are geared towards experts and technical administrations whereas others, such as the thematic assessments, are aimed to inform policymakers and the general public.

In terms of new developments, Ms Hembury pointed to two candidate indicators on marine mammal bycatch in Arctic waters and on persistent chemicals in marine mammals. She also noted the OSPAR M6 indicator on marine mammal bycatch corresponds to the MSFD D1C1 criterion and OSPAR M4 on abundance and distribution of cetaceans corresponds to MSFD D1C2 and D1C4<sup>4</sup>. Ms Hembury further discussed the integration methods for marine mammal indicators. For the 2023 OSPAR marine mammal thematic assessment, the status of small cetaceans and seals was reported as not good, while for other marine mammals it remained unknown.

In terms of future work, she highlighted, among others:

- the next OSPAR assessment planned for 2028-29, with the aim to feed into the next MSFD assessment;
- promoting the use of the candidate indicator on persistent chemicals;
- expanding the M6 bycatch indicator to the Arctic region;
- exploring data availability in the wider Atlantic region;
- developing a regional action plan on noise by 2025; and
- developing spatial approaches to cumulative impacts.

Participants emphasized the value of exchanges between OSPAR and ASCOBANS on harbour porpoises and common dolphins.

##### 4.2. ICES WGMME

Peter Evans reported on the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) Working Group on Marine Mammal Ecology (WGMME) meeting that took place in early 2023. He said it mainly focused on reviewing new information on seals and cetaceans on the northeast Atlantic and that the meeting report contains useful summaries of recent publications on the matter.

The Working Group is meeting again in February 2024. In addition to the standing items related to review of information, it aims to provide input to the methodological approaches proposed by the ICES Working Group on Bycatch of Protected Species (WGBYC) regarding the Bycatch Evaluation and Assessment Matrix (BEAM) and qualitative bycatch risk estimation for data-poor species. The meeting will also serve to review stranding records by species and country.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://oap.ospar.org/en/ospar-assessments/quality-status-reports/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://oap.ospar.org/en/ospar-assessments/quality-status-reports/qsr-2023/thematic-assessments/marine-mammals/>



### 4.3. ICES WGBYC

Allen Kingston (University of St Andrews, UK) provided an update from WGBYC, focusing on the provision of bycatch rate estimates for species on the EU's marine action plan's priority list. He highlighted all these species are data-limited, but to varying degrees.

He explained that the group developed BEAM as a screening process to identify species/area/gear-combinations for which the data is deemed to be reliable enough to produce quantitative mortality assessments and judge population impacts. He noted that the BEAM procedure was used for the first time in 2023 to filter which estimates would make it into the ICES advice and that it will be further refined in 2024. Essentially, it is a screening procedure to produce robust estimates for "less data limited cases," he highlighted, underscoring the challenge to generate reference points for abundance estimates for some species, especially non-air breathing taxa.

He highlighted that the group also reflected on how to deal with cases of even greater data limitation, specifically to assess the types of fishing gears and activities posing the greatest risk for high priority species for which bycatch rates and associated markers of sustainability are unavailable. For this, the group proposed a two-staged approach: collecting all relevant background information in a metadata table and, based on this, preparing risk estimation matrices to summarize and visualize information on potential risks. This would offer qualitative estimates for the most data-poor cases. The group plans to start using this approach with an initial focus on those species on the EU marine action plan's priority list that are not dealt with by BEAM.

He also pointed to workshops on appropriate sampling schemes for protected endangered and threatened species bycatch (WKPETSAMP), which reflected on how sampling designs and coverage influence bias and precision in bycatch rate estimation.

### 4.4. ICES WKEMBYC2

Ailbhe Kavanagh (Marine Institute, Ireland) [highlighted](#) that in the Bay of Biscay there was an increasing trend in common dolphin bycatch estimates derived using strandings data, with 9,040 dolphins estimated bycaught annually for years 2019-2021, compared to 6,660 dolphins annually for years 2016-2018.

She recalled that in July 2019 a group of NGOs requested emergency measures to address the bycatch of common dolphins in the Bay of Biscay. This prompted a response by the European Commission and Member States and the conduct of two ICES workshops on mitigation measures to reduce bycatch of short-beaked common dolphins in the Bay of Biscay (WKEMBYC). The first WKEMBYC held in April 2020 and by correspondence, thereafter, found that bycatch estimates were above the proposed threshold level and explored different bycatch mitigation reduction scenarios, which was taken up in ICES advice in May 2020. The proposed anthropogenic mortality threshold was based on the US potential biological removal (PBR) algorithm, which allows a population to be maintained at or above 50% of carrying capacity, 95% of the time within a 100-year time horizon.

Ms Kavanagh noted that ICES released advice in January and June 2023 after WKEMBYC2 considered updated bycatch data and reassessed scenarios. Discussions at WKEMBYC2 showcased that:

- none of the examined scenarios achieve a level of bycatch that would ensure the viability of the population is maintained based on the bycatch estimate derived from strandings data (i.e. the bycatch estimate was above the PBR threshold). achieving a bycatch reduction below 75% of PBR for the mortality estimate derived from at-sea sampling requires a 4-month closure in winter or 3+1 month in summer for métiers at risk, as well as pingers on those specified métiers the rest of the year, as had been suggested in the first workshop; and
- spatial temporal closure measures could be revisited or relaxed if specific fleets were able to demonstrate that they are dolphin-safe.

It also recommended:

- providing funding for fishers to transition to alternative fishing practices and conducting mitigation trials in various métiers;
- adequate monitoring through dedicated observers or incentivized use of REM, with representative coverage of the relevant métiers and vessel sizes and at-sea controls to check whether pingers are adequately deployed and in working order;
- developing bycatch estimate methodology to use on what currently are unequal and non-representative sampling schemes of at-sea monitoring programmes and improving reporting on elements such as net length and duration of soaking; and
- supporting stranding networks along the French coastline;
- conducting more large-scale surveys to estimate the abundance of common dolphins more frequently than the current decadal interval of the SCANS survey; and
- conducting regional scale abundance surveys on a seasonal basis.

Participants noted the need to also consider the mitigation of bycatch in the Iberian Peninsula.

Ursula Krampe (European Commission) noted that the southwestern waters high-level group had submitted in October 2023 a revised joint recommendation (JR) 'aiming to reduce small cetaceans accidental catches in the Bay of Biscay'. The JR focused on the employment of mitigation measures (i.e. pingers) and increased bycatch monitoring through both observer and REM programmes, as well as a fishery closure period of 30 days within French EEZ in ICES subarea 8. Though the closure was not mandatory if vessels were equipped with technical mitigation devices or on-board cameras.

The European Commission's Scientific, Technical, and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) reported that the JR was unlikely to minimise bycatch, and will not eliminate bycatch. STECF further recalled that for the time-area closure to be effective, it would need to span the peak period of bycatch, and not be made options.

France then proposed national emergency measures under Article 13 of the Common Fisheries Policy, which would entail the unconditional closure of its waters in the Bay of Biscay from 22nd January to 20 February. The Committee's preliminary perspective is that this would be a meaningful way forward. Consultations are ongoing with Member States.

#### **4.5. ASCOBANS Conservation Objective workshops**

Peter Evans reported on the work on ASCOBANS conservation objectives in relation to anthropogenic removals. He shared updates from two dedicated workshops held in April and May 2023, noting these served to discuss the concept of carrying capacity and approaches for defining it.

The workshops aimed to:

- review the appropriateness of current ASCOBANS conservation objectives;
- evaluate the ASCOBANS intermediate precautionary aim, which is to:
  - reduce bycatch to less than 1% of the best available population estimate;
  - consider total anthropogenic removal above 1.7% unacceptable for harbour porpoise;
  - consider an anthropogenic removal of much less than 1.7% an unacceptable interaction if available evidence suggests that a population is severely reduced, or in the case of species other than the harbour porpoise, or where there is significant uncertainty in parameters such as population size or bycatch levels; and
- evaluate a management framework procedure.

He noted the workshops resulted in the decision to retain the ASCOBANS conservation objective to restore and/or maintain biological populations at or above 80% of carrying capacity. Discussions ensured with regard the time horizon to achieve this objective, as well the probability (i.e. percentage of the time achieved).

Mr Evans said that workshop participants noted the need to justify the lower bound of carrying capacity that is considered acceptable (i.e. 80%) to ensure it is not viewed as an arbitrary value. They also said there should be more than one option for an appropriate time horizon (e.g. 20 years, 100 years), and further noted that the probability value options of 80% vs. 95% would be worth considering. They further considered that the conservation objective needed to be at least as stringent as was required by the US Marine Mammal Protection Act, particularly because of US MMPA import provisions for fisheries. They emphasized the value of using a range of tools to inform the process, such as the potential biological removal approach, population viability analysis, and removals limit algorithm, where appropriate depending on the availability of data.

He reported that participants also agreed on discarding the bycatch limits 1% and 1.7% fixed percentages of best available abundance. They noted these: do not account for uncertainty in parameters such as the population size, or maximum net productivity level; are very sensitive to assumptions made; and are not precautionary

Mr Evans said they further recommended the potential biological removal approach for general use, but modified from what is used in the US to align with the European conservation ambition, with other approaches recommended where data allows it.

He noted there was disagreement over whether the time horizon considered should be 20 or 100 years and whether the probability of achievement should be 95% or 80%. Participants recommended further modelling work to inform these discussions. He presented initial insights from this work, which indicate:

Responding to questions, Mr Evans clarified the recommendation is to operate on a case-by-case basis taking into account the actual population and using the modified potential biological removal approach rather than applying the 1% and 1.7% fixed percentages. He noted the approach works for a lot of species, including those on which there are less data, as long as there is an abundance estimate with uncertainty, and an estimate of anthropogenic mortality. It was further suggested that the time horizon and probability operate on a case-by-case basis, depending on the conservation status of the species. Participants also reflected on the possibility of reconstructing species' history to take a longer-term perspective on the notion of good environmental state.

#### **4.6. Draft French Action Plan to reduce common dolphin bycatch in the Bay of Biscay**

Hélène Peltier (La Rochelle University, France) provided an [update](#) on France's development of an action plan on common dolphin bycatch in the Bay of Biscay that was launched after the 2019 call for emergency measures by a group of NGOs.

The December 2022 version of the action plan foresaw, among others:

- large scale mitigation trials to be conducted in winter 2024 focussing on three devices: pingers on vessel hulls activated during the setting of nets, interactive acoustic devices, and reflectors on nets;
- 100 vessels with set-anchored gillnets, trammel nets, and combined gillnet-trammel nets to be equipped with REMs;
- vessel monitoring systems (VMS) mandatory for all vessels; and
- mandatory involvement in an observer programme for all mid-water patrollers and netters above 15 meters.

The French Council of State considered the proposed measures to be insufficient and ordered the Government to take appropriate measures to close fishing within six months, in addition to installing acoustic deterrent devices. Intense protests by fishers ensued.

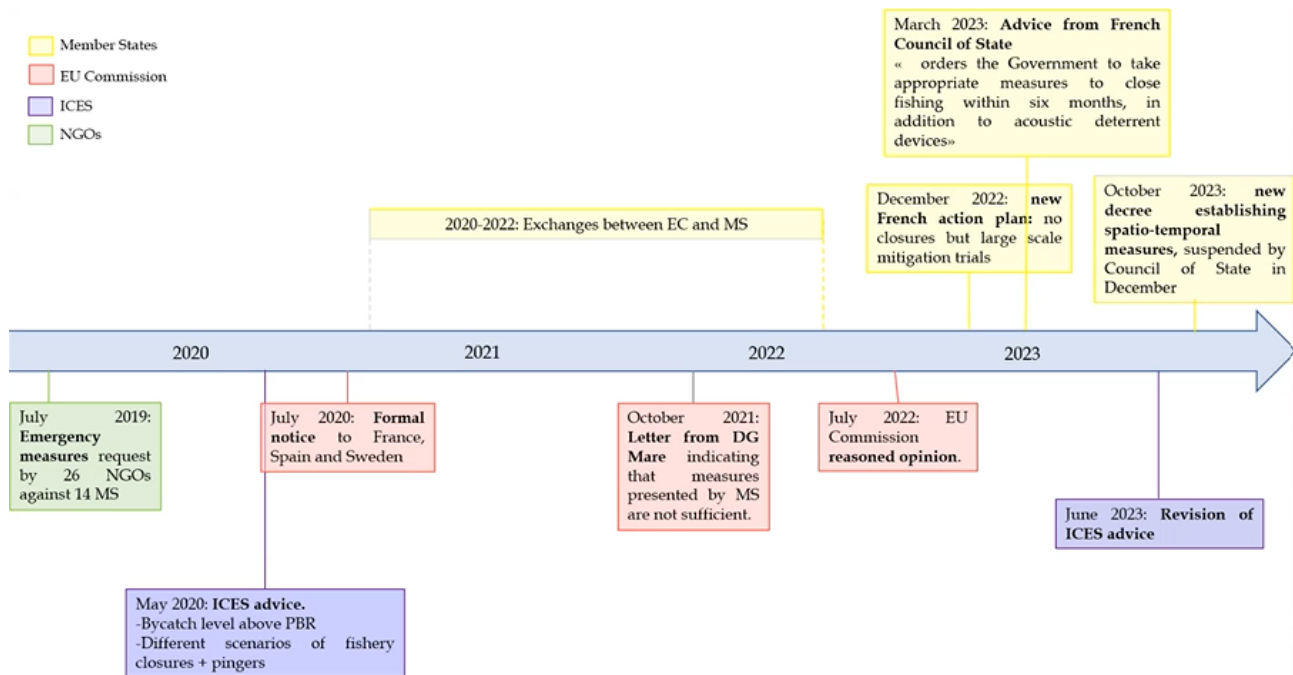


Figure 1: A slide from the presentation by H el ene Peltier.

In response to the ICES 2020 advice, Commission opinion, and ruling by the French Council of State, the action plan was revised in March 2023. The revised action plan foresees:

- establishing spatial-temporal measures for the reduction of bycatch of small cetaceans in the Bay Biscay for the years 2024, 2025, and 2026, specifically banning vessels above 8 meters operating with midwater otter trawls, midwater pair trawls, bottom pair trawls, gillnets, and trammel nets between January 22 and February 20;
- exempting vessels equipped with active technical devices to reduce bycatch or cameras on board from the ban in 2024;
- the possible use of 12 different mitigation devices, including pingers, reflectors, cetacean excluder devices, and REMs;
- mandatory VMS for all vessels; and
- mandatory involvement in an observer programme for all mid-water patrollers and netters above 15 meters.

Ms Peltier delineated various exemption provisions. She notably highlighted that ships that have undertaken to be equipped but cannot be effectively equipped before 15 January 2024 are subject to a shorter, intermittent ban in 2024.

## SUMMARY

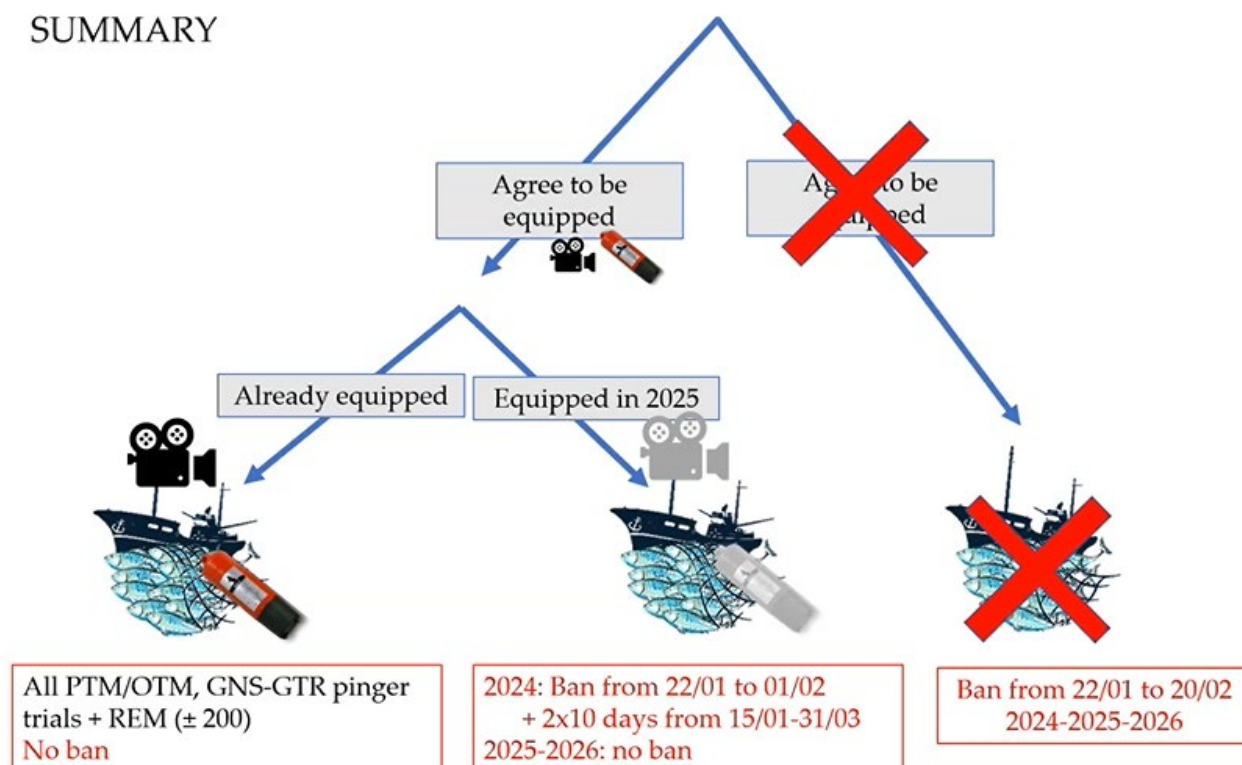


Figure 2: A slide from Ms Peltier's presentation on the second version of the French action plan.

Ms Peltier highlighted that scientists criticised the revised plan, especially for:

- employment of mitigation equipment on a voluntary basis only;
- lacking efficiency tests for the devices, with many of the listed devices being inefficient/unavailable (such as the reflectors and cetacean excluder devices);
- lacking a bycatch reduction target;
- the large number of exemptions and lack of dedicated control, which will limit the enforcement of the closure;
- having only 10 days of simultaneous closure for vessels who are in the process of being equipped in 2024; and
- not being based on any ICES scenario.

In December 2023, the Council of State considered the proposed derogations too insufficient to reduce bycatch to a sustainable level in 2024 and noted that the pelagic seine was not included in the list of prohibited nets, despite WKEMBYC2 findings that it is of high bycatch risk. For these reasons, the Council of State suspended part of the revised order and restored the December 2022 version. The French Government now has to revise the proposed action plan a second time.

Participants raised doubts about the practical feasibility and effectiveness of technical solutions, such as installing pingers at a meaningful distance on very long nets, underscoring the importance of spatio-temporal closures and the general use of more selective gear.

## 5. Bycatch

### 5.1. Results from the CetAMBICion project

Mr Pierce shared insights from the “Coordinated Cetacean Assessment, Monitoring, and Management Strategy in the Bay of Biscay and Iberian Coast Sub-Region”-project<sup>5</sup>.

Key outputs of the project include:

- a review of the MSFD second cycle reports, which showed that common dolphins were not found to be in good environmental status in Portugal, northern Spain, and France, with status unknown in southern Spain;
- a spatial bycatch risk assessment that showed that the border between France and Spain is of high risk for bycatch from bottom otter trawlers, bottom pair trawlers, and gillnets, with gillnets also being high risk in the north-western coast of Spain;
- mitigation trials that demonstrated that the application of dolphin deterrent device-pingers deployed when purse seine nets are set is very effective in reducing cetacean bycatch; and
- proposals for increased coordination between France, Spain, and Portugal.

### 5.2. Update on activities of CIBBRiNA LIFE project

Mr Pierce presented an overview of the project which aims to foster collaboration between scientists, fishers, government authorities, and other stakeholders to minimize bycatch of endangered, threatened, and protected species in the North-East Atlantic, Baltic, and Mediterranean. The focus is on high-risk fisheries, including gillnets, long lines, and bottom and pelagic trawls. The project’s kick-off meeting took place in September 2023.

The project aims to:

- improve estimates of fishing effort;
- improve bycatch monitoring, including by improving the quality of strandings data; and
- foster support from all stakeholders by assessing and addressing the socio-economic implications of proposed measures.

Participants reflected on challenges relating to engaging fishers in such projects.

### 5.3. Update on the Marine Beacon Horizon project

Julia Calderwood (Marine Institute, Ireland) presented an overview of the Marine Beacon project<sup>6</sup>, which focuses on monitoring and eliminating the bycatch of endangered and conserved species in the northeast Atlantic and was launched in January 2024.

The project aims to, among others:

- improve knowledge on the abundance and distribution of species by consolidating existing data across countries and regions and using sophisticated modelling techniques;
- foster bycatch monitoring through artificial intelligence and molecular approaches;
- explore the use of cameras on nets to foster live release;
- foster post-release survival through developing better handling practices; and
- determine how best to engage consumers.

Participants reflected on opportunities for coordination between the CIBBRiNA LIFE project, the Marine Beacon Horizon project, and others doing similar work to avoid duplication of efforts. It was suggested to maximize collaboration through, for example, joint seminars.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cetambicion-project.eu/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://marinebeacon.eu/>



#### 5.4. Bycatch mitigation trials in Portuguese fisheries

Ms Marçalo noted that about 2,900 boats are licenced to operate in Portugal's mainland Atlantic waters, most of which are under 9 meters long and operate near the coast. She highlighted that since 2022 there are regional stranding networks in place along the entire coastline.

She said the gears of highest concern for common dolphin bycatch are bottom-set nets, which are used year-round; purse seine nets used year-round, but with higher bycatch risk seasonally during summer months when targeting sardine along the whole coast; and beach seine nets used seasonally but with increased fishing effort in summer months along the north/central western coast area.

Mitigation trials showed:

- PAST:
  - good results for bycatch reduction of common dolphins and harbour porpoise through the use of Fumunda (10 and 70 KhZ) pingers on set nets, purse seine nets, and beach seine nets along the north-western coast;
  - no reduction of common dolphin bycatch from Fumunda (10 and 70 KhZ) pingers installed on set nets and purse seine nets in the Algarve;
  - lack of effectiveness of FishTeck Banana pingers on set nets for bottlenose dolphin depredation reduction in the Algarve;
- PRESENT:
  - a 100% reduction in common dolphin bycatch risk through the use of one DDD alarm on purse seine nets, with the alarm kept in the water until hauling starts; and
  - catch per unit effort being higher when using DDDs both on set nets and purse sein nets.

Ms Janiak said the EC was looking into how to work better with countries, scientists and fisheries regarding monitoring of bycatch. The fisheries control regulation<sup>7</sup> had been revised in December 2023. Ms Marçalo noted that the ICES WGBYC database is not uniform, and that 90% of the Portuguese data comes from strandings networks and dedicated projects, not from DCF. said that a national Portuguese working group was created in November 2023 to develop an action plan to reduce bycatch of cetaceans, seabirds, and sea turtles.

Participants emphasized the importance of strengthening observer programmes, noting challenges for implementing this in fleets largely constituted by small vessels and highlighting the importance of good collaboration between scientists and the fishing community, and the importance to improve, the best one can, the bycatch data collection and estimating fishing effort.

It was debated what the current Portuguese legislation foresees in terms of landing bycaught animals. Ms Marçalo highlighted that fishers can be sanctioned for having cetaceans on board and a specific permit would be needed for landing them, which is why fishers typically throw bycatch overboard. Ms Eira considered that while fishers are not allowed to sell bycaught cetaceans, they are allowed to land them for research purposes. Ms Sequeira said that "capture" is illegal, but suggested that incidental bycatch is not to be considered as falling under "capture." All agreed that resources would be insufficient anyway to keep up with the number of bycaught animals should these be landed in higher numbers.

It was noted that Article 11 of the Technical Measures Regulation 2019/1241 stipulates in section 1 that the onboarding and offloading of marine mammals and reptiles is prohibited. However, in section 3, it allows vessels to onboard and offload these species if incidentally captured animals are intended for scientific studies, provided that national authorities are notified beforehand and immediately. Understanding this requires direct involvement with fishermen, including involvement with research

<sup>7</sup> [Regulation \(EU\) 2023/2842 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 November 2023 amending Council Regulation \(EC\) No 1224/2009, and amending Council Regulations \(EC\) No 1967/2006 and \(EC\) No 1005/2008 and Regulations \(EU\) 2016/1139, \(EU\) 2017/2403 and \(EU\) 2019/473 of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards fisheries control](#)



projects, as fishers tend to assume that the animals are protected, and potential sanctions may apply if they are found on board.”

## 6. Surveys

### 6.1. Results from SCANS-IV

Matthieu Authier (La Rochelle University, France) noted SCANS-IV was a survey covering shelf and offshore waters of the European Atlantic, funded by Sweden, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, France, Spain, and Portugal. It was the fourth edition of a survey effort started in 1994 with the aim to estimate the abundance and trends of the regularly occurring cetacean species and which supports Member States’ reporting under the MSFD, the Habitat Directive, and for OSPAR/HELCOM assessments. It also supports impact assessments of offshore industries and fisheries. He highlighted the objective to have future SCANS-surveys conducted in 6-year cycles.

He recalled that SCANS-I focused on the North Sea and part of the Celtic Seas and harbour porpoises, whereas SCANS-II in 2005 expanded coverage in the Celtic Seas, and SCANS-III in 2016 further extended the area covered from Norway to Portugal.

SCANS-IV, which expanded coverage into Portugal’s offshore waters, took place in summer 2022. It combined aerial surveys with 8 planes and a shipboard survey covering primarily offshore waters. The aim was to cover 1.7 million of square kilometres. He said the survey resulted in good overall coverage, albeit with some gaps west of the Hebrides and in the northern North Sea, patchy coverage in the offshore area of the Bay of Biscay, and no coverage of the offshore western block around Scotland due to weather-related challenges.

Highlights of the survey included:

- common dolphin occurrence increased in the northern region of the Celtic Sea as well as in waters off the southwest of the UK and in the western part of the English Channel, suggesting that the population may be expanding further north;
- high density of common dolphins around the Iberian coast, off Brittany, and in the northern part of the Bay of Biscay;
- the distribution of common dolphins seems to be strongly concentrated in shelf waters;
- that abundance estimates in the wider area of the European Atlantic did not vary much compared to previous survey editions, but this needs to be confirmed through data from ObSERVE2; and
- findings related to other cetacean species, such as pinnipeds, turtles, sharks, sunfish, and tuna, as well as anthropogenic activities.

Mr Authier said that survey data has already been validated and the first abundance estimate by conventional distance sampling had been produced<sup>8</sup>. Model-based estimates of abundance and drivers of distribution are underway. The final report is expected to be published in autumn 2024.

The next edition of the survey is planned for 2028. Mr Authier noted that project coordination has become more challenging, especially with regard to the provision of funding from the different supporting governments. He emphasized the need for coordination with ObSERVE surveys in Irish EEZ waters to ensure consistency and said that data collection outside the summer season would be useful.

Responding to questions, he clarified:

- the initial objective was to conduct SCANS-IV in 2021 to use the data for the OSPAR Quality Status Report and reporting under the MSFD, but this was impeded due to funding challenges;

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.tiho-hannover.de/fileadmin/57\\_79\\_terr\\_aqua\\_Wildtierforschung/79\\_Buesum/downloads/Berichte/20230928\\_SCANS-IV\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.tiho-hannover.de/fileadmin/57_79_terr_aqua_Wildtierforschung/79_Buesum/downloads/Berichte/20230928_SCANS-IV_Report_FINAL.pdf)

- there is no information as of yet with regard to funding for SCANS-V; and
- the value of confirming the relative importance of inshore waters compared to offshore areas in terms of dolphin concentration.

Ms Murphy noted that while SCANS IV was reporting a northwards expansion in main distribution of the common dolphin since SCANS III, its needs to be borne in mind that this species has shown long term distributional shifts in the past<sup>9</sup>. Notably, Astarloa et al. (2021) reported a southern shift in their 'geographic center of gravity' in the Bay of Biscay, from the outer (northwest) to the inner (southeast) part of the Bay of Biscay using sightings data collected between 1994 to 2018 by Waggitt et al. (2020).

## 6.2. Results from ObSERVE2

Emer Rogan (University College Cork, Ireland) recalled that the first ObSERVE aerial and acoustic surveys of Irish EEZ water were undertaken in 2015 and 2016. This was a project funded by the Irish Government, originally against the backdrop of oil and gas exploration. It showed few sightings of common dolphins during July 2016. ObSERVE2 consisted of three aerial surveys conducted in summer 2021, summer 2022, and winter 2022-2023, which showed, among others:

- a very significant increase in common dolphin sightings compared to the first edition;
- very few sightings of common dolphins in the Irish Sea;
- quite a lot of sightings in the deeper offshore waters during the summer surveys, but most of them were on the continental shelf;
- lower sightings in the winter compared to the summer and considerably fewer sightings in the very deep water, with most sightings in the continental shelf area; and
- dolphin movements into the very inshore coastal area in autumn, including into bays and rivers.

Participants reflected on how data from ObSERVE2 would complement SCANS-IV, highlighting a significant increase in the abundance estimate for common dolphins in the northeast Atlantic since 2016.

## 6.3. Update from France on current work regarding aerial survey monitoring

Marion Pillet (La Rochelle University, France) [shared insights](#) from the CAPECET 2023 aerial surveys for megafauna, which took place in the Bay of Biscay in the winters 2020 and 2023, with another survey planned for winter 2024. A comparison of data from 2020 and 2023 showed:

- higher encounter rates in 2023 compared to 2020;
- dolphins found closer to the coast;
- higher density in 2023, both for dolphins and other species such as harbour porpoise;
- a density peak in mid-February in 2023 compared to mid-March in 2020; and
- higher density of dead dolphins in 2023.

In addition, regarding habitats evolution, Ms Pillet noted that the sea temperature had increased, especially in coastal regions, and nitrogen flow and phytoplankton production had decreased. During winter season 2023, dolphins' preys were detected at the bottom of the water column.

Pointing to STORMM estimates, she noted that dolphins found in the south Celtic Sea and the coastal part of the Bay of Biscay were mostly common dolphins, while those in oceanic areas are mostly striped dolphins. Participants reflected on using STORMM estimates to correct previous surveys, especially considering the appropriateness of retrospectively applying a correction factor amid possible shifts in distribution.

<sup>9</sup> Murphy et al 2021, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/aqc.3212>

Ms Pillet also indicated that the northern continental shelf of the Bay of Biscay was submitted as candidate for recognition as important marine mammal area with regard to the winter aggregation of common dolphins and harbour porpoise.

#### **6.4. Exploring environmental and biological drivers of cetacean occurrence in the crossborder region of the Malin Shelf using data from a European fishery survey**

Morgane Pommier (Atlantic Technological University, Ireland) presented insights from her research<sup>10</sup>, which showed, among others:

- common dolphins tended to occur not too far from the ocean front, with a peak in the probability of occurrence around 15 km from ocean fronts;
- more sightings over fine substrate types such as muddy sands; and
- no relationship between the probability of finding common dolphins and the herring/horse mackerel density.

To account for the overall rarity of common dolphin sightings, she focused on assessing habitat suitability rather than probability of occurrence.

### **7. Anthropogenic sound**

Giulia Spadoni (University of Algarve, Portugal) [presented](#) research on the impacts of seismic surveys on common dolphins in the south-western coast of Portugal. She noted that seismic surveys are used to study the bottom properties of the ocean for oil and gas exploration or for installing offshore wind farms. The study showed, among others:

- bathymetry plays a key role in noise propagation;
- seasonal differences in noise spread, with a larger spread in the winter testing month compared to the summer month; and
- the importance of considering habitat suitability and other data related to species distribution before starting seismic campaigns to mitigate risk.

She pointed to upcoming work on assessing the impacts of shipping noise.

### **8. Update on any hazardous substances, causes of mortality, health status, nutritional status, diet or life history analysis on the common dolphin**

#### **8.1. Update on DELMOGES project**

Marion Pillet [presented](#) insights from the DELMOGES project which aims to enhance understanding of bycatch mechanisms for common dolphins in the Bay of Biscay. She noted it provided insights on the spatial distribution of common dolphin populations in the Bay, their fine-scale winter movements, and their feeding ecology. It also showed, among others:

- individuals present a high genetic diversity, as evidenced through biopsies and eDNA analysis;
- a decrease in the PFAS contamination of biopsied tissue, with maximum concentrations observed in 2005 and continued decrease since then;
- an increase in sea surface temperature in coastal areas from 2000-2020;
- a decrease in nitrogen and phytoplankton flow in winter in coastal waters;
- detection on an unexpected very dense schools of small pelagic fish at the bottom of the water column in the coastal zone, in winter 2023; and
- higher risk of capture at less than 100m depth, with lower and more dispersed risk between 100m and the edge of the continental shelf.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/marine-science/articles/10.3389/fmars.2023.1224267/full>

## 8.2. Interelemental relationships and effects of age-maturity and health status on trace element concentrations in common dolphins in Irish waters

Co-Chair Murphy presented insights from yet-to-be-published research<sup>11</sup> on chemical pollutants found in common dolphins, such as PCBs, PFAS, mercury, and cadmium. The study highlights, among others:

- age and/or body length are strongly correlated with elements that bioaccumulate as well as the essential trace elements selenium and vanadium;
- strong inter-elemental relations between selenium and mercury, selenium and methyl mercury, selenium and cadmium, and copper and zinc, respectively;
- significantly higher zinc concentrations measured in individuals that died from infectious disease compared those that died due to physical trauma and other causes;
- potential differences in the capacity to metabolize mercury between juveniles and older individuals; and
- the need to devise guidelines for toxicity thresholds for marine mammals.

## 8.3. Update on PhD 'Impacts of anthropogenic activities and environmental change on the foraging ecology and nutritional status of common dolphin and its implications towards sustainable resource management'

Sofia Albrecht (Atlantic Technological University, Ireland) [presented](#) insights from research on common dolphins' nutritional status indicators, noting that compared to historical data from both Ireland and the UK, Irish contemporary data displays:

- a larger proportion of moderate and poor to very poor body conditions;
- a much larger proportion of animals that died from infectious disease and starvation;
- a decline in ventral blubber thickness, which was confirmed to be the most important indicator for nutritional status; and
- seasonal differences in ventral blubber thickness.

## 9. Updates on other relevant work

### 9.1. Discussion on the development of a strategic bycatch reduction plan

Co-Chair Murphy highlighted that the European Commission's Scientific, Technical, and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN cautioned that:

- plans often lack specificity as to pinger types;
- REM is not an avoidance strategy; and
- a long-term population-level plan is needed that focuses on all waters of the common dolphin distributional range, not just the Bay of Biscay, and which has a holistic approach that goes beyond addressing bycatch.

As next steps towards possibly developing such holistic guidance on common dolphins, she suggested:

- reviewing the US approach, especially the marine mammal take reduction plans;
- reviewing ICES WKPETSAMP2 and WKPETSAMP3 reports, and the ICES advice prepared in response to a special request from the Commission on appropriate bycatch monitoring systems at Member State level and for regional coordination, which is to be published in spring 2024;
- reconsidering the boundaries of the ASCOBANS management unit;
- reviewing national and common thresholds currently in use;

<sup>11</sup> Since the meeting, the research has been published: [Trace element concentrations in common dolphins \(\*Delphinus delphis\*\) in the Celtic Seas ecoregion: Interelement relationships and effects of life history and health status - ScienceDirect](#)

- reviewing updated information on mitigation trials since the WKEMBYC2 review in 2022;
- reviewing the final report and recommendations from the CetAMBICion project, once it is published;
- reviewing the French action plan to reduce common dolphin bycatch in the Bay of Biscay, once it is finalized; and
- reviewing the Spanish national plan to reduce accidental catches in fishing activity.

Ms Murphy noted that preparing such a guidance would require forming a sub-group, which several participants supported. Members of the sub-group: H el ene Peltier, Graham Pierce, Eunice Pinn, Mark Simmonds, Sin e ad Murphy, Nikki Taylor. The next step would be to discuss with the Co-Chairs of the ACCOBAMS-ASCOBANS Joint Bycatch Working Group.

Discussions related to, among others:

- tailoring an information document to the 10<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Parties (MOP) to ASCOBANS in September 2024 on what the Common Dolphin Group has been able to achieve;
- flagging an emerging issue of changes in common dolphin distributions (possibly driven by changes in water temperature) together with evidence of declining body conditions (changes in prey availability) to the MOP;
- reflecting on ASCOBANS' role within the institutional landscape on common dolphins;
- leveraging the findings from projects such as CIBBRiNA and Marine Beacon;
- getting support from other groups working on bycatch as well as from modellers; and
- renaming the envisioned plan to clarify that it has a holistic focus that goes beyond bycatch minimization.

## **9.2. Discussion on a Transboundary Assessment for the common dolphin for reporting under article 17 of the EU Habitats Directive**

Co-Chair Murphy recalled that members had expressed interest in conducting a transboundary assessment. Pointing to informal discussions with the European Commission, she said that there currently is no example of such transboundary assessment, but that the Commission would support such an endeavour, including through the provision of guidance.

The next steps for this would be to:

- prepare a one-pager delineating the proposed approach and its rationale;
- get approval by government officials from France and the UK, and ideally Ireland, Spain, and Portugal; and
- subgroup to prepare the assessment. Members of the subgroup: Sin e ad Murphy, Florence Caurant, Nikki Taylor, Roma Banga, Eunice Pinn, Graham Pierce.

## **10. Any Other Business**

No other business was raised.

## **11. Review of Activities Table**

Co-Chair Murphy noted she will update the [draft](#) 1<sup>st</sup> progress report from the Common Dolphin SAP based on information shared during CDG4. She invited parties and range states to provide additional information to feed into the report, including with regard to:

- new information on fishing effort being collected to assist ICES;
- what mitigation measures are currently being employed;
- risk assessments for anthropogenic activities beyond bycatch and seismic surveys;
- studies on seasonal or temporal trends published since 2019;
- updates on funding support for national stranding programmes;
- the number of necropsies performed each year;

- a summary of causes of death of stranded animals;
- ongoing work on diet and life history parameters;
- whether any live animals were sampled since 2019 and, if so, for what;
- support for the development of techniques for discriminating population structure in highly mobile small delphinids;
- legislation on the landing of bycaught animals;
- guidance on underwater noise;
- recent work on emerging pollutants and marine litter;
- national MSFD indicators for cetaceans; and
- work undertaken on emerging pressures such as marine renewable energy and ecotourism.

Ms Murphy noted this will be helpful to inform the transboundary assessment process.

## 12. Review and update of Recommendations

Ms Renell (Secretariat) recalled that AC27 asked working groups to specify, for each of their recommendations: a time frame; a deadline, where possible; and a level of priority, ranging from high/medium/low.

Participants exchanged views on possible recommendations, building on those issued by CDG3. Updates related to, among others:

- adding information on time frames and priority levels;
- extending a number of recommendations to non-Party Range States;
- encouraging the allocation of funding for winter surveys;
- enhancing pollution monitoring to ensure sufficient data for reporting to facilitate OSPAR's marine mammal persistent pollutant indicator assessment;
- requesting the fishing industry to enhance its reporting on fishing effort;
- encouraging the use of OSPAR common indicators;
- ensuring the development of mitigation strategies is done in a stakeholder-inclusive manner;
- caution in the use of powerful acoustic deterrent devices due to their potential impact on species such as the harbour porpoise;
- encouraging the use of less harmful gear, including by enhancing their economic viability;
- urging France to consider the updated ICES advice in revising its draft action plan for the reduction of bycatch of common dolphins in the Bay of Biscay, with the Steering Group expressing concern over delays in the development of the plan; and
- encouraging fine-scaled risk mapping of anthropogenic noise sources and considering the cumulative impacts of exposure.

The recommendations are contained in Annex 1 to this report and available on the [ASCOBANS website](#).

## 13. Date and venue of the 5th Meeting of the Common Dolphin Group

Ms Renell (Secretariat) invited feedback on dates for the next meeting and potential offers to host the meeting. Ms Murphy suggested third week of January and offered to host the meeting in Galway, Ireland, at ATU boardroom, which was hybrid ready. The Secretariat welcomed the offer. Participants converged on 14-15 January 2025 as tentative dates for CDG5, with the meeting to be held in a hybrid manner in Galway, Ireland.

## 14. Close of the Meeting

Co-Chair Murphy noted some members will liaise intersessionally to work on the transboundary assessment and declared the meeting closed on 10 January 2024 at 17:37 CET.



**Annex 1:**

**RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE**

**4th MEETING OF THE ASCOBANS COMMON DOLPHIN GROUP**

*(Adopted by the Advisory Committee)*

These recommendations were made at the 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Common Dolphin Group (CDG4, 9-10 January 2024), which reviewed the latest information related to bycatch and other significant threats. The CDG made the following recommendations:

<b>CDG4 /Rec #</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Long-/short-term + Deadline if possible</b>	<b>Priority (High / Medium / Low)</b>
<b>Surveys</b>			
1.	Parties and Non-Party Range States are encouraged to allocate adequate funding to future SCANS summer (June-July) and winter surveys in a timely manner to ensure that such surveys are undertaken in as short a time as possible, noting the Common Dolphin is a highly mobile species and the abundance in an area may vary greatly between seasons. (CDG3/Rec1*)	Long-term	High
<b>Strandings</b>			
2.	Considering the increase in cases of infectious disease and starvation reported in the UK and Ireland, Parties should ensure sufficient funding is available for stranding programmes to assess health status, and monitor changes in causes of death. The CDG also recommends this to Non-Party Range States. The need for a consistent and holistic approach to collection and analysis of data and samples from stranded animals should be borne in mind. (CDG3/Rec2)	Long-term	Medium
3.	Parties and non-Party Range States should continue efforts to harmonize and coordinate assessments for Common Dolphin and other cetaceans for reporting under the MSFD and Article 17 of the Habitats Directive, including employing OSPAR's common indicators. (CDG3/Rec9*)	Long-term	High
4.	Parties and non-Party Range States should enhance their pollution monitoring programmes to ensure sufficient data for reporting to OSPAR, to facilitate the Marine Mammal persistent pollutant indicator assessment.	Long-term	Medium
5.	Parties and non-Party Range States are recommended that North-east Atlantic-wide information on life history parameters be collected and analysed from stranded and bycaught animals to assess for evidence of temporal changes in those parameters at the population level that may have resulted from anthropogenic activities. (CDG2/Rec7*)	Long-term	Medium
<b>Bycatch</b>			



CDG4 /Rec #	Recommendation	Long-/short-term + Deadline if possible	Priority (High / Medium / Low)
6.	Parties and non-Party Range States are urged to quantify the effects of their bycatch reduction measures to ensure that they minimize and where possible eliminate the incidental catches of Common Dolphins in fisheries in the Bay of Biscay. The 25 October 2023 Joint Recommendation of the South Western Waters High-Level Group lacked an evaluation of their proposed measures. This includes information on pingers that will be employed, together with their technical and operational specifications and the proof of their effectiveness on Common Dolphins, as outlined by STECF (2023). As well as knowledge on the scale of pinger deployment, both spatially and temporally. Caution should be exercised with the use of powerful acoustic deterrent devices, considering their potential impacts on species, such as the Harbour Porpoise, but including Common Dolphins as well. A more detailed strategic plan for pinger deployment is required.	Immediate action; long-term activity	High
7.	France is urged to provide a clear action plan for the reduction of bycatch in the Bay of Biscay. The Steering Group is concerned by the delayed development of the action plan, based on the information received at its 4 <sup>th</sup> meeting. France is also recommended to consider the relevant ICES advice (2020, 2023).	Short-term	High
8.	Parties and non-Party Range States are urged to include all stakeholders (scientists, fishers, governmental entities, and NGOs) to discuss and implement practical measures to combat bycatch. Collaborative and inclusive approaches in developing mitigation strategies should be applied at all stages of the process.	Immediate action; long-term activity	High
9.	Parties and non-Party Range States are encouraged to continue to review and test a range of mitigation options to reduce bycatch of Common Dolphins, including acoustic deterrents, gear modifications, fishing practices, time-area closures, move-on procedure etc., mitigation measures that could be implemented at the fleet level. (CDG2/Rec4*)	Long-term	High
10.	Parties and non-Party Range States should encourage fishers to adopt less harmful alternative gears, and to develop the economic viability of fishing gear substitution/adaptation.	Immediate action; long-term activity	High
11.	Parties and non-Party Range States should request the fishing industry to enhance their reporting of fishing effort.	Medium-term	High
12.	Parties and non-Party Range States should better target their bycatch monitoring efforts at the areas and metiers of high bycatch risk for the Common Dolphin. These include particularly static net fisheries (GNS and GTR) over the Biscay shelf (subareas 8a and 8b) and the coastal zone of the Iberian Peninsula (subareas 8c, 9a, 9b) where current monitoring effort covers only a very small fraction of fishing effort. (CDG3/Rec6)	Long-term	High

<b>CDG4 /Rec #</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Long-/short-term + Deadline if possible</b>	<b>Priority (High / Medium / Low)</b>
13.	Portugal and Spain are encouraged to actively increase observer coverage and remote electronic monitoring in small vessel fisheries for estimating bycatch and monitor the effectiveness of mitigation measures, given the increase in strandings of bycaught Common Dolphins in recent years. (CDG3/Rec7)	Medium-term	High
<b>Other</b>			
14.	Parties are encouraged to conduct further analysis towards fine-scale risk-mapping of anthropogenic noise sources and consider the cumulative impacts of exposure in the future on the Common Dolphin.	Medium-term	Medium
15.	Letters of invitation to be sent from the Secretariat to request Non-Party Range States' participation in implementation of the SAP on Common Dolphins. (CDG2/Rec10)	Short-term	High
16.	SAP Range States to complete the 'Achievements Table' by end of the year to identify data gaps, as well as actions and funding that are required going forward. The Steering Group should then set priorities for each country. (CDG2/Rec11)	By end of 2024	High

\* Updated/edited.

**Annex 2:****LIST OF PARTICIPANTS****MEMBERS OF STEERING GROUP**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Email</b>
<b>France</b>		
Florence CAURANT	CDG Co-Chair / La Rochelle University	florence.caurant@univ-lr.fr
<b>Ireland</b>		
Sinead MURPHY	CDG Co-Chair / Atlantic Technological University (ATU)	sinead.murphy@atu.ie
<b>Portugal</b>		
Catarina EIRA	CESAM, University of Aveiro	catarina.eira@ua.pt
Marina SEQUEIRA	Institute of Nature Conservation and Forests	marina.sequeira@icnf.pt
<b>Spain</b>		
Graham PIERCE	Instituto de Investigaciones Marinas	g.j.pierce@iim.csic.es
<b>United Kingdom</b>		
Nikki TAYLOR	JNCC	nikki.taylor@jncc.gov.uk
Allen KINGSTON	University of St Andrews	ark10@st-andrews.ac.uk
<b>IGOs</b>		
Joan GONZALVO	ACCOBAMS	joan.gonzalvo@gmail.com
<b>NGOs</b>		
Mark SIMMONDS	OceanCare	mark.simmonds@sciencegyre.co.uk
Peter EVANS	Sea Watch Foundation	peter.evans@bangor.ac.uk
Nicola HODGINS	Whale and Dolphin Conservation	nicola.hodgins@whales.org
Fiona READ	Whale and Dolphin Conservation	fiona.read@whales.org
<b>Fishing industry</b>		
Eunice PINN	Seafish	eunice.pinn@seafish.co.uk

**OBSERVERS**

Ursula KRAMPE	European Commission, DG MARE	ursula.krampe@ec.europa.eu
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**INVITED EXPERTS**

Sofia ALBRECHT	Marine and Freshwater Research Centre, ATU	sofia.albrecht@research.atu.ie
Marie PETITGUYOT	Institute of Marine Research - Spanish National Research Council	mpetitguyot@iim.csic.es
Emer ROGAN	University College Cork	E.Rogan@ucc.ie

**SECRETARIAT**

Jenny RENELL	Coordinator	jenny.renell@un.org
Bettina REINARTZ	Administrative Assistant	bettina.reinartz@un.org