

Agenda Item 2

Opening Statement

Information Document 2.b-i

**Opening Statements: Observers –
HELCOM**

Action Requested

Take note

Submitted by

HELCOM



Note:

Delegates are kindly reminded to bring their own document copies to the meeting, if needed.



HELCOM statement at the 9th Meeting of the Parties (MOP9) to ASCOBANS

The Baltic Sea is a permanent home to only one species of cetacean, the harbour porpoise. However, the number of individuals has drastically decreased since the middle of the past century, with no signs of recovery. The situation of the *Phocoena phocoena* population in the Baltic Proper is of particular concern, with an estimated 500 animals remaining in that particular basin.

In the Baltic Sea, harbour porpoises are subjected to multiple pressures. Bycatch and drowning in fishing gear are believed to be the greatest source of mortality, but factors such as underwater noise and changes in their habitat are also a cause for concern. The plight of this small cetacean in the Baltic Sea is reflected in the HELCOM 2013 Red List, which classifies the harbour porpoise population in the Baltic Proper as Critically Endangered, and the population in the Western Baltic, Belt Sea and the Kattegat (WBBK) as Vulnerable.

Urgent action is therefore required, and bycatch of harbour porpoises is currently being addressed in various HELCOM processes, including the update of the Baltic Sea Action Plan, HELCOM's strategic programme of measures for a healthy Baltic Sea.

In our efforts to conserve the Baltic Sea harbour porpoise, HELCOM views ASCOBANS as a prime partner. We strongly share the ASCOBANS priority on preventing fisheries bycatch to ensure the conservation of cetacean species such as the harbour porpoise.

The relationship between ASCOBANS and HELCOM is deep-rooted, based on a decades-long collaboration that reaches back to the 1990s. Beyond shared visions, it also yields tangible cooperation. Thus, HELCOM's recently revised recommendation 17/2 on the protection of harbour porpoises references the ASCOBANS Jastarnia Plan and the Conservation Plan for the Harbour Porpoise Population in the WBBK. Another token of successful collaboration is the joint HELCOM/ASCOBANS harbour porpoise database that records sightings, bycatches and strandings of the cetacean as reported by HELCOM Contracting Parties and that has been in place for many years now. HELCOM also regularly participates in the meetings of the ASCOBANS Jastarnia Group.

HELCOM is therefore very pleased to attend the 9th Meeting of the Parties of ASCOBANS, and we would like to extend our gratitude to Belgium for hosting the meeting and to the Secretariat for organizing this event.

We recognize that, more than ever, strong partnerships and mutual efforts are required to advance the cause of marine protection, in our region as elsewhere. It would certainly be one of our greatest failures to see the harbour porpoise, the Baltic Sea's only cetacean, disappear from our waters.

HELCOM wishes all participants a fruitful meeting.