Agenda Item 4.5 — Reports

Reports from Observer Organizations

Information Document 4.5d — **Reports from Observer Organizations: IWC**

Action Requested — Take note

Submitted by — IWC

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

IWC Observer report to 9th MOP ACOBANS, 2020

The International Whaling Commission (IWC)is pleased to submit this observer report to the 9th Meeting of Parties to the Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic, North East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas. We also wish to congratulates the Government of Belgium and ASCOBANS Secretariat for hosting this meeting virtually in light of the challenges we all currently face with the global pandemic.

The IWC cooperates with the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and its cetacean daughter agreements ACOBANS and ACCOBAMS on several areas of mutual interest and looks forward to continued fruitful cooperation in the years ahead.

The current report of the IWC Scientific Committee (SC) makes a number of recommendations of relevance to ASCOBANS and is available here. In addition, the IWC's 2020 State of the Cetacean Environment Report (SOCER) was focused this year on the Atlantic Ocean summarising papers on the full range of recognised threats to cetaceans – bycatch, ship strikes, marine debris, chemical pollution, disease events, harmful algal blooms, oil spills, noise and climate change. The IWC looks forward to it's virtual Conservation Committee meeting (28th Sept to 2nd October 2020) where many issues of mutual interest with ASCOBANS will also be discussed.

The summary below provides more detail of recent IWC work on issues on the agenda for the 9th ASCOBANS Meeting of the Parties meeting.

IWC work on priority ASCOBANS species

The IWC Scientific Committee (SC) has made a number of recommendations specific to Harbour porpoises over several years highlighting unsustainable by-catch as the major source of anthropogenic mortality. In particular to save the critically endangered harbour porpoise population of the Baltic proper the IWC has recommended, as a matter of urgency, that all countries adjoining the Baltic Proper assess and mitigate bycatch and other anthropogenic mortality. Further research into stranded and bycaught porpoises was encouraged to investigate all the factors negatively impacting this population including pollution and prey depletion. The IWC also encouraged Baltic range states to propose the Baltic porpoise for listing in CMS appendix 1.

For the Iberian harbour porpoise the IWC SC agreed that the bycatch mortality is unsustainably high and will consequently cause a population-level decline. It urged range states to reduce bycatch in Iberian waters through a range of mitigation measures and to prioritise transition from gillnet fisheries to the use of gears with no (or low) levels of cetacean bycatch. The Committee further recommended that existing legal obligations are met, illegal fishing activities are monitored and controlled and that the Iberian porpoise is added to Appendix 1 of CMS.

The SC had also expressed concern that the bycatch of common dolphins in the Bay of Biscay may threaten the conservation status of the population. There was a recommendation to focus on cross-border and cross-agency cooperation with fishers and among countries on bycatch monitoring and mitigation, building on the expert advice of relevant regional organisations.

Bycatch

The IWC Bycatch Mitigation Initiative (BMI), supported by its Standing Working Group on Bycatch, an Expert Panel and Bycatch Coordinator was established in 2016 in recognition of the major conservation issue posed to cetaceans by fisheries bycatch. The initiative aims to raise awareness at national and international levels of the need to address cetacean bycatch and the tools available to

understand and mitigate the issue. It's 10-year strategic plan lays out its vision and the high-level objectives and can found here. The BMI aims to promote both existing and innovative solutions for monitoring and management and promote collaborative, multi-disciplinary and inclusive approaches to bring about lasting change. The initiative is focused on addressing bycatch in gillnet fisheries, particularly in small-scale and artisanal fishery sectors. The BMI is collaborating with partners to build capacity within national governments and fisheries management bodies such as Regional Fishery Management Organisations (RFMOs), to support decision makers in the most appropriate tools for bycatch assessment and management. The BMI's Expert Panel also provides multi-disciplinary expertise and technical advice upon request

The current 2018-2020 workplan for the BMI can be found here and a new costed workplan 2021-2024 is being prepared for consideration at the IWC Conservation Committee meeting in September 2020. The BMI is currently focused on developing a set of multidisciplinary pilot projects in seven countries/locations, development of a capacity building programme including delivery of training and support for bycatch rapid risk assessments and collaboration with RFMOs. A recent virtual meeting with the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) (a pre-meeting to its Working Party on Ecosystems and Bycatch) identified several opportunities for future collaborative work between the IWC and IOTC, which may be relevant to the EU fleet fishing in these waters. The BMI continues to look for opportunities to learn from existing work addressing bycatch, and export lessons from its pilot projects or elsewhere to other fisheries.

The ASCOBANS Secretariat is represented on the BMI Standing Working Group and the IWC Bycatch Coordinator participates in the Joint ACCOBAMS-ASCOBANS Bycatch Working Group. The IWC looks forward to further collaboration with ASCOBANS on this critical issue for cetaceans.

Marine Debris

The IWC has undertaken extensive work to understand and mitigate potential threats from a range of different types of marine debris. In December 2019 the IWC held a workshop aiming to progress IWC's work on this threat by (i) reviewing the latest evidence on interactions with cetaceans (both ingestion and entanglement) and considering evidence for associated toxicology; (ii) identifying best protocols for gross pathology, pathology for microdebris and the standardised classification of recovered plastics and other debris; and (iii) developing liaison with other relevant expert bodies. Based on its discussions, the workshop made a series of detailed recommendations, emphasising the importance of long-term studies; the need for standardised approaches to post-mortem studies; the importance of strandings networks; the assessment of floating debris during aerial surveys and the integration of marine debris concerns into the IWC's Conservation Management Plans, where appropriate. The vulnerability of some species was highlighted and the potential of some to be used as indicator species. Other recommendations covered engagement with international bodies and communications.

Amongst its recommendations on cetacean post-mortem studies the workshop welcomed the ASCOBANS/ACCOBAMS Best Practice on Cetacean Post-mortem Investigation and Tissue Sampling. The workshop also recommended the adoption of an Evidence Based Diagnostic Assessment framework for cetaceans necropsies on marine debris ingestion and common data collection during post-mortem examinations of cetaceans in order to study the impact of marine debris ingestion on marine mammals (see Annex 5 IWC/SC/68B/REP03 and ASCOBANS/MOP9/Inf.6.2.3a).

At its meeting in May 2020 the IWC SC welcomed the workshop report and endorsed its recommendations. It recognised that the impacts of marine debris on cetaceans are more substantial than was previously thought and further noted the importance of continued work on this topic. The SC tasked a marine debris intersessional group with several follow up actions, which will be reported back to the next SC meeting in May 2021.

Cetacean Strandings

At its meeting in 2016 (IWC66) the Commission endorsed the recommendations of the Scientific Committee (SC) and the Whale Killing Methods and Welfare Issues Working Group (WKM&WI WG) with respect to an IWC Strandings Initiative. The IWC Strandings Initiative aimed to build capacity of countries to respond to and investigate cetacean strandings including through the provision of virtual, real-time advice during ongoing strandings events, allocation of funding for emergency response and investigations, support for the development of strandings networks and training in "on the beach" response and necropsy.

Following the departure of the strandings coordinator to a new position in December 2019 a consultant (Dr Andrew Brownlow) was hired to undertake some key tasks for the IWC in the lead up to the next Commission meeting (IWC68). This included a review of progress for the strandings initiative to date and propose a new four year costed work programme for how the initiative might develop in the future. The IWC is very grateful to the ASCOBANS Secretariat for its input to this review.

A report from this consultancy has now been received and is being reviewed by the strandings expert panel and steering group, before final proposals are presented to the next meeting of the IWC Scientific Committee. Proposals are made for future work under broad themes of data collation and dissemination, emergency response, expert advice and advocacy and capacity building. The IWC is keen to collaborate with other organisations including ASCOBANS and ACCOBAMS in refining and delivering this new programme of work.

Underwater Noise

The IWC has been considering anthropogenic noise since 2004 including seismic surveys in 2005, noise from shipping in 2008, measurements of ambient noise and sound mapping in 2014 and a workshop on masking in 2016. The Commission also passed a Resolution (2018-04) on anthropogenic underwater noise in 2018 which gave a number of instructions to the Scientific and Conservation Committees. In 2008, the IWC endorsed a noise reduction target for shipping arising from the Okeanos Foundation workshop representing a broad set of interests that established a goal for 'initial global action that will reduce the contributions of shipping to ambient noise energy in the 10-300 Hz band by 3dB in 10 years and by 10 dB in 30 years relative to current levels' (Wright 2008).

The IWC has observer status at the IMO and members of the Secretariat and Scientific Committee usually attend meetings of the Marine Environment Protection Committee. In recent years the IWC has been engaging in IMO discussions on underwater noise from shipping, including a policy workshop organised by Canada on 'Quieting Ships to Protect the Marine Environment'. The workshop was intended to assist in the development of a proposal to the IMO Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC 75) to include underwater noise as a new work item.

In May 2020 the IWC SC held a virtual workshop on noise to discuss advancing efforts to address underwater noise from shipping (IWC, 2020) This was attended by 70 participants including representatives from shipping interests. The presentations and discussion focused on ambient noise, noise budgets and indicators in addition to collaboration with the IMO.

At its subsequent meeting the IWC Scientific Committee reiterated the threats posed to cetaceans by underwater noise (SC/19/26) and that this can also have adverse effects on other trophic levels including fish and invertebrates. Recalling Resolution 2018-04, and the Commission's objective to facilitate mitigation of adverse effects of anthropogenic underwater noise, the Committee *inter alia* agreed to revisit the topic of collaboration with the IMO after the MEPC takes up pending papers on underwater noise and encouraged the development of databases of ship source levels.

The IWC Conservation Committee is currently developing a new work programme on management and mitigation of underwater noise and , subject to travel restrictions, is planning a workshop next year.