Pilot study - tagging harbour porpoises in the Dutch North Sea

ASCOBANS North Sea Group – 14-15 February 2023

Jip Vrooman, Steve Geelhoed, Anne-Marie Svoboda, Meike Scheidat

Photo: Steve Geelhoed
The updated Dutch Harbour Porpoise Conservation Plan recommends starting an investigation with the tagging of harbour porpoises in the Netherlands.

Main question: “How do harbour porpoises use the southern North Sea, and to what extent is this influenced by (anthropogenic) pressures?”

Priorities from a policy perspective: large-scale movements, habitat preferences and habitat use, responses to human activities and feeding ecology.
Recorded satellite positions of 71 harbour porpoises tagged in Denmark (blue dots) and 31 in West Greenland (red dots). Black contour: southern North Sea. Adapted from Nielsen et al. (2018).
Tagging, in combination with other surveys, can provide information on various aspects, such as habitat use, disturbance, behaviour, energetics and population structure.
Report Scheidat et al., 2016 on feasibility of tagging harbour porpoises in NL
International expert workshop: 14 Apr 2021
Stakeholder workshop NL: 27 May 2021
Formation of project team: Jun 2021
International expert workshop: 28 Feb 2022
Knowledge base report: Vrooman et al., 2022 (*next slide*).
Stakeholder workshop NL: 7 Apr 2022
Development of work plan: Nov 2021 – Dec 2022
Exploration of assignment: 2022
2023: definite assignment and start project
- Commissioners: Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality & Rijkswaterstaat. Potentially KBIN Belgium
- Contractors: WMR, TNO, Aarhus University (Denmark), veterinarian
Research questions (from the policy perspective) that tagging could help answer

Current tag types, components and use

Representative sampling

Collected data and link to research questions (what kind of answers can tagging provide?)

Welfare and ethics

Recommendations
Phased approach

- Phase 1: preparation and pre-study, developing protocols, **go/no-go**
- Phase 2 (*depending on phase 1*): tagging harbour porpoises in the Dutch North Sea, **go/no-go**
- Phase 3 (*depending on phases 1 and 2*): analysing data, reporting and advising on potential next steps/continuation

→ Close collaboration with Danish experts & veterinarian
1. (Further) exploring the feasibility of tagging harbour porpoises in the Netherlands

2. Developing a method for, and gaining experience with, catching, tagging and releasing harbour porpoises in their natural environment.

3. Obtaining initial insight in large-scale movements, (variation in) time spent at specific locations and preferred habitats of tagged harbour porpoises, as well as seasonal variation therein.

4. Depending on the success of objectives 1 to 3, laying the foundation for a large-scale tagging program with the aim of answering the research questions as prioritized by the commissioners.
Thank you

Photo: Jip Vrooman