

## What are small cetaceans?

Whales, dolphins and porpoises belong to the scientific order known by the Latin term Cetacea. They are aquatic mammals and most of them are marine, i.e. they live in the sea. Cetaceans spend their whole life in the water. Two main types of cetaceans exist today. Species of the suborder Mysticeti, or baleen whales, are characterised by having baleen plates for filtering food from the water, rather than teeth. They are relatively large and include, for example, the blue whale, the largest animal ever to have lived on earth. Most members of the suborder Odontoceti, or toothed whales, are considerably smaller and are accordingly called small cetaceans. They feed predominantly on fish and squid.



Striped dolphin  
(*Stenella coeruleoalba*)

## Where can you find small cetaceans?

Small cetaceans are found in nearly all of the world's seas and in some rivers. Several species commonly occur in the North Sea, North East Atlantic and Irish Sea. The only species native to the Baltic Sea is the harbour porpoise. ASCOBANS covers all species, subspecies or populations of toothed whales in this area, with the exception of the large sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*). The most common species in the Agreement Area are:

- Harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*)
- Bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)
- Common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*)
- White-beaked dolphin (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*)
- Atlantic white-sided dolphin (*Lagenorhynchus acutus*)
- Striped dolphin (*Stenella coeruleoalba*)
- Risso's dolphin (*Grampus griseus*)
- Killer whale (*Orcinus orca*)
- Long-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala melas*)
- Northern bottlenose whale (*Hyperoodon ampullatus*)
- and other beaked whales (Ziphiidae).



Common dolphin  
(*Delphinus delphis*)

## Why are small cetaceans threatened?

Most cetacean species are highly mobile, following their prey over long distances or migrating regularly between breeding or feeding ranges. In the ASCOBANS Area they encounter a variety of man-made threats, of which **bycatch**, the accidental entanglement in fishing gear, is considered the most serious. Every year, several thousand cetaceans drown because they become ensnared in fishing nets, preventing them from coming up to the surface to breathe. Marine **pollution** is another serious threat that calls for an international, coordinated approach. Toxic substances like heavy metals and persistent organic compounds, most notably the PCBs, enter the food chain and accumulate in the body tissues of marine mammals, adversely affecting their health. Commercial shipping, industrial activity (e.g. pile-driving and

seismic explorations), explosions and navy sonar cause underwater noise. Such **acoustic disturbance** can lead to behavioural changes, physical injury and even death. Moreover, the expanding shipping fleets result in increasing numbers of **ship strikes**, collisions between the vessels and the cetaceans, which is of growing concern.

The extent and the effects of the threats faced by small cetaceans vary among areas and species. An example is the dramatic decline in the number of harbour porpoises in



Harbour porpoise  
(*Phocoena phocoena*)

the Belt Sea and in the Baltic Proper. This drop, observed since the 1930s, has been accompanied by a steady retreat from large areas of its former range. Today, Baltic harbour porpoises are generally restricted to the Kattegat and Belt Sea in the extreme west of their original habitat, with decreasing numbers of sightings along the German, Polish and Swedish Baltic coasts.

Harbour porpoises are particularly vulnerable to bycatch in bottom-set gillnet fisheries, killing thousands

each year in the North Sea alone. The common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) occurs throughout European Atlantic waters. In the Celtic Sea and Bay of Biscay in particular, it suffers incidental capture in fishing gear from multi-national pelagic trawl and drift net fisheries. The bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), which is familiar to many people, is often found in coastal areas and faces a number of human-induced threats, including marine pollution, bycatch and underwater noise.

The combined effects of all human activities are unknown, but it is clear that cetaceans are under additional pressure from prey depletion, habitat degradation and climate change, which have a detrimental effect on whales, dolphins and porpoises.



Killer whale  
(*Orcinus orca*)

# ASCOBANS

## Saving Europe's Small Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises

### What is ASCOBANS?

The acronym ASCOBANS stands for **A**greement on the Conservation of **S**mall **C**etaceans of the **B**altic, North East **A**tlantic, Irish and **N**orth **S**eas.

ASCOBANS was concluded in 1991 as the Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic and North Seas under the auspices of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Ani-

mals (UNEP/CMS or Bonn Convention). The Agreement Area was extended westwards in early 2008. ASCOBANS is open for accession by all Range States (i.e. any state that exercises jurisdiction over any part of the range of a species covered by the Agreement or whose flag vessels engage in operations adversely affecting small cetaceans in the Agreement Area) and regional economic integration organizations.

Many, but not all countries in the Agreement Area have already become Parties to the Agreement and ASCOBANS continues to grow. The Parties share the common concern that continuously high bycatch rates, habitat deterioration and increasing anthropogenic disturbance are likely to threaten the existence of small cetaceans in the Baltic and North Seas, North East Atlantic and Irish Sea.

### What does ASCOBANS do?

Since migrating cetaceans regularly cross national boundaries, their protection can only effectively be achieved by means of international cooperation. Thus, the aim of the Agreement is to promote close cooperation amongst Parties with a view to achieving and maintaining a favourable conservation status for small cetaceans in the ASCOBANS Area. A Conservation and Management Plan, which forms part of the Agreement, obliges Parties to engage in habitat conservation and management, surveys and research, pollution mitigation and public information. To achieve its aim, ASCOBANS also cooperates with Range States that have not (yet) acceded to the Agreement, with relevant intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations.

### How does ASCOBANS work?

Three main bodies promote the implementation of the Agreement:

#### The Meeting of Parties (MOP):

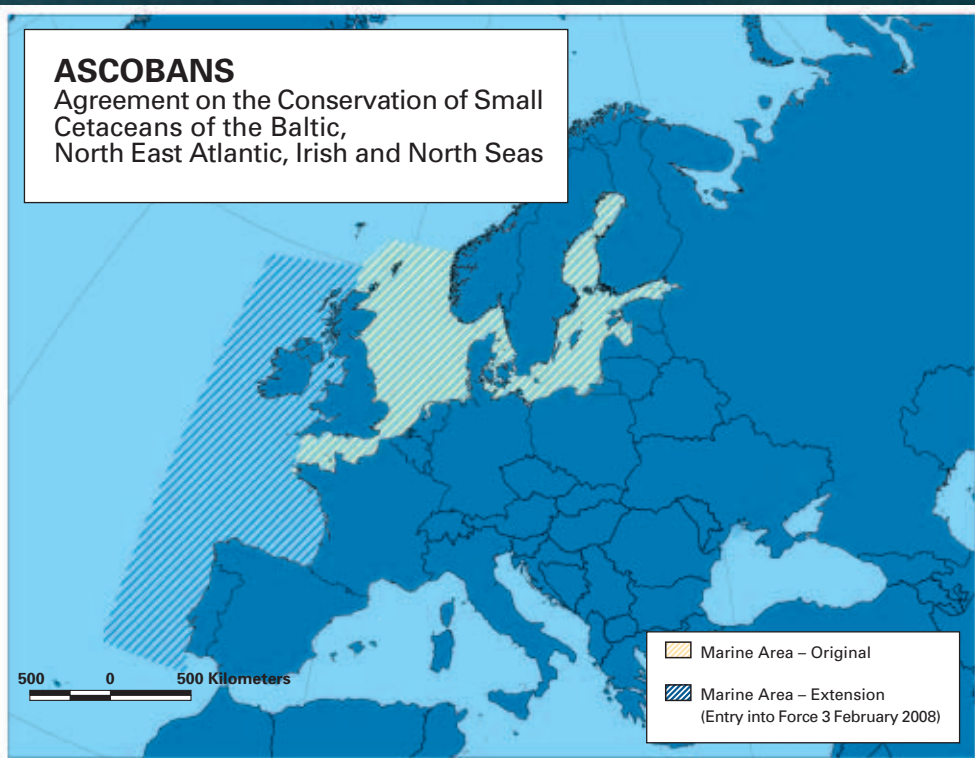
The Meeting of the Parties is the decision-making body of the Agreement. It meets every three years to assess progress and develop further steps in the implementation of ASCOBANS. Non-Party Range States and relevant regional, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations can attain observer status to attend MOP meetings without having power to vote.

#### The Advisory Committee (AC):

The AC, which meets at least once a year, provides scientific and policy advice to the Parties and the Secretariat on the conservation and management of small cetaceans and on other matters related to the running of the Agreement. Each Party is entitled to appoint one member to the AC, who may be accompanied by advisors. As with the MOP, external observers may take part in AC meetings, while the nominated members are the only ones entitled to vote.

#### The Secretariat:

The ASCOBANS Secretariat acts as the coordinating body of the Agreement. It provides administrative support, gathers and disseminates relevant information and supports the Parties in the implementation of the Agreement. In addition, it prepares content for, organizes and services the meetings of the MOP and the AC. The Secretariat also plays an important role in awareness-raising. As with CMS and some of its other regional daughter agreements, the ASCOBANS Secretariat is administered by the United Nations Environment Programme and is based in Bonn, Germany.



Killer whale  
(*Orcinus orca*)

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