REPORT ON THE CONSERVATION STATUS OF CETACEANS AND RELEVANT ACTIVITIES IN BLACK SEA

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Year of Start *: 2017
Year of End *:2019

Introduction: *The aim of this report is to give a global vision of what occurred in the Region, regarding cetacean conservation, since the previous report, and what is important to address for the next period/in a near future. So the regional representative will synthetize the main studies (species, topics) led in the region, concerning research, monitoring and conservation, also the main "hot" topics or threats that need to be addressed and what is awaited from the Scientific Committee (and ACCOBAMS) for the next triennium as recommendations.*

Countries of Black Sea region:

Bulgaria
Georgia
Romania
Turkey
Ukraine

Overview of activities in the Region since the previous report:
The information based member states' national reports presented by Parties during the 7th MOP for the period 2017-2019 for the Black Sea Region, in November 2019. The activities have undertaken for continuous data acquisition in link with comprehensive cetacean population estimate and distribution, habitat use and connectivity, stranding networks and events for the three species inhabiting the Black Sea (*Delphinus delphis* ssp. *ponticus, Tursiops truncatus* ssp. *ponticus* and *Phocoena phocoena* ssp. *relicta*)*.

Cetacean abundance
The most comprehensive study was the first basin-wide aerial survey for cetacean distribution / abundance conducted over the Black Sea waters in Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine in summer 2019. Over the distance of 7324km monitored, the two observing teams collected data on the abundance of cetaceans as well as fish, birds (MSFD Descriptor 1 Biodiversity) and Marine litter (MSFD Descriptor 10), descriptors found in defining the Good Environment Status (GES), the main objective of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive under the project CeNoBS. See the ACCOBAMS-SC13/2020/Inf04. In addition, coastal surveys (within the 12 NM area) were performed in Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine.

Bycatch
The pilot study on bycatch monitoring was started in the framework of the same project. Data were collected from two sources: questionnaires and on-board observers in the ports of Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine. In addition, the study of use of pingers for bycatch mitigation is undertaken in Bulgaria. See the ACCOBAMS-SC13/2020/Inf07 for more details of the bycatch study.

Stock identification and population structure
Photo identification, demographic and genetic studies were conducted in Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine which gained new data on sub-population identity and management units, connectivity, life span and mortality rates for a few cetacean stocks across the Azov and Black Seas.

Noise
Research of noise impact is still at the beginning. The Secretariat organized the first HQMMO/PAM training course in Romania, for the Black Sea region in 2018. Regional training workshop and pilot activities on noise monitoring will be implemented in Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine under the project CeNoBS.

Marine pollution
As the result of the project (2018-2019) on the contamination of heavy metals in the bones of harbour porpoises in the Bulgarian waters, it was found that the stranded porpoises in the northern part had significantly higher levels than the southern ones (ACCOBAMS-MOP7/2019/Inf 03Rev1). In addition, there is the EU-funded ANEMONE project on marine litter and pollution ongoing in Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine. The project result is expected to be available in 2021.

Conservation
The outcomes of the projects and activities mentioned above have been presented to the stakeholders by relevant academic institutions and NGOs at a national level to develop and implement necessary conservation measures. New steps in developing Conservation Action Plans are undertaken in countries which have not established it yet and discussion for revision are held in those with a plan in action. ACCOBAMS Cetacean Conservation Module was carried out in March 2019 in Istanbul and it was participated by the students and representatives of the NGOs from the Black Sea countries.

Major issue(s) or main threats or "hot" topics that have emerged in 2017-2019:

- The continuous oil and gas related activities (seismic, drilling) in the region have been observed with no concrete legislation at national level in order to assure the monitoring and conservation of cetaceans. It is critically important for noise monitoring to develop and distribute standardized instruments for measuring underwater noise. It is also important to assess the noise impact on aquatic organisms, including marine mammals, during NATO military training, for example, the study of the effects of underwater explosions. The situation in the Kerch Strait, the Area of special importance for Black Sea cetaceans, is of special concern: the government of the Russian Federation is doing construction works and transformation of marine environment which can be harmful for cetaceans there.

- Knowledge gaps, mainly for offshore areas, slows the process for development of conservative measures and tools. Systematic surveys are in urgent need to continue in order to fill the knowledge gaps which are long missing in the area and currently under heavy human pressure. A basin-wide survey like the one carried out under ASI and CeNoBS should be repeated every 6 years (in connection with the MSFD cycles) to 10 years or so depending on the budget and expertise. Moreover, coastal surveys by each country should be continued seasonally following the same protocol, so that the results can be shared at a regional level for the evaluation of population status.

- Illegal capture and trade of bottlenose dolphins should be investigated, and the dolphinaria should be strictly monitored (a punctual problem raised by Ukraine).

- Effective, long-term resolution of the conflict between cetaceans and fishers, namely, bycatch and depredation, would require further detailed research on the frequency of damage suffered by fishermen and the potential impact of repellent devices as a way to mitigate the conflict.

- Databank, analysis and expertise in pathology are lacking in the region. Infection with parasites, as well as pathogens of viral, protozoan and bacterial diseases, the complexity of the life cycles of organisms are poorly

studied. In this regard, feeding ecology of cetaceans has an important aspect. For human health, early warnings of the transfer of pathogenic organisms from dead dolphins to terrestrial farmed animals is extremely important.

- A great achievement by ASI and CeNoBS projects is proposed as a baseline work for the future systematic survey actions.

Recommendations / suggestions for Improvement of the conservation:
There is a need of research and monitoring programs of noise and development of mitigation actions guidelines and legislative tools relevant to the conservation of cetaceans in regard with anthropogenic pressure like seismic surveys, drilling, marine traffic, fisheries, construction activities, etc.

Having in mind that the main cause of mortality of harbour porpoises is bycatch in turbot nets, effective, long-term resolution of the conflict would require further detailed research on the frequency of damage suffered by fishermen and the potential impact of repellent devices as a way to mitigate the conflict. The pursue of national authorities to implement onboard observation programs it is strongly recommended. From last year in Romanian were allowed monofilament gillnet use.

Deaths of dolphins due to entering into the trawl during fishing are widely known but the data have been scarce. Moreover, it is known that some dolphins become specialized in feeding on fish escaping from the nets during fishing operations. One of the monitoring tasks is the photo ID of dolphins during the trawl fishery to determine the number of animals that have adapted to such way of feeding. It is possible that dolphins recognize fishing vessels by the characteristic underwater noise they produce. When fishing with fixed nets, or more precisely enslaving nets, legislative restriction of fishing rules, for example, introducing restrictions on the mesh size, as was done in Ukraine in 2018 for the Danube area of the sea, can be of great importance for reducing the number of dolphins (first harbour porpoise) killed in nets.

Encouraging more researches for the offshore area is needed to fill the knowledge gaps on distribution and migration routes.

International support for establishing MPAs, including transboundary areas, is desirable.
Update of the Black Sea cetacean status in IUCN lists based on the ASI/CeNoBS survey and coastal monitoring efforts for the last years in Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey and Georgia.

Mass mortality events showed a lack in managing the situation at the national level, thus it can be stressed the need for a databank, analysis, and expertise in pathology at the regional level. Organizing workshops for teaching key skills to a wide range of stakeholders will increase research capacities. Elaboration of relevant rescue plans in cases of mass strandings should be realized. Field laboratory equipped with relevant devices for autopsy and necropsy are needed.

A close collaboration with academic and scientific bodies, decision makers and forums or commissions (eg. Black Sea Commission, Black Sea Advisory Council) will increase the research capacities and threat assessment, which will enable us to correctly target the needed conservation efforts.
Impacts of climate change, toxic contamination and pollutant effects on cetaceans should be studied and continuously monitored.

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