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REPORT ON THE CONSERVATION STATUS OF CETACEANS AND RELEVANT ACTIVITIES IN CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN

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Date of the last modification of the report *: February 2020

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 synthesize 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 Central Mediterranean region:

Albania,
Croatia,
Italy (Adriatic coast),
Libya,
Malta,
Montenegro,
Slovenia,
Tunisia

Overview of activities in the Region since the previous report:

This report is based on National Reports submitted to MOP7. According to National Reports, the common bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) is the most commonly reported species in the region, followed by the striped dolphin (*Stenella coeruleoalba*) and common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*). In addition, Risso’s dolphin (*Grampus griseus*), Cuvier’s beaked whale (*Ziphius cavirostris*), sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) and fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*) are also reported. This is in line with what is generally known about cetacean diversity and distribution in this region. Other species are recorded more rarely. It is also interesting to note the reported “occasional” status of rough-toothed dolphin (*Steno bredanensis*) for Malta.

A number of projects have been implemented or are ongoing, some directly addressing cetacean conservation, while others focusing on habitats or other ecosystem components that are also relevant to cetaceans. Some countries have good research and monitoring programmes in place, while others lack such programmes. Generally speaking, the northern part of the region is much better studied. The Adriatic Sea is currently probably the only part of the region with good information on cetacean abundance.

Although not part of the National Reports, several Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMA) have been designated in the region during the past triennium, as part of the IUCN work on marine mammal protected areas. In addition, Areas of Interest as potential candidates for IMMAs were identified, which may become IMMAs in the future as new information becomes available.

It is noteworthy to mention that the ACCOBAMS Survey Initiative, carried out in summer 2018, produced a large amount of new data, which has provided and will provide (as analyses are completed) substantial new information that will be relevant to cetacean conservation in the region.

SHORT SUMMARIES BY COUNTRY

ALBANIA: Little or no research effort. There is some occurrence information on common bottlenose, striped and common dolphins, but no systematic studies are carried out. No stranding network exists, due to lack of human and financial resources, as well as lack of expertise. Some capacity building on that is needed (strandings, necropsies). Incidental bycatch is occasionally reported by fishermen.

CROATIA: Research effort is carried out through local boat-based photo-identification studies, line-transect aerial surveys as part of regional (Adriatic-wide) monitoring, and stranding network / necropsies. In 2017, six dead common bottlenose dolphins were reported. Cause of death of four of them was linked to longline hooks, while three were bycaught in fishing nets. Studies investigating soundscapes have also been initiated.

ITALY: Research effort is carried out through local boat-based photo-identification studies, line-transect aerial surveys as part of regional monitoring, and stranding network / necropsies, as well as sighting activities from passenger ferries.

LIBYA: There is little or no research effort. There is some occurrence information on common bottlenose, striped, common and Risso's dolphins, but no systematic studies. No stranding networks exist.

MALTA: Research effort is carried out through boat-based sightings and aerial surveys, as well as through stranding network. No bycatch was reported.

MONTENEGRO: The ACCOBAMS Survey Initiative was the main activity in last 3 years related to research and monitoring of cetaceans. The Montenegro Dolphin Project was established in 2016 by two NGOs, with the aim to monitor cetaceans in Montenegrin waters. No stranding network exists. Support for setting up national stranding network, obtaining necropsy equipment and training of veterinarians has been reported to be needed. In addition, support for setting up a tissue bank is considered relevant, as well as training on passive acoustic monitoring. 3D seismic surveys as part of oil and gas exploration were conducted in November 2018 and February 2019.

SLOVENIA: Research effort is carried out through local boat-based photo-identification studies, line-transect aerial surveys as part of ACCOBAMS Survey Initiative and stranding network / necropsies, as well as passive acoustic monitoring. Cases of severe injuries in local bottlenose dolphins have been recorded, with unclear causes, as well as cases of non-lethal bycatch.

TUNISIA: Research effort is carried out through local boat-based photo-identification studies and sighting activities from passenger ferries, as well as effort to collect information on fisheries bycatch and depredation. No stranding network exists.

Major issue(s) or main threats or "hot" topics that have emerged during the said period for the Region:

No major hot topics were reported by the parties, but one party did mention marine litter and single-use plastic pollution as a hot topic. From the available reports, it appears bycatch is an issue in some areas. Seismic surveys are a cause of concern and should be carefully considered. Croatia is the only country in the region where commercial dolphin watching is taking place. Chemical pollution from legacy pollutants, particularly PCBs, has been documented as a threat to some cetacean species, particularly common bottlenose dolphins.

Recommendations / suggestions for Improvement of the conservation:

Some capacity building is needed in some areas, on topics such as stranding networks and necropsies. Although some parts of the region are well studied, with good understanding of cetacean conservation status, large portions of the region remain poorly studied, with little or no information on cetacean presence, abundance, status or threats. Focused effort would likely be needed in those areas, both in terms of research and in terms of building local capacity.