

Document: ACCOBAMS-SC14/2021/Doc05
Distribution: 17/11/2021

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

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Issue: Report on the conservation status of cetaceans and relevant activities in Central Mediterranean

1. Action requested

The Scientific Committee is invited to:

- a) **note** the information provided in this Report.

2. Background

Pursuant to the Rules on the Scientific Committee, each Regional Representative will be invited to present a report on the conservation status of cetaceans and relevant activities in the region under his/her competence.

Taking into account «Recommendation 12.1- Guidelines for Regional Representatives regarding the preparation of their regional reports» adopted by the 12th Meeting of the ACCOBAMS Scientific Committee, the 2nd Regional report - to be presented at the second Meeting of the Scientific Committee after the MOP - shall constitute an update to the 1st Regional Report and provide guidance to National Focal Points on their future national reports.

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Date of the last modification of the report *: 8 November 2021

Year of Start *: 2020

Year of End *: 2021

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 an update from the one presented at SC13 in early 2020. A number of activities 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.

In general, activities have been hampered by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which had emerged in the region roughly at the same time as the last Scientific Committee meeting. These difficulties led to pauses in some activities at certain times in most places. Despite this, numerous activities have nevertheless been carried out in the region, related to research, education, conservation and capacity building. Some countries have ongoing long-term research and monitoring programmes in place, while others lack such programmes. As noted in the previous report, the northern part of the region is much better studied, with substantial information gaps from the southern portion of the region.

Research has been carried out via a number of approaches, including local boat-based photo-identification studies, land-based surveys, dedicated line-transect aerial surveys, surveys from passenger ferries, passive acoustic monitoring, biopsy sampling, strandings and post-mortem investigations, and the use of unmanned aircraft (“drones”), focusing on the common bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), striped dolphin (*Stenella coeruleoalba*), common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*), Risso’s dolphin (*Grampus griseus*), Cuvier’s beaked whale (*Ziphius cavirostris*), sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) and fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*), which are all regular species in this region.

Analysis of acoustic data collected during the ACCOBAMS Survey Initiative in 2018 revealed a relatively large number of detections of beaked whales in the southern part of the region, off Libya and Tunisia. This may suggest that these waters, which have historically been data deficient areas, may provide key habitats for beaked whales.

A Natura 2000 area of about 500 km² has been designated for common bottlenose dolphins off the Po River delta, Italy, northern Adriatic Sea.

A key activity that took place since the previous meeting of the Scientific Committee are the new and updated Red List assessments for various cetacean species in the Mediterranean and Black Seas, under the framework of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Even though this pertains to the entire Mediterranean Sea (as well as the Black Sea), it is nevertheless highly relevant for the Central Mediterranean region, as key habitats exist in this region for several assessed species. Most assessments have not yet been published, but will likely to become published soon, with changes in status for some cetacean species in the Mediterranean. In addition to Mediterranean-level assessments, a number of local assessments have also recently been carried out.

During 2021, an updated Action Plan for the Conservation of Cetaceans in the Mediterranean Sea has been prepared under the auspices of SPA-RAC, in close collaboration with ACCOBAMS, and will be presented during SC14.

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

Main issues identified largely echo the ones reported in the previous report and represent ongoing and well-known threats, including bycatch in fishing gear and other interactions between cetaceans and fisheries, disturbance from recreational boating, shipping and other sources of underwater noise, chemical pollutants and marine litter.

In addition to bycatch, ingestion of fishing gear related to depredation of set nets (gill nets and trammel nets) by common bottlenose dolphins has been identified as a potential conservation threat in some parts of the region. An increasing reliance of common bottlenose dolphins on fish farms has been noted in some areas, with animals reportedly being fed by people operating the fish farms. In some areas, increasing rates of disturbance of cetaceans by recreational boating has been reported, as well as a general gradual trend of increasing recreational boat traffic. A noteworthy emerging issue of concern pertains to the increased incidence of marine litter originating from the personal protective equipment (PPE) and single-use plastics, both related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations / suggestions for Improvement of the conservation:

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.

Bycatch is a known issue for cetaceans in the region and globally, but robust estimates of bycatch are lacking in the Mediterranean Sea.

While the policy on paper largely appears adequate, a substantial lack of enforcement has been noted in several parts of the region and in relation to several types of threats.