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

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Issue: Report on the conservation status of cetaceans and relevant activities in Eastern 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.

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

Date of the last modification of the report *: 2019

Year of Start *: 2019

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 Eastern Mediterranean region:

Cyprus,

Egypt,

Greece,

Lebanon,

Syria,

Turkey (Mediterranean coast)

Overview of activities in the Region since the previous report:

Cyprus: Projects already registered in NETCCOBAMS are: ACCOBAMS Survey Initiative. Moreover, through a survey on the national cetaceans stranding networks in 2017/2018, data were provided to the ACCOBAMS permanent Secretariat

Egypt: Projects already registered in NETCCOBAMS are: ACCOBAMS Survey Initiative and the participation of Egypt to the CSMC4 that was held in Alegria between 11 and 13 November 2017.

Under the Dolphin interaction programme, there was a need to follow-up on the activity: Interactions between humans and dolphins addressed by Resolution 3.13: Human-dolphin interaction is not limited to fisheries, seismic surveys or even military activities, but also to pollution and land-based sources. In Egypt, there is an urgent need and priority to monitor and address threats to dolphins.

Experts, researchers and students participated to the 5th Conference on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the South Mediterranean Countries (CSMC5) that was held online from 13 to 15 April 2021.

Greece: Projects already registered in NETCCOBAMS are: ACCOBAMS Survey Initiative, MEDSEALITTER and FLT Mediterranean Monitoring Network – Marine species and threats.

Through a survey on the national cetaceans stranding networks in 2017/2018, data were provided to the ACCOBAMS permanent Secretariat. The data bank and tissue bank are available through the Pelagos Cetacean Research Institute. Stranded animals are: *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*, *Balaenoptera physalus*, *Delphinus delphis*, *Grampus griseus*, *Megaptera novaeangliae*, *Phocoena phocoena*, *Physester macrocephalus*, *Pseudorca crassidens*, *Stenella coeruleoalba*, *Tursiops truncatus* and *Ziphius cavirostris*. The country is working on the death origin, dynamic mapping, just spotted specimens, marine debris in necropsies and necropsies.

Lebanon: Projects already registered in NETCCOBAMS are: ACCOBAMS Survey Initiative and the participation of Lebanon to the CSMC4 that was held in Alegria between 11 and 13 November 2017.

Through a survey on the national cetaceans stranding networks in 2017/2018, data were provided to the ACCOBAMS permanent Secretariat. The country is trying to implement a tissue bank by collecting organs and tissues of stranded cetaceans. Every time a stranded animal is reported, a team from the National Centre for Marine Sciences intervene in order to perform the dissection, and therefore collecting organs and tissues.

The National Centre for Marine Sciences (CNRS-L) hosted the 5th Conference on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the South Mediterranean Countries (CSMC5) that was held online from 13 to 15 April 2021. Experts, researchers and students from Lebanon participated to the conference.

Syria: Projects already registered in NETCCOBAMS are: ACCOBAMS Survey Initiative and the participation of Syria to the CSMC4 that was held in Alegria between 11 and 13 November 2017.

Under the Dolphin interaction programme, there was a need to follow-up on the activity: Interactions between humans and dolphins addressed by Resolution 3.13: Creation of a scientific and field team, aiming (1) to the observation of cetaceans along the Syrian coast, (2) to follow-up on the cases of stranded cetacean (alive or dead), (3) to the identification of the causes of death. Moreover, Creation of a citizen science platform (e.g., social media) to solicit and validate the sightings, photos and other data. implementation many of awareness and educational campaigns targeting teachers, school students, and the general public will be one of the important aims of this team.

When it comes to interaction between cetaceans and fisheries: Local professional and amateur fishermen confirm that there are interactions between dolphins and fisheries along the Syrian coast. These interactions are seen almost daily, where dolphins follow fishing boats returning to harbors. Groups of offshore dolphins could include over 70 animals, where dolphins attack fish and take them from fishing nets (there were many records of these applications in Syrian water between *Tursiops truncatus* and purse seine nets and gill nets), this application causes a reduce in fishing yields, damages to fishing gear, and an unfriendly relationship between fishermen and dolphins. This offers preliminary insight on the degree of interactions between dolphins and fisheries. Unfortunately, the fishermen have no capacity to classify the species of the dolphins that interact with the fish inside the fishing gear. The most of these interactions are attribute to common bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) as the most regular species in the Syrian coast and the one more frequently in the interactions with the fishing gear. On another side, fishermen reported about interactions between another species of dolphins and the fisheries, unfortunately the fishermen could not classify exactly the species, there are doubts between short-beaked common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) and striped dolphins (*Stenella coeruleoalba*).

Experts, researchers and students participated to the 5th Conference on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the South Mediterranean Countries (CSMC5) that was held online from 13 to 15 April 2021.

Turkey (Mediterranean coast): Since Turkey was not included in the eastern Mediterranean countries report in the previous reporting period, there was no input.

In May and September 2021, two scientific expeditions were organized in Finike (Anaximander) Seamounts Special Environment Protected Area (SEPA), within the scope of protection and monitoring activities for Cetacea diversity by T.R. Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change, General Directorate for Protection of Natural Assets, in cooperation with Faculty of Aquatic Sciences, Istanbul University. The survey area is larger than the surface of Cyprus Island, with 1,124,173 hectares. During the line transect visual and acoustic surveys; six species were detected; sperm whale, striped dolphin, Risso's dolphin, Cuvier's beaked whale, bottlenose dolphin, rough-toothed dolphin.

Additionally, DMAD (Marine Mammals Research Association) has conducted research traditional visual surveys combined with passive acoustic monitoring between Marmaris and Anamur in the Levantine Sea since 2018 with ongoing survey effort, under the name of the project “Giant Guardians of The Deep Seas II”. Until now, covered eleven seasons with overall 99 days of survey effort, resulting with 14 encounters of deep divers (sperm whales and Cuvier’s beaked whales) and 49 encounters of small cetaceans. Additionally, DMAD in partnership with WWF-Turkey conducted seasonal survey efforts in the Dilek Peninsula, Aegean Sea, covering 6 seasons in 8 days. Common dolphins were the only sighted species during the surveys.

Further, a group of false killer whales were reported 6 nm off the coast of Gökçeada Island, Turkey, in the northern Aegean Sea in January 2020 (Dede et al. 2020). It was also the first reported sighting in 25 years for the Aegean Sea. In another study, which was conducted between 2019-2020, the acoustic signals of sperm whale were detected for the first time off Gökçeada Island in the northern Turkish Aegean Sea coast (Kesici et al. 2021).

Last but not the least, the project “Understanding Mediterranean multi-taxa 'bycatch' of vulnerable species and testing mitigation- a collaborative approach “(Bycatch project) took place in Turkey which aims to support UNEP/MAP Barcelona Convention, and specifically the southern and eastern Mediterranean Contracting Parties (Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey), to identify and test measures to reduce impact of fisheries on marine mammals, birds, turtles and elasmobranchs. Phase 1 of the project started in 2017, finished in June 2020. The Medbycatch 2 will expand the geographical scope of the project to include Croatia and Italy. France and Spain will also be included in policy and advocacy activities.

Experts, researchers and students participated to the 5th Conference on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the South Mediterranean Countries (CSMC5) that was held online from 13 to 15 April 2021.

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

Cyprus: There are no issues mentioned in the report

Egypt: Cetacean facing many challenges at the Mediterranean and Black Sea levels, which include, by-catch, collision with ships, pollution, habitat fragmentation, and others. In addition, low awareness and willingness of the stakeholders to participate to the projects presented and the shortage on the number of team members who are willing to take the step further. There is therefore a need for a regional program that is interested in establishing a database and a standardized monitoring model, as in the regional cetacean survey initiative.

Greece: There are no issues mentioned in the report

Lebanon: There are difficulties in implementing the Agreement for the following reasons:

- Lack of highly qualified personnel
- Lack of equipment, especially for the histology center
- Lack of adequate funding
- Difficulties in convincing public opinion of the interest of the agreement and conservation of cetaceans
- Episodically tense security situation not making it possible to carry out research and awareness-raising missions on a continuous basis

Syria: Several important issues need a lot of attention:

- Noise in the Levant probably became elevated than other times, due to the increased shipping, and military activities
- Pollution and other forms of habitat degradation, caused by the unsustainable and growing human activities

- Interactions between dolphins and purse seines have been recorded in Syrian fisheries, targeting the entangled fish in the nets, damaging the gear, which has a negative economic impact on local fishermen
- It is urgent to start using biodegradable fishing nets and lines

Turkey (Mediterranean coast): Continuous oil and gas related activities (seismic surveys, drilling) in the region have been observed with no concrete mitigation and legislation in place (e.g., obligation to hire an MMO during their activities) at a national level in order to assure the monitoring and conservation of cetaceans. It is critically important to develop noise monitoring and increase the capacity of relevant organizations and people in terms of measuring underwater noise. It is also important to assess the noise impact on aquatic organisms, including marine mammals, by low frequency sonars used during NATO military training and activities.

Recommendations / suggestions for Improvement of the conservation:

Cyprus

Egypt

Greece

Lebanon

Syria: To improve the conservation measures, we need to have the basic scientific background. It is not easy by the present lack of information on species composition of the cetaceans, distribution, and ecology. Information on the cetacean species occurring in or off the Syrian waters is extremely scarce and limited to a handful of stranding and sighting records. Consequently, **scientific research, and capacity building**, are seen as priorities. Conducting awareness and educational campaigns targeting teachers, school students, and the general public are urgently needed. In addition, establishment of fisheries observer schemes is a prerequisite. It will be a great work if we could take the Measures which reduce the noise in the Levant.

On the other side, we need to **encourage the fishermen to report about the lost and abandoned fishing gear.**

Turkey (Mediterranean coast): As known, during their 5th Meeting (Tangiers, 2013), the ACCOBAMS Parties resolved that during naval exercises involving sonar or underwater explosions, all areas designated as 'Areas of Special Concern for Beaked Whales' in the Mediterranean Sea should be avoided completely within a 50 nautical mile buffer zone. In this regard, it may be recommended to put pressure on organizations such as NATO and to question what they are doing about this issue.

Especially companies (countries) carrying out seismic activities in the region should be advised to work with MMOs and to conduct PAMs on board.