

PROGRESS REPORT OF THE ACCOBAMS EMERGENCY TASK FORCE FOR STRANDING EVENTS (AETFS) TO ASSIST WITH EMERGENCIES AND UNUSUAL MORTALITY EVENTS

Background

During the Eight Meeting of Parties to ACCOBAMS (November 2022, Malta), following the presentation of the Document MOP8/2022/Inf32, here attached, Parties requested the creation of a regional Task Force for stranding events : The ACCOBAMS Emergency Task Force for Stranding events (**AETFS**).

It aims at assisting emergency and unusual cetacean mortality events and more specifically to:

- monitor and report strandings and bycatch data in the area in a common and real time repository in order to note any deviation from the average stranding rate for the area, period and species;
- collect information on ongoing military exercises involving underwater noise sources to be monitored, and to enhance passive acoustic monitoring;
- routinely carry out complete *postmortem* investigations, including acoustic trauma, according to Resolutions 7.13 and 7.14, with remote advice and support from ACCOBAMS Experts (telenecropsy);
- collect and preserve tissue samples in double: 1) to be stored and analyzed in Country by local laboratories and stored in a centralized Tissue Banks (University of Padova and Schmalhausen Institute of Zoology of National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine) and 2) to deliver samples to European countries to be analyzed for a second opinion, and stored as a back-up tissue Bank;
- deliver brain tissue to the University of Padova for molecular and microscopic examination, and ears to the University of Liege and Hannover for microscopic examination so to support forensically acoustic impacts;
- report any incident related to acoustic trauma to ACCOBAMS Secretariat and to the Task Force;
- respond to live strandings and unusual mortality events;
- maintain preparedness through organizing necropsy and telenecropsy training sessions so to develop and improve remote advice for dissection and samplings.

The composition of the AETFS:

The Task Force is jointly chaired by **Sandro Mazzariol** (sandro.mazzariol@unipd.it) from Padova University and **Thierry Jauniaux** (T.Jauniaux@ulg.ac.be) from Liege University.

The 2 co-chairs are assisted, at least, by the following experts:

- Michel André
- Cristina Casalone
- Ursula Siebert
- Antonio Fernandez

Additional experts may join the AETFS after providing their CV to the ACCOBAMS Secretariat and both co-chairs.

First Meeting of the AETFS

A first Zoom meeting was held on Tuesday 11th April 2023 with all members as well as with the ACCOBAMS Secretariat.

They agreed on the following recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** the main objective of the AETFS is to give assistance to other experts in the ACCOBAMS Area and to reinforce the links / synergy between existing stranding networks.
- **Recommendation 2:** the ACCOBAMS Secretariat should formally inform all ACCOBAMS Focal Points of the launch of the AETFS and request them to update the list of all relevant national entities dealing with cetaceans stranding. The leader of each stranding network should be clearly identified.
- **Recommendation 3:** the AETFS could also assist Countries in facilitating the relevant permits for import/export of tissue samples.
- **Recommendation 4:** the ACCOBAMS Secretariat should establish, with the assistance of the AETFS, the list of relevant laboratories - inside but also outside the ACCOBAMS Area - that could be contacted to perform tissue sample analysis.
- **Recommendation 5:** The assistance of the AETFS in the Black Sea is strongly recommended with the specific goal of monitoring the effect of military activities in the Black Sea and adjacent waters. The AETF will propose a document regarding the situation in the Black Sea with a proposed budget for concrete actions such as:
 - collect information regarding the military activities ongoing in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean waters;
 - constantly monitor strandings and bycatch to eventually relate incidents spatially and temporally with military activities;
 - implement *postmortem* investigations to preserve and store samples for future analyses.