

REPORT OF THE ACCOBAMS-ASCOBANS JOINT BYCATCH WORKING GROUP April 2023

The Joint Bycatch Working Group (JBWG) was established in January 2019. Dr. Ayaka Amaha Oztürk (Turkish Marine Research Foundation / Faculty of Aquatic Sciences, Istanbul University, Türkiye), representing ACCOBAMS, and Dr. Peter Evans (Sea Watch Foundation/School of Ocean Sciences, Bangor University, UK) representing ASCOBANS, agreed to act as Co-Chairs, and have maintained regular contact with one another and their respective Secretariats ever since.

The first formal meeting of the Group was held online between 10 and 12 February 2021, attended by >150 persons from 31 countries spanning the Baltic, North Atlantic, Mediterranean and Black Seas. The first two days were devoted to 28 presentations sharing experiences in monitoring and mitigation of cetacean bycatch across the two Agreement Areas and covering different fishing gears. On the final day, members of the JBWG discussed and decided upon priorities in the form of a Programme of Work spanning the period 2021-2023. In addition, A total of [24 Recommendations](#) were made: five General Recommendations called for increased and more targeted sampling of high-risk fisheries (preferably a minimum of 5-10% of annual fleet activity), along with urgent measures in the Black Sea and Baltic Proper, working towards eliminating bycatch in those regions; ten Recommendations to improve monitoring, including wider use of Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM), better understanding of factors relating to bycatch risk, support for strandings schemes, pathological examinations, and greater use of drift models; and nine Recommendations to prevent and mitigate bycatch by greater stakeholder engagement, area-based measures, alternative gears and new technologies.

On 18 August 2022, a second, smaller, catch-up meeting was held online, reviewing progress on the Programme of Work established at the first meeting, identifying Leads for the different tasks set, revising priorities for some tasks, and proposing a schedule for each. Some are ongoing tasks with no set deadline for completion; others have a prescribed timeline. An updated review of the Programme of Work can be found in Annex 1. At this meeting, an update was provided by Anne-Marie Svoboda on the status of the CIBBRiNA project (involving several JBWG members) that had been submitted to the EU LIFE programme but been unsuccessful. A modified proposal with much reduced budget and greater emphasis on bycatch mitigation was being prepared for re-submission.

Besides national initiatives, several international bodies (e.g. ICES WGBYC, FAO, GFCM, IWC, OSPAR, HELCOM) are involved in actions relating to bycatch, and rather than duplicate those efforts (many of which already involve JBWG members), the WG aims to integrate those with initiatives that will fill gaps. To ensure regular liaison between JBWG and those bodies, representatives of the latter have participated in one or both of the JBWG meetings. Both Co-Chairs have also participated in meetings with the European Commission, and with the Regional Advisory Fisheries Councils, giving presentations.

Following the two online meetings mentioned above, a physical workshop was organized at the occasion of the Annual Conference of European Cetacean Society, on 17 April 2023, in O Grove, Spain. It was entitled “Current bycatch issues in European waters” and was open to all the conference participants. In total, 43 people attended (including some from fishing communities) and discussed bycatch issues in both ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS areas. New data on monitoring and assessment of bycatch in the Baltic Sea, Bay of Biscay, Black Sea and Mediterranean Sea were presented, highlighting situations of serious concern despite some progress at the political level due to the pressure exerted by the European Commission on its Member States. Some updates on mitigation techniques tested in the scope of different projects were presented as well as recent developments in regional policies.

Current fisheries policy and bycatch action plans were presented by DG MARE and ICES, along with a presentation highlighting areas where progress has been weak. A call was made to the conference requesting the Council of the European Cetacean Society to send a letter of concern to Baltic Sea states, relating to the endangered population of harbor porpoise in the Baltic Proper for which pinger deployment was recommended as a mitigation measure but which has stalled over military concerns that the sounds emitted by the pingers will interfere with the ability to detect mid-frequency active sonar used for anti-submarine detection.

ANNEX 1
PROGRAMME OF WORK 2021-2023 FOR THE JOINT BYCATCH WORKING GROUP OF ACCOBAMS AND ASCOBANS

(Version: 20 September 2022)

TOR	Task description		Lead	Priority	Timeframe	Report to
1.	Collate and prepare an overview of scientific information ¹ relevant to bycatch of affected cetacean species.					
	1.1.	ACCOBAMS Area: 1) Mediterranean, 2) Black Sea (e.g. ASI report, strandings network data, CeNoBS and Anemone reports). Engage Parties.	Ayaka Amaha Ozturk	High	Nov 2021, May 2023	SC14, SC15
	1.2.	ASCOBANS Area. Engage Parties.	Peter Evans	High	Sep 2022	AC27
2.	Review available information on IUU (Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated) fishing, recreational fishing, identification of bycatch risk areas, fishing techniques and gears applied in both agreement areas related to bycatch					
	2.1.	IUU: ACCOBAMS Secretariat to contact Parties regarding illegal driftnets > report to Bureau	ACCOBAMS Secretariat	High (ACC) Medium (ASC)	Nov 2022 Sep 2022	MOP8 / SC15 AC27
	2.2.	Recreational fishing		Medium	May 2023 Sep 2022	SC15 AC27
	2.3.	Identification of bycatch risk areas	Peter Evans (ASCOBANS)	High	EC contract to PE (ASC) completed Jun 2021	
	2.4.	Fishing techniques and gears - ICES collecting this information in the ASCOBANS Area; also discussed in ASCOBANS North Sea and Jastarnia Groups.	Leave to ICES WGBYC / CIBBRiNA? GFCM	High (ACC) Medium (ASC)	Ongoing	

¹ Related to abundance and management units, including population dynamics.

TOR	Task description		Lead	Priority	Timeframe	Report to
3.	Contribute to the assessment process of the EU-MSFD criteria and/or UNEP-MAP EcAp, and associated targets					
	3.1.	EU MSFD: Comparison between the Agreement areas. Intermediate report.	Sinead Murphy	High	by end of 2022?	JBWG2
	3.2.	EU MSFD: ABIOMMED project in the ACCOBAMS Area. OSPAR and HELCOM leading in the ASCOBANS Area (underway).	ABIOMMED Partners		Ongoing	JBWG2
	3.3.	UNEP-MAP EcAp: Report on SPA-RAC in ACCOBAMS Area.	SPA/RAC		End of 2023	JBWG2
4.	Review and provide updates on bycatch mitigation reduction measures currently available or under development and their effectiveness, using existing sources - Reviews done recently in both Agreement Areas		Co-chairs & Secretariats	Medium	Ongoing	JBWG2
	4.1.	Collating experiences from case studies in the two Agreement Areas that describe which measures have or have not worked.	Co-chairs	High	Ongoing	JBWG2
5.	Prepare an overview of national and international legislation and other measures relevant to the monitoring and management of cetacean bycatch, and include an overview of actions taken to deliver on ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS obligations - Overview presented e.g. at JBWG1		Secretariats	Low	2023	JBWG2
6.	Prepare, as appropriate, and in coordination with ICES WGBYC, advice on: a. target setting including potential conservation and user objectives, in accordance with the policies of the two Agreements; b. monitoring cetacean bycatch and fishing operations					
	6.1.	Advice on target setting (bycatch limits) - OSPAR, HELCOM, ICES WGs working on this in the ASCOBANS Area but plan is to have two workshops to reach conclusions		High (ACC) Medium (ASC)	Oct 2021 Apr 2023	SC14 AC28
	6.2.	Advice on monitoring cetacean bycatch and fishing operations - ICES WGBYC working on this, with reference to the two Agreement Areas	-	Medium		

TOR	Task description		Lead	Priority	Timeframe	Report to
7.	Provide technical support as required to facilitate dialogue with relevant bodies that have certification schemes, such as the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), including by actively contributing to the assessment of relevant fisheries with respect to cetacean bycatch		-	High	Ongoing	As requested
8.	Comment on requests for information or advice received through the Secretariats		Secretariats	High	Ongoing	As requested
9.	Report back to ACCOBAMS Scientific Committee and ASCOBANS Advisory Committee meetings, and where appropriate provide input intersessionally to other relevant meetings or working groups under the two agreements			High	Ongoing	As requested
10.	Engagement with fishers					
	10.1.	Develop guidelines on how to best incentivise and engage fishers in mitigation and monitoring programmes. - Potentially covered in the International Bycatch Project.	Anne-Marie Svoboda	High	?	?
	10.2.	Develop an outreach strategy (include sociologists)	?	High	?	?