

REPORT OF THE ACCOBAMS WHALE WATCHING WORKING GROUP

Issue: whale watching activities

1. Action requested

The Scientific Committee is invited to:

- a. consider the document reflecting the state of play of whale watching activities in the ACCOBAMS area,
- b. consider the draft Terms of Reference for the WWWG,
- c. consider the draft Terms of Reference for the ECS Whale Watching Workshop (Annex 1),
- d. provide recommendations to the Parties on this issue.

2. Background

A Working Group for the assessment, monitoring and data collection of cetacean watching activities in the ACCOBAMS area was established in 2014 during the Ninth Meeting of the Scientific Committee.

The Whale Watching Working Group was reactivated in 2020 and its Terms of Reference need to be updated in light of the activities of the ACCOBAMS Program of Work for 2023-2025 adopted at the 8th Meeting of the Parties to ACCOBAMS (Resolution 8.2) related to Cetacean watching (CA2d).

ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT BY THE WHALE WATCHING WORKING GROUP IN 2024

Under the mandate set by SC14, the following activities were developed:

- The results of the study carried out in the Sado estuary (Portugal) to define a carrying capacity for commercial dolphin watching are ready to be implemented and a new system of licensing will be developed in the future.
- An App named ILogWhales incorporating the common procedure for data collection by the whale watching companies, was developed by CIMA Research Foundation (CIMA) in the framework of the Interreg Fr-It project EcoSTRIM. Since 2023 CIMA and the Whale Museum (Madeira) collaborate to update the App and test it with whale-watching operators in the Mediterranean and in Atlantic. The results (to be presented at SC17) are promising but a few updates and improvements are still needed. It is expected that a new version could also be tested in south Portugal in 2025.
- In the framework of the project “*NextGenerationEU – Piano Nazionale Resistenza e Resilienza (PNRR)*” funded by the EU thanks to the Award of the MUR “*National Biodiversity Future Center – NBFC - Activity 4 Biodiversity mainstreaming in Maritime Spatial Planning*”, CIMA is mapping the whale-watching effort and quantifying the socio-economic value of the whale-watching with the High Quality Whale-Watching® in the Ligurian waters. Results will be available at the end of 2025.
- MIRACETI implemented a pilot study (MARKER 2021-2023) aiming at providing concrete and standardized assessment tools (ecological and socioeconomic indicators) to monitor the evolution of pressure on cetacean populations from whale-watching activity in the French Mediterranean Sea and evaluate the effectiveness of the High Quality Whale-Watching® (HQWW) certification. Following the preliminary results, MIRACETI will look for funding to develop an in-depth study to further analyse this issue.
- The HQWW collective certification mark has been renewed with Cabinet Hautier by ACCOBAMS. However, the Regulations governing the use of this label still need to be updated and can be registered with the Monegasque and EU trademark offices in the next months.
- MIRACETI initiated the co-construction of a consolidated project to promote the contribution of whale-watching operators to cetacean conservation in MPAs by:
 - i) Strengthening collaboration with MPA managers;
 - ii) Testing tools for collecting and promoting cetacean data and knowledge;
 - iii) Developing tools for exchanging and sharing knowledge.
- ACCOBAMS is an associated partner of the Interreg Euro-MED “*BlueWatch*” project proposal, led by CIMA Research Foundation. If accepted, it will involve Italy, Portugal, Croatia, Spain, and Montenegro, with the goal of reinforcing and promoting sustainability in the marine tourism sector, focusing on marine life watching.

DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE WORKING GROUP ON WHALE WATCHING**Mandate**

With a view to assessing cetacean watching activities in the Agreement area and their potential adverse impacts on cetacean individuals and populations, the Whale Watching Working Group (WWWG) in cooperation with other experts and partners will:

- Support the work of the expert who will be tasked to analyse existing national legislations related to whale watching. The report of the study will be presented at MOP9;
- Review the results of the study carried out in Portugal to define the whale watching 'carrying capacity' in a targeted geographical area where commercial whale watching is intensively practiced (Sado estuary);
- Continue testing the App that incorporates the common procedure for data collection and assess the results achieved so far and the lessons learnt in the areas where the procedure is being tested. The report will be presented at SC17;
- Develop a dedicated programme for data collection on OBSenMER collaborative platform, bearing in mind the necessary compatibility with the App ILogWhales;
- Support the development of project proposal(s) aimed to strengthen exchanges and cooperation between tourism operators, policy makers and scientific institutions in order to assess cetacean watching pressure on cetacean populations.
- Draft and present at MOP9 the revision of the Regulations governing the use of the collective certification mark "HIGH QUALITY WHALE-WATCHING®" ([Resolution 6.20](#) on *Commercial Cetacean Watching Activities in the ACCOBAMS Area*).

ANNEX 1

TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR AN ACCOBAMS WORKSHOP TO IMPROVE DATA REPORTING FROM THE WHALE-WATCHING OPERATORS

According to the ACCOBAMS-MOP8/2022/Doc31/Annex8, the Work Programme 2020-2022 partially achieve:

- Gathering information on cetacean watching activities and identifying potential issues in order to identify the hotspots of WW activities in the ACCOBAMS Area.
- Testing the proposed common procedure (data collection system) for whale watching vessels in pilot areas and a variety of operation types (e.g. the Liguro-Provençal Basin, Gibraltar Strait, and south Portugal), in collaboration with relevant projects such as EcoSTRIM.
- Working in close cooperation with IWC and other relevant International Organizations.

Additionally, the Work Programme 2023-2025 (ACCOBAMS-SC15/2023/Doc06), proposed two main actions:

- Monitoring the status of whale watching activities in the ACCOBAMS Area and their potential adverse impacts on individual cetaceans and on populations
- Promote the use of whale watching vessels as platforms of opportunity by:
 - ✓ Reviewing and updating the data collection form for commercial whale watching vessels and test the revised common procedure for whale watching activity in identified pilot areas (e.g. the Ligurian-Provençal Basin, including the Pelagos Sanctuary, Gibraltar Strait, and south Portugal).
 - ✓ Organizing photo-ID and data collection training for whale watching operators, with the final goal of sharing the collected data.

Moreover, the workshop "*Setting up an international network to reinforce the collaboration with Marine Mammal Tourism companies and enhance their sustainability*" held during the 34th Conference of the European Cetacean Society in Spain concluded on 3 main challenges in order to reinforce the sustainability of the whale-watching activity:

- 1) the need of a public involvement in label management, data sharing, access, use, and reuse;
- 2) the need to build a collaborative network willing to work together on a joint action plan including the definition of a limited but efficient WW data collection;
- 3) the need to highlight to policy-makers that WW data is complementary data but cannot replace data collected by dedicated research surveys.

In order to improve data collection from whale-watching operators and to monitor the status of whale-watching activities in the ACCOBAMS Area, a one-day workshop is proposed for the next ECS Conference (Azores, May 2025) with the following ToR:

- Assessing the potential adverse impacts on individual cetaceans and populations:
 - Defining indicators to assess the potential adverse impacts on cetaceans.
 - Identifying gaps in whale-watching legislation in the ACCOBAMS area.
- Promote the use of whale-watching vessels as platforms of opportunity by:
 - Defining good practices of collaboration that allow using whale watching vessels as platforms of opportunity;
 - Sharing and using the existing App and web platform to collect and register data.