

REPORT OF THE JOINT MEETING ACCOBAMS / BLACK SEA COMMISSION SECRETARIATS IN 2024

Issue: Collaboration with the Black Sea Commission

Background

On 6th and 7th March 2024, (Istanbul – Türkiye), the Secretariats of ACCOBAMS and of the Black Sea Commission have jointly organized a meeting to take stock of common subjects in relation to the Black Sea.

It was attended by Representatives from the ACCOBAMS Secretariat, the Black Sea Commission Permanent Secretariat, the EU/DG Mare, the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean and the Black Sea (GFCM). Representatives from Black Sea ACCOBAMS Parties and Members of the Scientific Committee also participated in the meeting.

REPORT OF THE JOINT MEETING ACCOBAMS / BLACK SEA COMMISSION



6 and 7 March 2024, Istanbul - Türkiye

Report of the Joint meeting ACCOBAMS - Black Sea Commission

The Secretariats of ACCOBAMS and of the Black Sea Commission have jointly organized a meeting to take stock of common subjects in relation to the Black Sea on **6-7 March 2024, in Istanbul**, in the premises of the Black Sea Commission Permanent Secretariat.

It was attended by Representatives from the ACCOBAMS Secretariat, the Black Sea Commission Permanent Secretariat, the EU/DG Mare, the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean and the Black Sea (GFCM). Representatives from Black Sea ACCOBAMS Parties and Members of the Scientific Committee also participated to the meeting.

The full list of participants is shown in [Annex I](#) to this report.

After welcoming addresses from Mrs. Susana Salvador, ACCOBAMS Executive Secretary, and from Ms. Iryna Makarenko, Black Sea Commission Permanent Secretariat, participants adopted the agenda as presented in [Annex II](#) to this report.

Regarding Document ACCOBAMS-BSC/2024_Doc04 on fisheries issues in the Black Sea, participants agreed with it, taking into account amendments proposed during the meeting and shown in [Annex III](#).

Conclusions of the Joint meeting ACCOBAMS - Black Sea Commission, as agreed by participants, appear in [Annex IV](#).

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ANNEX II – AGENDA

- 1. Discussion about priorities defined in respective Programmes of Work**
- 2. Areas for joint work in 2024 and 2025**
- 3. Conservation Plans**
- 4. Fisheries issues: Network for harbour porpoise bycatch in the Black Sea between the European Commission, GFCM, ACCOBAMS and the Black Sea Commission**
- 5. Monitoring cetacean populations in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea**
 - a. Outcomes of the ACCOBAMS Survey Initiative 2018/2019
 - b. Preparatory phase for the next survey in the ACCOBAMS area
- 6. Future collaboration between ACCOBAMS and the Black Sea Commission**

ANNEX III – FISHERIES ISSUE IN THE BLACK SEA

1- BACKGROUND IN ACCOBAMS

During the Seventh Meeting of the Parties to ACCOBAMS (Türkiye, 2019), Parties recommended the re-establishment of an ACCOBAMS expert panel on strandings to assist with emergency and unusual mortality events (Resolution 7.14). Moreover, under the section CA1.d - Functional Stranding Networks and Responses To Emergency Situation- of the Programme of Work for the triennium 2020-2022 (Resolution 7.6), Parties, Scientific Committee and Secretariat were invited to *“Encourage the creation of a permanent expert panel on strandings to assist on emergencies and unusual mortality as a means of implementation for the action of setting /reinforce official national stranding networks (with all national institutions concerned) as appropriate, and encourage collaborations among national networks of Parties”*.

Information was presented to the Eighth Meeting of the Parties to ACCOBAMS (Malta, 2022) and Parties requested the creation of a regional Task Force for stranding events: The ACCOBAMS Emergency Task Force for Stranding events (AETFS).

2- THE ACCOBAMS EMERGENCY TASK FORCE FOR STRANDING EVENTS (AETFS)

The AETFS 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.

Composition of the AETFS

The Task Force will be 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:

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- Cristina Casalone - cristina.casalone@izsto.it
- Ursula Siebert - Ursula.Siebert@tiho-hannover.de
- Antonio Fernandez - antonio.fernandez@ulpgc.es

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

3- SPECIAL SITUATION IN THE BLACK SEA

3.1 - State of play of Black Sea cetaceans

The cetacean fauna of the Black Sea includes three species which are recognized as endemic subspecies – the Black Sea harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena relicta* Abel, 1905), the Black Sea common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis ponticus* Barabash-Nikiforov, 1935) and the Black Sea bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus ponticus* Barabash, 1940). The ranges of all the Black Sea cetacean subspecies include open waters of the Black Sea, as well as territorial waters and exclusive economic zones of all Black Sea countries. Also, the Sea of Azov is the habitat for a distinctive decreasing population of the Black Sea harbour porpoise. The conservation status of Black Sea cetaceans has been reviewed and assessed under initiatives by the European Cetacean Society (1992), the European Commission (1999), the Black Sea Commission (1999 and 2008), ACCOBAMS (2002, 2006 and 2010), the International Whaling Commission (2004), and the IUCN (2008, in progress). The Black Sea harbour porpoise and the Black Sea bottlenose dolphin are now listed as Endangered by the IUCN (Birkun and Frantzis, 2008; Birkun, 2012) and the Black Sea common dolphin is listed as Vulnerable (Birkun, 2008). Eleven Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs) were formally distinguished in the Black Sea by the IUCN (2021), among them the whole Sea of Azov, Kerch Strait and the Turkish Straits System (<https://www.marinemammalhabitat.org/imma-eatlas/>).

All three Black Sea cetacean species suffer from common and specific threats, both natural and anthropogenic. They are all affected by prey depletion and by habitat degradation, chemical pollution and underwater noise, microplastic contamination, as well as infection diseases causing many mass mortality events. Amongst the anthropogenic factors, incidental mortality in fishing nets is the most serious threat, which needs immediate action by riparian states (ACCOBAMS SC 14, 2021). Although all three Black Sea cetacean species are 'bycaught', the majority (often more than 90% in annual estimates) of recorded cetacean entanglements are harbour porpoises (Birkun et al. 2014; Popov et al 2022). Bycatch is, indeed, the major factor affecting the population trend in harbour porpoises in the region. There is also a threat of illegal live catches for captivity purposes posed to bottlenose dolphins.

3.2 - Proposed Network for harbour porpoise bycatch in the black sea between the European Commission (DG Mare), GFCM, ACCOBAMS and the Black Sea Commission

Organizations Involved:

- European Commission, DG Mare
- General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM)
- Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Contiguous Atlantic Area (ACCOBAMS)
- Black Sea Commission's Permanent Secretariat

General Aim:

The general aim of this collaborative network is to address the issue of high-rate harbour porpoise bycatch in the Black Sea region through coordinated efforts, data sharing, research, and policy implementation, within the ultimate goal of reducing and mitigating by-catches during fishing activities.

Specific Objectives:

- To identify Contact Points in each involved organization and in each Black Sea Country
- Sharing information contributing to assess the current status and trends of harbour porpoise populations in the Black Sea
- To enhance the knowledge about by-caught animals so to better quantify the real impact of those bycatches in the harbour porpoise population and in terms of the sustainability of Black Sea fisheries

- To enhance synergies between stakeholders, the fishing sector, marine conservation organizations and regional fisheries management organizations, academia, and decision-makers
- To promote public awareness to the problem, disseminate Best Practices towards reinforcing conservation of harbour porpoise in the Black Sea region
- To create a specific Black Sea Sub Task

3.3 - Specific Black Sea Sub Task¹

In the framework of the AETFS, a specific “Black Sea” Sub-Task, composed by experts from Black Sea Countries is to be created and shall provide annual summary information to the AETFS, and to the “Network for harbour porpoise bycatch in the black sea between the European Commission (DG Mare), GFCM, ACCOBAMS and the Black Sea Commission”.

The main objectives of the “Black Sea” Sub-Task will be:

- monitor strandings and bycatch;
- implement *postmortem* investigations to preserve and store samples of bycaught animals for future analyses.

¹ The information gathered by the subtask or network about the bycatch of harbour porpoise in the Black Sea is collected, analysed, and processed by the participating specialists in their personal capacities. The aforementioned information does not represent official information or reporting by the respective national competent authorities or government bodies and ought not to be regarded as such. Furthermore, the activities of the EU Member States’ joint special group on the EU Action Plan: Protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries (Marine Action Plan), including regarding *Phocoena phocoena* bycatch rates, threshold values and maximum allowable mortality from incidental catches in the Black Sea, remain exclusively the sole competence and responsibility of each Member State.

ANNEX IV – CONCLUSIONS

1. Participants agreed to consider:
 - a. updating the draft Conservation Plan for Black Sea Cetaceans for (2025-2030) for further submission to relevant Black Sea Commission Advisory Groups and consideration by the Black Sea Commission.
 - b. implementing the Conservation Management Plan framework for Black Sea cetacean species.
2. Secretariats agreed to revise the Annex of the MoU between Black Sea Commission Permanent Secretariat and ACCOBAMS.
3. Participants agreed to continue efforts to deepen cooperation on cetaceans' conservation between ACCOBAMS, GFCM, BSC PS and EU/DG MARE in the Black Sea region and other relevant entities as appropriate.
4. Participants expressed their commitment:
 - a. to conduct basin wide survey as ASI2 for estimating cetacean abundance and distribution, and
 - b. to engage within the ASI2 contact group.
5. Secretariats will liaise with Ukraine to ensure coordination of activities taking into account current circumstances.
6. Regarding monitoring and mitigation project of harbour porpoise bycatch by GFCM, participants agreed that results of the GFCM project were impressive and promising for the use of PALs as mitigation measures against the bycatch of harbour porpoises, which is still the most serious threat for this subspecies. Participants recommended to stress this point at the next SC and following MOP to elaborate some practical recommendations.
7. In relation to fisheries issues, participants agreed to consider creation of a collaborative network between the EU/DGMARE, GFCM, ACCOBAMS, and the Black Sea Commission aimed to facilitate the joint response to the objective of addressing the critical high-rates of harbour porpoise bycatch in the Black Sea region.
8. Participants considered ACCOBAMS-BSC/2024_Doc04 on fisheries issues in the Black Sea and agreed with it, taking into account amendments proposed during the meeting, as it is shown in [Annex III](#).