

## PROGRESS REPORT FROM THE TASK MANAGER - FUNCTIONAL STRANDING NETWORKS AND RESPONSES TO EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

### Issue: stranding networks and responses to emergency situations

#### 1. Action requested

The Scientific Committee is invited to:

- a. **consider** the Progress report from the Task Manager- Functional stranding networks and responses to emergency situations,
- b. **provide recommendations** to the Parties on this issue.

#### 2. Background

In accordance with the main priorities of the 2023-2025 Working Programme, during the 15<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Scientific Committee, members decided to designate the following Task Managers, supported by the respective Vice Task Managers and Support Groups:

##### **CA1a- Cetacean population estimates and distribution**

Task Manager: Tilen GENOV

Vice Task Manager: Simone PANIGADA

##### **CA1d – Functional stranding networks and responses to emergency situations**

Task Manager: Pavel GOL'DIN

Vice Task Manager: Anastasia KOMNENOU

##### **CA2a – Interactions with fisheries / aquaculture**

Task Manager: Dimitar POPOV

Vice Task Manager: Caterina FORTUNA

##### **CA3a – Area-based measures for cetacean conservation**

Task Manager: Léa DAVID

Vice Task Manager: Souad LAMOUTI

Each Task Manager will be invited to present a summary of relevant activities.

**CA1d – Functional stranding networks and responses to emergency situations****Update on activities undertaken after SC 15**

Task Manager: Pavel GOL'DIN

Vice Task Manager: Anastasia KOMNENOU

Support Group: Marta AZZOLIN, Rimel BENMESSAOUD, Olfa CHAIEB, Erdem DANYER, Işıl AYTEMİZ DANYER, Aimilia DROUGAS, Carolina FERNANDEZ MALDONADO, Draško HOLCER, Thierry JAUNIAUX, Celine MAHFOUZ, Sandro MAZZARIOL, Danny MORICK, Marian PAIU, Guido PIETROLUONGO, Dimitar POPOV, Yianna SAMUEL, Marina SEQUEIRA, Mark SIMMONDS, Arda M. TONAY

The 17th annual marine mammal necropsy workshop was organized by the Department of Veterinary Pathology (University of Liege, Belgium), in collaboration with the Laboratory of Applied Bioacoustics LAB (Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Spain), the UMS Pelagis, Centre de Recherche sur les Mammifères Marins (University of La Rochelle, France), Institute for Terrestrial and Aquatic Wildlife Research, University of Veterinary Medicine Hannover (Germany) and the department of Comparative Biomedicine and Food Science, (University of Padova, Italy). The main goal of this workshop was to train experts biologists and veterinarians on the European Best Practice Document on cetaceans postmortem investigations and tissue sampling in order to gain information on possible threats for marine mammals conservation. The special focus was on postmortem, teleneecropsy & inner ear investigations. The workshop was two-step, May 13: on-line webinar, and July 9-11: on-site necropsy workshop (University of Liege, Belgium).

A teleneecropsy training workshop on a scientific photography protocol was organized by ACCOBAMS in collaboration with SPA/RAC and INSTM, at INSTM Monastir Tunisia, in November 2023.

The second ACCOBAMS workshop on ingested marine litter monitoring and entanglement evidence in marine mammals of the Adriatic Sea was held in February 2024 at the University of Padova, Italy.

The workshop on ingested marine litter monitoring and entanglement evidence in the ACCOBAMS area was convened on the 6 & 7 April 2024 in Catania, Italy. The main objective was to improve the collection of relevant data, especially from stranded cetaceans, with a specific focus on identifying best practice related to monitoring ingested marine litter and entanglement evidences in the ACCOBAMS Area.

Series of internal online trainings on live strandings, necropsy and sample collection as well as zoonotic diseases under one health aspects for the provincial personnel of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Turkish Republic have been conducted since 2021 by the Turkish veterinary experts.

Under the project LIFE DELFI, online and in presence training were organized in Italy and Croatia in order to harmonize diagnostic interpretation of post-mortem findings applying specific frameworks to the post-mortem investigations. First results regarding pathogens prevalence have been recently published (Grattarola et al., 2024; Legnardi et al., 2024) as well as some preliminary results on human interactions (Mattioda et al., 2024). Additionally, videos and virtual reality experiences were developed for continuous and standardized capacity building events. Additionally, local rescue teams were trained for a first response in case of alive strandings and for disentanglement procedures.

The conceptual framework for the ACCOBAMS Emergency Task Force for Stranding events (AETFS) was presented at the Joint meeting ACCOBAMS - Black Sea Commission, 6-7 March 2024. 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; collect information on ongoing underwater noise sources (including military sources, seismic surveys, use of sonar for oil and gas exploration research, or other work) that effect cetaceans to be monitored, and to enhance passive acoustic monitoring; routinely carry out complete postmortem investigations, including acoustic trauma, with remote advice and support from ACCOBAMS Experts (teleneecropsy), when needed; collect and preserve tissue samples and store as a back-up; support the forensic examination of samples when necessary; support live strandings and unusual mortality events responses. The draft Action Plan for Functional

stranding networks and responses to emergency situations has been outlined based on the ACCOBAMS Resolutions and information documents with the input from Task Force members. The document is still under discussion.

National Stranding Networks and stranding research teams have been active in most Party countries, including but not limited to Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Romania, Spain, Tunisia, Türkiye, Ukraine. Among them, the National Stranding Network for Cetaceans in **Tunisia** has been actively involved in reporting cetacean strandings along the Tunisian coast. Since May 2023 until today, over 45 carcasses were documented from five different species, with a notable dominance of *Tursiops truncatus*. Necropsy was undertaken when possible and tissue samples were actively collected. **Greece** has implemented on May 2023 the Joint Ministerial Decision (Official Gazette no. 3376/B/19-5-2023) of the National Stranding and Monitoring Network of marine wild species (cetaceans, monk seals, marine turtles and Chondrichthyes [sharks, rays]) management stranded alive or dead in Greek territorial waters. A georeferenced National Marine Species Strandings Databank and a National Tissue Bank is also forced to be created to collect and evaluate all the past and present related information. For helping towards the effective management of marine wild species local Stranding network hubs are created in Cyclades islands, following the coastal area and islands of Ionian and Aegean Sea. ARION's Vet Network offers their knowhow and help in stranding events in other Mediterranean countries when asked (e.g. Albania, Cyprus, etc). In **Romania** the national network included more than 1000 students and teachers as part of it. In **Bulgaria**, the Ministry of Environment and Water continues its effort to improve the stranding network by assigning collection and necropsies of fresh carcasses of stranded cetaceans to Green Balkans' Wildlife Rescue Centre. Yet, coordination with Regional Environmental authorities and municipalities is not perfect and such cases when that is achieved are very scarce

Several unusual mortality events were recorded in the ACCOBAMS area. A multiple stranding of beaked whales *Ziphius cavirostris* was recorded at the coast of Cyprus in February 2023. The presence of undigested fresh squid in the stomach, which is an indicator of sudden death, and the intravascular gas bubbles seen in macroscopic examination are consistent with the general findings obtained in previous studies on beaked whales stranded due to military activities (Tonay et al. 2024). According to the report provided by the government of Cyprus, it was "likely to have been caused by an acoustic related disturbance, probably associated to mid-frequency sonar activities". An UME of harbour porpoises was recorded in the Ukrainian north-western Black Sea in summer 2023, following the freshwater discharge after the Kakhovka dam was blown up (Vishnyakova et al., 2024), and another event was suggested in Georgia in March 2024. On May 18, 2024, three disoriented *Ziphius* were stranded alive on the eastern coast of Corsica, and two days later another whale was found dead on the island of Elba. Also, on October 24, 2024, three disorientated adult *Grampus griseus* were stranded alive on the Northern cost of Corfu Island in Greece, treated in situ by ARION Vet Network but died 2 days later. Death was probably related to fishing activities in the area.

Among the most needed activities the members of the Task Force listed the creation and maintaining a living updated list of stranding networks, involved research institutions, other relevant contacts in the ACCOBAMS countries and other networking mechanisms. Also, a role of national focal points in developing stranding networks and responses to emergency situations was suggested as crucial.