

PROGRESS REPORT ON VESSEL STRIKES ISSUES, INCLUDING A WHALE SAFE CERTIFICATE

Issue: vessel strikes

1. Action requested

The Scientific Committee is invited to:

- a. **consider** the progress report on vessel strikes issues, including a whale safe certificate,
- b. **provide recommendations** to the Parties on this issue.

2. Background

ACCOBAMS and the International Whaling Commission (IWC) have recognized the problem of vessel strikes and have been working together to develop a better understanding of the issue and to develop effective mitigation measures inter alia within the ACCOBAMS area.

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Background information

ACCOBAMS and the International Whaling Commission (IWC) have recognized the problem of vessel strikes and have been working together to develop a better understanding of the issue and to develop effective mitigation measures *inter alia* within the ACCOBAMS area.

Several areas of the Mediterranean Sea were identified during previous workshops on this topic as areas of particular interest due to shipping and cetacean densities:

- (1) Strait of Gibraltar;
- (2) Wider Pelagos Sanctuary area;
- (3) Hellenic Trench;
- (4) area around the Balearic Islands;
- (5) area between Almeria and Nador at the eastern side of the Alborán Sea;
- (6) Strait of Sicily.

A Working Group (WG) was established under the auspices of the ACCOBAMS Scientific Committee to ensure that the recommendations of the workshops and the resolutions from the Meeting of the Parties are acted upon. The WG should work in close contact with the ACCOBAMS Secretariat, the IWC, the Pelagos Sanctuary and other relevant experts.

An early focus for the WG should be to liaise with riparian nations and others to obtain information concerning both cetaceans and vessel traffic that will enable it to identify areas for cetaceans (especially fin and sperm whales) where they are (or are potentially) susceptible to vessel strikes (based upon actual data and simulation models that incorporate information on whale and vessel distribution and predictions of collision rates). On this basis it will be better able to determine where, and what kind of mitigation measures can be taken.

This will be achieved by:

- ▲ reporting of vessel movements and density at appropriate geographical scales from maritime companies, involving both bottom-up (i.e., awareness, involvement) and top-down (i.e., regulatory) approaches;
- ▲ mapping the temporal and geographic distribution and abundance of cetaceans in relationship to similar information on vessel traffic to identify potential higher risk areas;
- ▲ estimation of numbers of vessel strikes including data from:
 - strandings networks (including detailed necropsies);
 - photo-identification studies (photographs may contain evidence of non-lethal encounters with vessels);
 - data collected by the IWC vessel strike data base;
- ▲ modelling exercises to assess potential threats at the population level.

The ultimate objective for ACCOBAMS is to collect enough information to allow a robust assessment of the extent of vessel strikes within the agreement area, and develop and evaluate effective mitigation measures, recognising that there is no universal solution to the problem. While the animal welfare issue applies to all individual whales, priority for mitigation measures may be directed at areas/species where there is a probable population level effect.

The work carried out by the WG would lead to the creation of a Mediterranean network, including ACCOBAMS Range States, ACCOBAMS Partners, the IWC, different research institutes, and concerned shipping companies to contribute to the central data base on vessel strike data developed by the IWC, to facilitate information exchange and data sharing.

Terms of Reference

- (1) Members will contribute constructively to the work of the WG, in a voluntary capacity.
- (2) Communication will be mainly by email, but where necessary, meetings may be organized, ideally in concomitance with some other events (e.g. ECS Conference, IWC meeting, etc.) to save money.
- (3) The WG will suggest initial high priority work based on the recommendations of the workshops, to be implemented in close contact with the ACCOBAMS Secretariat and Parties, the Pelagos Sanctuary and the IWC Scientific Committee, as well as other relevant experts and research groups in the region.
- (4) The WG will detail and prioritize the research and management recommendations developed during the last Workshops. This will include liaising with Parties, Range States and other appropriate institutions to work towards identifying high collision risk areas and appropriate mitigation measures.

Link with the Scientific Committee and of the International Whaling Commission

A strong link with the Ship Strike Working Group (SSWG) of the IWC has been established in order to use the same online database developed by the SSWG and to follow the recommendations of the previous workshops.

Key components of the work on vessel strikes involve better communication with stakeholders (e.g., shipping companies) and increased reporting of events via regional initiatives and especially the global vessel strikes database (<https://iwc.int/ship-strikes>) and an increased efforts in this regard within the ACCOBAMS area. Such efforts shall include:

- (1) promotion of the issue and the importance of reporting via a number of *fora* including specialist marine press;
- (2) further evaluation and dissemination of information on mitigation approaches such as WhaleAlert app and REPCET;
- (3) additional co-operation with IMO (and its MEPC) both via IWC and CMS agreements, but also through initiatives with member states (the most appropriate mechanism for IMO action);
- (4) improved protocols for the identification of vessel strikes via necropsies;
- (5) investigation of incidences with regard to the nature of vessel strike injuries within photo-identification studies;
- (6) encourage studies that improve access to the temporal and spatial distribution of shipping including AIS information;
- (7) encourage studies that improve our understanding of the temporal and spatial distribution of cetaceans within the region, including telemetry studies;
- (8) encourage studies to develop and evaluate mitigation measures, incorporating *inter alia* results from (6) and (7) above, recognizing that appropriate measures will vary depending on circumstances and areas.

This working group should continue to work to collate information and report on relevant studies within and outside the ACCOBAMS area. It will foster collaboration with ASCOBANS, CMS and IMO and develop priority actions and studies, including the consideration of a project to develop a standard training module.

Mitigation measures

Mitigation measures for vessel strikes with fin whales have been discussed during dedicated IWC-ACCOBAMS workshops, during which different recommendations were discussed and suggested. Measures that separate whales from vessels (or at least minimise co-occurrence) in space and time to the extent possible are the most effective, where

this is feasible (e.g., routing schemes). The most effective and only demonstrated measure to reduce fatal collisions with most large whales is to reduce speed to 10-13 knots.

Emphasis should also be placed on the collection and reporting of data to the IWC Global Ship Strikes Database which will both: (1) facilitate a proper evaluation, prioritisation and monitoring of vessel strikes as a threat to various populations and regions; and (2) assist in the development of mitigation measures.

One of the key components of the IWC Ship Strikes Strategic Plan is to identify high risk areas for vessel strikes; Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs) represent a systematic and biocentric approach to identifying important habitats, and that as such they can be helpful in identifying potential high-risk areas for vessel strikes. In particular, if an IMMA contains a species or population that is vulnerable to vessel strikes, and it is transited by significant shipping, the area can be “flagged” for further investigation and potential mitigation.

The latest IWC-IUCN-ACCOBAMS workshop (Messinia, 2019) recommends the following steps are undertaken as part of a process to identify High Risk Areas for Ship Strikes based on IMMAs:

1. Traffic information (e.g., types of vessel, size, speed, flag, etc.): plotting major ship routes and see if they cross IMMAs which host significant or high density populations of species that are threatened and/or vulnerable to vessel strikes.
2. Species information (e.g., relative abundance, status, Animal Behaviour/seasonality/key lifecycle use in and within IMMAs)
3. Management and Mitigation

Shiprint project

A joint project, funded by “Initiative Pelagos” is led by the ACCOBAMS Secretariat. It involves OceanCare and We Are Méditerranée.

In July 2023, the IMO Marine Environment Protection Committee adopted Resolution MEPC.380(80) establishing the Northwestern Mediterranean Sea as a Particular Sensitive Sea Area (NW Med PSSA) at the initiative of the four ACCOBAMS countries (Spain, France, Italy and Monaco).

The Shiprint project aims to support the implementation of the adopted Associated Protective Measures (APMs) within the PSSA by offering the adjacent coastal states technical and awareness-raising solutions around 4 components:

- The achievement of a new module in the NETCCOBAMS platform that will enable relevant countries to track all AIS-equipped vessels in the area. This project will allow further developing the existing prototype and reach the first milestone for assessing the implementation of ship speed recommendation in the PSSA. Furthermore, the project will enable starting working on GHG emissions in the same module and further improving the underwater noise assessment functions in order to prepare the integration of these into the new module.
- A series of four in-person workshops with prior online training courses will be organised targeting different vessel categories (and shipping companies, including interest groups), as well as relevant national and port authorities in order to exchange information and assist them in better understanding environmental impacts posed by the sector on marine biodiversity, in the PSSA, and in order to actively involve stakeholders in reducing the risk of collision with fin and sperm whales in the PSSA. The planned four in-person workshops will be hosted by the three States signatory to the Multilateral Agreement establishing the Pelagos Sanctuary.
- A back-to-back photo-exhibition will contribute to raise awareness to cetacean conservation and marine life in the Pelagos Sanctuary, and to the need to deploy conservation efforts.
- Guidelines with advice on a whale-safe certificate will be elaborated in order to be proposed for adoption by ACCOBAMS Parties.

Future effort (2026-2028)

1. Keep collaborating with the IWC to populate the online data-base;
2. Liaise with the Pelagos Agreement and the relevant working group on impacts;
3. Participate to ongoing effort in the Agreement area to mitigate the risk of vessel strike (e.g., Life SeaDetect project, Life Conceptu Maris project);
4. Develop, within the Shiprint project, a whale-safe certificate, taking note on similar ongoing activities in the U.S. (e.g., Stellwagen Bank National Park), or the European level, such as the Green Marine Europe (GME) label, to encourage shipping companies who are part of the GME programme to apply the 10 to 13 knots speed reduction;
5. Contributing to the assessment of the Associated Protective Measures (APM) of the PSSA and to the evaluation, through NETCCOBAMS, of the compliance by vessels;
6. Enhance the use of place-based conservation effort, such as IMMAs, to identify high-risk areas with vessels and cetaceans overlap;
7. Collect telemetry data through bio-logging, to overlap whales' movements and AIS data to assess Close Point of Approach (CPA) and suggest appropriate mitigation measures.