

REPORT FROM THE 2017 ACTIVITIES IN ICES

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ICES WGMME

The ICES Working Group on Marine Mammal Ecology (WGMME) met in St Andrews, UK 6–9 February 2017. It reported on recent information on status of, and threats to, marine mammal populations and briefly reviewed current knowledge of effects of plastics and underwater noise. Direct interactions between seals and fisheries were reviewed and the group also reported on the current status of the ICES / OSPAR seal database(s). The group provided text for five ecosystem overviews (Iceland Sea, Norwegian Sea, Baltic, Azorean ecoregion and the Oceanic Northeast Atlantic ecoregion). Criteria for assessment of abundance trends in offshore cetaceans in the context of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) were reviewed, modifying the proposed indicator (previously based solely on the rate of decline) to make specific reference to baseline values. Linked to this, the group reported on the outcomes of the 2016 SCANS III survey. Given that the three main large-scale surveys of cetaceans in European Atlantic waters have all arisen from individual projects and were separated by intervals of eleven years, there is concern as to the future and utility of these surveys. WGMME recommends that the surveys be co-organised and coordinated by Member States as part of their routine monitoring and that the frequency is increased to once every six years to match the MSFD reporting cycle.

ICES WKPIGS

A one-day Workshop on Predator-prey Interactions between Grey Seals and other marine mammals (WKPIGS) focused on predatory behaviour of grey seals towards other grey seals, harbour seals and harbour porpoises in European waters was convened in Middelfart, Denmark, on 30 April 2017. The workshop aimed to define and harmonise the pathological indicators of grey seal predation events across nations and to collate data on the prevalence and distribution of such events. A further objective was to discuss methods to aid in detection of predation events and potential population level consequences of reported incidences.

The challenge of ascribing grey seal predation as the cause of a mortality event from limited pathological evidence was discussed. In cases where the behaviour has been observed in pinnipeds, a straight-edged wound margin which spirals around the carcass is typical; however, most cases are not directly observed. Inferring grey seal predation as a cause of death from stranding reports, photographs and necropsies occurs by ruling out other potential causes of death and by examining the macroscopic and microscopic pathology. Decision trees have been reported elsewhere and the workshop focused on the challenges of distinguishing grey seal predation from grey seal scavenging and from scavenging by other (terrestrial or avian) predators. New techniques examining the histopathology of wound margins and forensic (DNA) evidence can aid in detection of tearing of warm tissue (indicator of active predation) and in ruling out predators other than grey seals.

Reported cases of grey seal predation events in Europe were collated and summarised. The behaviour has been detected throughout much of the grey seal range, although information is lacking from some key areas. Seasonal trends of predation on pinnipeds peaked during their respective pupping/mating seasons while cases of predation on harbour porpoises peaked in spring months. A total of 737 cases were reported, peaking in 2016.

The implications of these findings for populations of grey seals, harbour seals and harbour porpoises were limited by the challenges of detecting the true prevalence of the behaviour in the grey seal population. The incidence of grey seal predation on other marine mammals steadily increased over the last 10 years although it is not known if this represents a true increase in prevalence, reflects the steady increase in European grey seal numbers over the same period or is due to an increase in effort and reporting. It was noted that if previously high rates of harbour seal mortality due to grey seal predation were sustained, they could potentially account for observed declines in some populations. Coupled with the rise in European grey seal numbers, this could become the most important driver of local harbour seal extinctions in populations already beyond natural recovery.

ICES WGBYC

The ICES Working Group on Bycatch of Protected Species (WGBYC) met at NOAA Fisheries Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) in Woods Hole Massachusetts USA, 12–15 June 2017. Highlights from the meeting include:

- Expanding membership, notably protected species (PS) bycatch data from Icelandic fisheries and seabird bycatch experts;
- Review of ongoing bycatch mitigation research projects;
- Site visit/tour of the NEFSC Fisheries Sampling Branch and its staff presentations on interdisciplinary bycatch monitoring programs in the US Northwest Atlantic northeast region;
- Collaborations with other ICES working groups (i.e. WGCATCH and JWGBIRD);
- Positive advancements on WGBYC database development working jointly with the ICES Data Centre;
- Progress on summarizing bycatch for the Baltic Sea and Bay of Biscay/Iberia fisheries overviews.

Similar to previous years, the content of member state (MS) reports (for 2015) continued to vary in both content and format. A total of four species of cetaceans were reported as bycatch from 2015 MS reports (common dolphins, white-beaked dolphin, bottlenose dolphin, and harbour porpoise). Fourteen species of seabirds and five species of seals are also included in the report. WGBYC continues to be challenged by limited availability of accurate total fishing effort from relevant European waters for various gear types. Consequently, there continues to be considerable uncertainty in the representativeness of total fishing effort reported in MS reports submitted to the EC. Thus, WGBYC continues to highlight the inconsistent submission and content of annual reports provided by some MS and the shortcomings to accurately reflect the full magnitude of cetacean bycatch in European fisheries. WGBYC is preparing for the transition away from regular MS reports as the primary source of data on bycatch of cetaceans over to data coming through the ICES regional database as a result of the implementation of new EUMAP.

Five recommendations were included in the 2017 report, some of which were repeated from last year. Key new recommendations pertain to continued maintenance of the WGBYC database and retro-fitting historical data to the revised template format to facilitate historical

review. The historical review is intended to serve as a baseline comparison on bycatch of cetaceans from previous monitoring programs to the new EUMap data collection program that requires regional coordination groups to monitor and collect data on PS bycatch events. Additionally, ICES Data Centre intends to issue a formal data call for PS bycatch in 2018 to support WGBYC objectives.

ICES ASC

The 2017 ICES Annual Science Conference (ASC) was held in Fort Lauderdale, USA 18-21 September 2017. The conference included no particular theme session devoted entirely to marine mammals. Nevertheless, some sessions were designed with marine mammals included as an integral part – of the most relevant sessions were: “Microbes to mammals: metabarcoding of the marine pelagic assemblage” and “From iconic to overlooked species: How (electronic) tags improve our understanding of marine ecosystems and their inhabitants”.

More information is available at the ICES web side www.ices.dk.