

## Observer report from the 23d ASCOBANS Advisory Committee meeting Le Conquet, France, 5-7 September

Geneviève Desportes

Desportes attended the AC 23 meeting, organized as usual in two sessions: a scientific session and an institutional session. A number of Expert and Working Group reports were presented and discussed. Three focused on harbour porpoise conservation at a regional level in the remit of three regional Action Plans covering the Baltic, the Western Baltic, Belt Sea and Kattegat, and North Sea. Other working groups deal more generally with the threats to small cetaceans - Bycatch, Disturbance, Habitat change and degradation and Management of cumulative impacts. The meeting reviewed new information on threats to small cetaceans and considered steps for mitigating the impacts of human activities on the animals and their habitats.

The Special Species Session was on white-beaked dolphin, a species of interest to NAMMCO, with as background document the Document Inf.3.1.b - White-beaked dolphin review (2016) - *Lagenorhynchus albirostris* (Cetacea: Delphinidae).

Three other documents of interest to the NAMMCO SC work are:

- Document Inf.4.1.a - Estimates of cetacean abundance in European Atlantic waters in summer 2016 from the SCANS-III aerial and shipboard surveys.
- Document Inf.5.1.1.e - Technical Support Information to the CMS Family Guidelines on Environmental Impact Assessment for Marine Noise Generating Activities.
- Document Inf.6.1.a - Report on Expert Workshop “Unacceptable Interactions” and Bycatch.

The documents are available at <http://www.ascobans.org/en/meeting/AC23>

Following the decision of NAMMCO 24 to increase its scientific cooperation with organisations dealing with marine mammals, an invitation was conveyed to ASCOBANS MOPs8 for such an increase in cooperation. The NAMMCO Scientific Committee recommended that a review and assessment of the status of harbour porpoise stocks in the North Atlantic be conducted in 2018, and had supported the participation of ASCOBANS and other European Scientists to such an exercise.

The NAMMCO secretariat sent therefore to the Chair of the ASCOBANS AC and the ASCOBANS Secretariats an invitation to organise jointly a North Atlantic Review of Harbour Porpoises (see attached letter from June 2017). The response from the Secretariat was positive and both Secretariats had some exchanges on how to proceed.

At AC 23, Desportes presented a general update on NAMMCO aims, structure and activities, lastly developing the proposal for the joint review of North Atlantic harbour porpoises. Although many scientists present and some delegations were in favour of this cooperation, the AC did not agree on embarking in a specific scientific cooperation with NAMMCO and declined NAMMCO’s invitation, although it is stipulated in the Work plan activity 61, adopted by MOPs8 in 2016 ([Resolution 8.2](#)): “61. Seek to cooperate closely with CBD, ECS, HELCOM, ICES, IWC, NAMMCO, OSPAR, UNCLOS, UNEP and other relevant organizations.”

An Action Point was however adopted by the AC, which reads:

**Action Point 13. - Parties are invited to send experts or observers to the NAMMCO Working Group on Harbour Porpoises.**

The official letter of decline was received from the ASCOBANS Secretariat on October 13, 2017 and is attached.



Dr. Geneviève Desportes  
General Secretary  
NAMMCO - North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission  
POB 6453, Sykehusveien 21-23  
N-9294 Tromsø  
Norway

## **Population assessment of Harbour Porpoises in the North Atlantic in 2018**

Bonn, 13 October 2017

Dear Geneviève,

I would like to thank you and the NAMMCO Council for reaching out to ASCOBANS regarding the forthcoming review and assessment of Harbour Porpoises in the North Atlantic, including your active participation at the 23<sup>rd</sup> session of the Advisory Committee (5-7 September 2017, Le Conquet, France). Both ASCOBANS and NAMMCO work closely on Harbour Porpoises, not least in the North Sea, and indeed we have been tasked by our respective Parties to seek closer collaboration (Work plan activity 61, [Resolution 8.2](#), 2016).

Under [agenda item 7.1](#) the Advisory Committee discussed the letter from NAMMCO ([Inf.7.1.b](#)), taking into account the Final Report of the NAMMCO Scientific Committee Working Group on Harbour Porpoises ([Inf.7.1.c](#)) and your [powerpoint presentation](#). The Advisory Committee agreed that "Parties are invited to send experts or observers to the NAMMCO Working Group on Harbour Porpoises." ([AC23 Action Point 13](#)) and to thereby participate in the forthcoming population assessment of Harbour Porpoises in the North Atlantic in 2018. While this is not the level of technical collaboration envisaged by the NAMMCO Council, ASCOBANS remains committed to the work plan goal to "Seek to cooperate closely with [...] NAMMCO [...] and other relevant organizations." (Work plan activity 61, [Resolution 8.2](#), 2016), which underpins our daily work.

In this regard, I look forward to continue working with you to further improve the conservation status of Harbour Porpoises and other small cetaceans in the ASCOBANS area and beyond. I would be grateful if you could inform the Secretariat of the outcomes of your forthcoming review and population assessment in the North Atlantic, as well as other NAMMCO outputs of relevance to ASCOBANS.

Yours sincerely,



Aline Kühl-Stenzel  
ASCOBANS Coordinator



Sami Hassani, Chair of the Advisory Committee  
Bradnee Chambers, Acting Executive Secretary  
Aline Kühl-Stenzel, ASCOBANS Coordinator

## ASCOBANS

UNEP/CMS/ASCOBANS Secretariat  
UN Campus  
Platz der Vereinten Nationen 1  
D-53113 Bonn, Germany

Tromsø, 22 June 2017

Dear Sami, Bradnee and Aline

At its 24<sup>th</sup> Meeting, the Council of NAMMCO agreed to increase its scientific cooperation with the other international organisations having competence in conservation and management of marine mammals, including ASCOBANS (see agenda point **12.3 Other business**<sup>1</sup>). The scientific cooperation with ASCOBANS was specifically mentioned under agenda point **12.2 ASCOBANS** where the following paragraph reads:

*The assessment of North Sea harbour porpoises, so far considered a single stock and therefore a shared stock between one NAMMCO party (Norway) and several ASCOBANS parties (Sweden, Denmark, UK, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, France), was the most obvious [area where a scientific cooperation with ASCOBANS would be of relevance to both organisations]. The estimation of life parameters, population health status, impact of anthropogenic disturbances, including by-catch, and their mitigation were all difficult areas which would benefit from the broadest possible expertise.*

Council therefore tasked the Secretariat to consult with the ASCOBANS Secretariat to explore possibilities for such a scientific cooperation. NAMMCO forwarded to ASCOBANS a more general invitation to an increased cooperation at MOP8 in its Opening Statement.

NAMMCO has previously organised a symposium on harbour porpoises in 1999, which resulted in a volume in the NAMMCO Scientific Publication Series<sup>2</sup>, and the NAMMCO Scientific Committee Working Group on Harbour porpoises held a meeting in 2013 focussing on Norway and Greenland<sup>3</sup>.

Since these two meetings, a significant amount of data has become available in many areas, such as population abundance (particularly from the NASS 2015 and SCANS 2016 surveys), by-catch estimation and mitigation, contaminant loads, life history parameters, as well as telemetry, shedding light on distribution, movements and possibly stock identification. However, there is a need for an

---

<sup>1</sup>NAMMCO Annual Report 2015. <http://nammco.no/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/report-nammco-24th-council-meeting.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Harbour Porpoises in the North Atlantic, <https://nammco.no/topics/volume-5-harbour-porpoise/>

<sup>3</sup> NAMMCO WG on harbour porpoises, <http://nammco.no/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/NAMMCO-HPWG-2013-Final-Report.pdf>



overview of the status of the harbour porpoise in the North Atlantic which combines all of the available data, including information from European and Nordic waters, where it is clear that harbour porpoises are subjected to significant levels of by-catch, pollution and other anthropogenic disturbances.

The NAMMCO Scientific Committee has recommended that a review and assessment of the status of harbour porpoise stocks in the North Atlantic be conducted in 2018<sup>4</sup> (point 8.11.3, page 59), and supported the participation of ASCOBANS and other European Scientists to such an exercise.

As a single-stock framework has been proposed for the North Sea, it is a shared stock between ASCOBANS and NAMMCO, and it would make little sense for either organisation to conduct a stock assessment without involving the other organisation. In addition, the harbour porpoise is a species not very well understood in many domains, but which is subjected to many threats, including climate and environment changes and increasing anthropogenic activities. Associating forces, expertise and competence for conducting a thorough review and assessment of the harbour porpoise in the North Atlantic and adjacent waters would make good sense. NAMMCO would therefore like to propose to ASCOBANS to initiate such a collaboration and organise jointly this North Atlantic Review.

Our two organisations do not share the same view on the use of marine mammals. ASCOBANS view them solely as cultural ecosystem services. NAMMCO, recognising the right and needs of coastal communities to make a sustainable living from what the sea can provide, also add to this dimension nutritional ecosystem services. However, the ultimate interest of both our organisation is the sustainable use – whatever it is – and the conservation of small cetaceans. As the areas of jurisdiction of both our organisations are contiguous, we share not only stocks of these widely distributed species, but also unfortunately many of the consequences of anthropogenic activities and the threat they represent for species we want to conserve.

We hope that ASCOBANS will see this invitation as a way forward toward the sustainability of the harbour porpoise in the North Atlantic and adjacent waters.

We are therefore looking very much forward to hearing from you on this matter and on how to proceed. We will be participating to the ASCOBANS AC meeting in Brest and would be happy to present and discuss this possibility there.

Best regards

Geneviève Desportes  
General Secretary

Jill Prewitt  
Scientific Secretary

---

<sup>4</sup> Report of the 23th Meeting of the SC Report, <http://nammco.no/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/sc23-report-final-21112016.pdf>