

**REPORT OF THE MEETING OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE FOR
SEALS AND WALRUS
4 February 2015, Reykjavik, Iceland**

1. CHAIRPERSON'S OPENING REMARKS

The Chair, Hild Ynnesdal, Norway, opened the meeting and welcomed all participants.

2. ADOPTION OF AGENDA

The agenda was adopted noting that agenda items 6. Trade issues changed place with agenda item 5. and that items 6. to 9. would be discussed in a joint session with the Management Committee for Cetaceans. The report from the joint session is part of this report. The meeting documents were reviewed. Agenda and list of documents are contained in Appendices 1 and 2 respectively.

3. APPOINTMENT OF RAPPORTEUR

The Secretariat was appointed as rapporteur.

4. CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT MEASURES FOR SEAL STOCKS

The Chair drew attention to the following documents:

- NAMMCO/23/MC/3 summarising past proposals for conservation and management and responses to these
- NAMMCO/23/MC/4 summarising past requests to the Scientific Committee and responses.
- NAMMCO/23/SMC/5 listing recommendations to member countries in 2014.

There were no new proposals for conservation and management to member countries or recommendations to member countries arising from the meeting.

The vice-chair of the Scientific Committee, Tore Haug, presented the information on seal and walrus stocks from the Scientific Committee report (NAMMCO/23/5) under each species.

4.1 Harp Seals

In 2014 Greenland had agreed to send a new request to ICES in order to finalize the assessment on the Northwest Atlantic stock, because the results from the last surveys in 2013 had not been ready, and therefore not been dealt with at the last WGHARP meeting in August 2013.

Greenland had sent a request to ICES that somehow had not been received in the right department. The WG on harp and hooded seals had therefore not discussed this request at its last meeting in November 2014. SC will have to discuss the issue once a response has been received.

Requests by Council for advice from the Scientific Committee

R-2.1.4 - NAMMCO/12-2003 (standing): to regularly update the stock status of North Atlantic harp and hooded seals as new information becomes available.

R-2.1.6 – NAMMCO/14-2005 (ongoing): to evaluate how a projected decrease in the total population of Northwest Atlantic harp seals might affect the proportion of animals summering in Greenland.

R-2.1.10 – NAMMCO/17-2008 (standing): to provide advice on Total Allowable Catches for the management of harp seals and the establishment of a quota system for the common stocks between Norway and the Russian Federation, leaving full freedom to the Committee to decide on the best methods to determine this parameter based on an ecosystem approach.

R-2.1.11 - NAMMCO/18-2009 (pending): to evaluate how a projected increase in the total population of Northwest Atlantic harp seals might affect the proportion of animals summering in Greenland.

Advice from the Scientific Committee

The ICES Working Group on Harp and Hooded Seals (WGHARP) had not met prior to the NAMMCO Scientific Committee meeting. The Scientific Committee had therefore not been in a position to assess and give advice on the catch potential of harp seals stock in the Barents Sea/White Sea and in the Northwest Atlantic.

The Scientific Committee had reviewed the list of ongoing request and noted that requests R-2.1.6 and R-2.1.11 were completed.

Other information

Aerial surveys were carried out by PINRO in March 2013 yielded a total pup production number of the White Sea/Barents Sea harp seal population of 128,786.

In Norway the Marine Research Institute (IMR) has now started experiments with Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (Drones) to perform aerial photographic surveys of harp and hooded seal whelping patches on the drift ice. With some technical improvements on both aircrafts and operational equipment a new survey, will be conducted in the West Ice in 2015.

Photographic and visual aerial surveys had been conducted off Newfoundland and in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence in 2012. This resulted in an estimated total pup production of 790,000 of Northwest Atlantic harp seals. This estimate is approximately half of the estimated number of pups born in 2008, likely due to lower reproductive rates in 2012 compared to 2008.

A population model had been used to examine changes in the size of the total Northwest Atlantic harp seal population between 1952 and 2014. The total population size in 2012 were estimated to be 7,445,000, and appears to be relatively stable, showing little change in abundance since the 2004 survey, although pup production has become highly variable among years.

Discussion

Norway reported that the catches of harp seals in the West Ice had been of the same magnitude as in the 1980s. Of the quota of 21 270 animals, 7 116 had been caught. There has been no hunt in the Barents Sea since 2009.

Greenland informed that they as in previous years had given Norway permission for scientific work on seals and Norwegian sealing vessels permission to hunt within Greenland EEZ in 2014.

Canada informed that in 2014 54 000 animals had been caught of a total quota of 400 000.

Russia informed that the hunt in the Barents Sea most probably would be carried out in 2015.

Conclusion

The Management Committee took note of the report from the Scientific Committee. It was noted that the ICES WG on harp and hooded seals had not met at the time of the SC meeting and as a result assessments of both the White Sea/Barents Sea and the Northwest Atlantic harps seals stocks was not yet finalised. Furthermore it was noted that requests R-2.1.6 and R-2.1.11 were completed.

The Committee asked the Secretariat to find out the correct procedure for forwarding requests to ICES in the future when it is a joint ICES / NAFO / NAMMCO working group.

There were no recommendations for new scientific research or recommendations to member countries.

4.2 Hooded Seals

In 2014 the Management Committee for Seals and Walruses recommended a commercial catch level of zero only allowing limited research catches.

Norway informed that 24 animals had been taken for the purpose of scientific research.

Requests by Council for advice from the Scientific Committee

R-2.1.4 - NAMMCO/12-2003 (standing): to regularly update the stock status of North Atlantic harp and hooded seals as new information becomes available.

R-2.1.9 – NAMMCO/16-2007 (ongoing): to investigate possible reasons for the apparent decline of the Greenland Sea stock of hooded seals; assess the status of the stock on basis of the results from the survey in 2007.

Update from the Scientific Committee

As was the case for the harp seals, the Scientific Committee had not been in a position to answer the request since the ICES Working Group on Harp and Hooded Seals (WGHARP) had not met prior to the NAMMCO Scientific Committee meeting.

Discussion and conclusion

The Management Committee took note of the report from the Scientific Committee. It was noted that the ICES WG on harp and hooded seals had not met and as a result assessments of the Northwest Atlantic hooded seals stocks was not finalised.

There were no recommendations for new scientific research or recommendations to member countries.

4.3 Ringed Seals

Requests by Council for advice from the Scientific Committee

R-2.3.1- NAMMCO/5-1995 (standing): to advise on stock identity of ringed seals for management purposes and to assess abundance in each stock area, long-term effects on stocks by present removals in each stock area, effects of recent environmental changes (*i.e.* disturbance, pollution) and changes in the food supply, and interactions with other marine living resources.

R-2.3.2 - NAMMCO/7-1997 (standing): to advice on what scientific studies need to be completed to evaluate the effects of changed levels of removals of ringed seals in West and East Greenland.

Advice from the Scientific Committee

There is still not sufficient information on stock structure and size to give answers to the requests. Last year the SC had suggested convening a Working Group in 2015/2016. In light of the work taking place under the Arctic Council working group “Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna” (CAFF), the SC had agreed to await the outcome of the work of CAFF before proceeding with the NAMMCO Working Group.

Discussion

Greenland raised concern over the work being done in the Arctic Council CAFF on ringed seals. The main focus of ringed seals in CAFF is related to it being the prey of the polar bears and the climate change issue.

Conclusions

The Management Committee took note of the report from the Scientific Committee. There is still not enough information to answer the request. The proposed NAMMCO WG on ringed seals will await the work of the Arctic Council CAFF WG on this species.

There was no recommendation for new Scientific Research or recommendations to member countries.

4.4 Grey Seals

Requests by Council for advice from the Scientific Committee

R-2.4.2 - NAMMCO/11-2002 (standing): provide a new assessment of grey seal stocks throughout the North Atlantic.

Advice from the Scientific Committee

Norway

The most recent pup production estimate of grey seals in Norway is based on data obtained in 2006–2008. The present management plan for coastal seals in Norway require that data be updated every 5 years. A boat-based visual survey aimed to obtain a new abundance estimate for the species in Norway started in November 2013 and continued in 2014. Some of the new estimates obtained in mid Norway were much lower than in the previous survey, and quotas were immediately reduced in these areas as a result.

The current surveys, aimed to obtain a new pup production estimate for the entire Norwegian coast, will be completed in 2015. If possible, Russia and Norway will conduct a joint survey of grey seals on the Murmansk Coast - these grey seal colonies have not been surveyed since 1991.

There was little new information to report from Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands on grey seals.

The Scientific Committee has rescheduled the Coastal Seals Working group meeting to February 2016 to address R-2.4.2 and R-2.5.2. By February 2016, the CSWG will likely have by-catch estimates and a new complete grey seal estimate in Norway for consideration at the meeting.

The Terms of Reference:

- 1) assess the status of all populations, particularly using new abundance estimate data that are available from Iceland and Norway.
- 2) address by-catch issues (grey seals) in Norway, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands
- 3) re-evaluate the Norwegian management plans (which have been already implemented) for grey and harbour seals.

Discussion

Norway informed the meeting that in 2014 the quota was 406 of which 208 was hunted.

Conclusions

The Management Committee took note of the report from the Scientific Committee and endorsed that the Working Group on Coastal seals meet in February 2016 in order to finalise requests 2.4.2 and 2.5.2. By that time the new grey seals estimate in Norway will be ready.

There was no recommendation for new Scientific Research or recommendations to member countries.

4.5 Harbour Seals

Requests by Council for advice from the Scientific Committee

R-2.5.2 - NAMMCO/16-2007 modified **NAMMCO/19-2010** (pending): To conduct a formal assessment of the status of harbour seals for all areas as soon as feasible.

Advice from the Scientific Committee

In Norway aerial surveys aimed to obtain a new abundance estimate were started in 2011 and continued in 2012 and 2013. The results from these surveys were supplemented with results from boat-based visual surveys in 2014, resulting in a final point estimate of 7,533 for the entire Norwegian coast. The new estimate has been implemented in the 2015 management following the plan reviewed by NAMMCO SC in 2011.

Norwegian catch statistics do not include by-catch removals. Norway is now in the process of developing a model for management of harbour seals, which will include uncertainties around by-catch.

In 2011, Iceland estimated the harbour seal population to be around 12.000 animals, which is just on the border to the recommended population size. In 2014 a partial survey was carried out, representing 62% of the area of the 2011 count. The results from the study indicate a ~30% annual decrease between 2011 and 2014. The numbers are preliminary and deducted from partial area coverage. However, if applicable it shows a much smaller population than the recommended number of 12.000 animals. If funding is secured the plan is to carry out a new count in 2015 covering the whole of Iceland.

Norway informed the meeting that in 2014 the quota was 425 of which 406 was hunted.

Conclusion

The Management Committee took note of the report from the Scientific Committee and notes that the Working Group on Coastal seals meet in February 2016 in order to finalise requests R-2.4.2 and R-2.5.2.

There was no recommendation for new Scientific Research or recommendations to member countries.

4.6 Bearded seal

Since 2009 the Management Committee has recommended that the status of this species be assessed.

The Chair noted that there is no request for advice from the Scientific Committee on this species.

Update from the Scientific Committee

The Scientific Committee communicated that some limited satellite tracking of bearded seals is on-going and continuing in Svalbard and Greenland. However it was noted that this species like the ringed seal is suffering from the new ice conditions.

Conclusion

The Management Committee reiterates the conclusion from the last meeting that there is still not much information on bearded seals, and that this probably reflects that this is not a target species for NAMMCO members.

There is no recommendation for new Scientific Research or recommendations to member countries.

4.7 Walrus

In 2014 Greenland was recommended to undertake the following scientific research:

- That new estimates of sex and age structure of the catch for West Greenland are obtained. The sex determination that is reported by the hunters should be validated using genetics.
- That the fraction of the catches and abundances in Canada that belong to the West Greenland/Baffin Island population are clarified.
- That complete catch statistics from Canada are collated.
- That reliable reports of struck and lost are obtained for the entire range of the stocks in Greenland and Canada.

As response to the MCS Chair, Greenland informed the meeting that Greenland complies to the NAMMCO biological advice in all management areas but one when allocating quota. The Government of Greenland is not following the biological advice from NAMMCO in one management area (Qaanaaq). The Government of Greenland has decided to use a struck and lost rate of 3 % and not 15 %. The 3% rate was based on specific interviews with the experienced hunters from the area. Greenland also informed that the below mentioned interview report suggests a struck and lost rate of 5 % in Qaanaaq area. The issue will be subject to evaluation according to the existing rate of 3 %.

Requests by Council for advice from the Scientific Committee

R-2.6.3 - NAMMCO/15-2006 (ongoing): provide advice on the effects of human disturbance, including fishing and shipping activities, in particular scallop fishing, on the distribution, behaviour and conservation status of walrus in West Greenland.

Advice from the Scientific Committee

The 2013 quota assessments for West Greenland has been much debated and it was decided to carry out a supplementary survey of the northern stock (Baffin Bay stock in NW Greenland, Qaanaaq area) in April as a supplement to previous surveys that were conducted in May–June when the walrus are more dispersed in the North Water. This survey, completed in early April 2014 shows promising results and should allow for a new abundance estimate to be developed soon. Together with updated hunting statistics, this new abundance estimate could be used for a revised assessment for this particular stock with a possible update on advice.

The Scientific Committee suggested that the Walrus Working Group meet one day in March 2015 to address possibilities to update advice on sustainable takes of walrus from the Baffin Bay stock.

Other information

In new a project in Svalbard sponsored by the Norwegian-Russian Environmental Commission 20 adult male walrus were instrumented with GPS loggers in 2014 and should collect GPS positions for at least five years. Blood and blubber samples were collected from these animals for various studies. New methods resulted in 0 mortality.

Newly published results from the recent survey of walrus haulout sites in Svalbard provides updates regarding the increasing numbers of land- based haulout sites, occupied sites, sites with mother-calf pairs, and a 48% increase in abundance in the six-year period between the two surveys to 3,886 (CI: 3,553-4,262) animals, including animals in the water at the time of the survey.

Discussion

Greenland reported the following quota and catch data for 2014 and quota for 2015:

	2014		2015
	Quota	Catch	Quota
North Water (Qaanaaq)	61	67	86 (minus 3)
West Greenland	61	52	69
East Greenland	18	08	18

The non-accumulating carry-over (also in use for narwhal and beluga) is in function so non-used quota from 2014 will be allocated on top of the basic quota on walrus. Greenland also informed that the Institute of Natural Resources in Greenland is in its final process to finalize a report on interview with hunters in North Greenland on traditional knowledge, incl. struck and lost on walrus. The report will be presented at NAMMCO at its next year's meeting.

Conclusion

The Management Committee took note of the report from the Scientific Committee. The Management Committee furthermore endorsed the recommendation to update advice on sustainable takes of walrus from the Baffin Bay stock, and that this be organised through a one day teleconference.

5. TRADE ISSUES AND THE EU BAN OF IMPORT OF SEAL PRODUCTS

The WTO Appellate Body's report in the seal case was published on the 22nd of May 2014. The report confirms that EUs regulation is arbitrary and unjustifiably applied and is therefore inconsistent with EU's WTO obligations.

The parties to the case have agreed that EU be given until the 18th of October 2015 to bring its measure in conformity with WTO rules. The EU has taken steps to do so with regard to seal products stemming from Canada's inuit hunt.

For the time being, there is no specific information indicating the specific details on how the EU will comply with the Appellate Body's (AB) report pertaining to sustainable resource management hunt.

Greenland emphasised that seals represents a resource, which should be utilized like any other marine resource, and that they are opposed to the ban and the exemptions. Parts of the ban had to be changed in accordance to the verdict, and Greenland will work against any changes of the Inuit Exemption making it more difficult to export the skins to the EU.

In relation to the process of becoming a certifying body, there has been exchange of information with Canada/Nunavut during bilateral meetings on the difference of the two sealhunts and trade-possibilities, which mainly is based on the historic and infra-structural difference in development of the sealskin industry in the two areas.

Norway stated that they were pleased to note that the AB report in the seal case confirms that EUs regulation is inconsistent with the EU's WTO obligations. It is anticipated that the EU will comply with the AB report and remove or amend the discriminating exceptions from the regulation. For Norway, the sealing industry is of limited economic value, but EUs trade restrictions are a matter of principle concerning market access for renewable marine resources

The Management Committee noted the views expressed by Greenland and Norway.

JOINT SESSION

It was agreed that agenda items 6. Procedures for decision making on conservation and management measures, and agenda item 7. ecosystem-based management would be dealt with under agenda item 9. Related management issues.

8. USER KNOWLEDGE IN MANAGEMENT DECISION-MAKING

Requests by Council for advice from the Scientific Committee

R-1.8.1 :need for greater input from hunters in the work of the SC

R-1.8.2 :SC report language must be kept precise and simple

The Management Committee noted that these are now part of the SC working procedures and agreed that these request were completed.

9. RELATED MANAGEMENT ISSUES

9.1 Marine mammal – fisheries interactions

Requests by Council for advice from the Scientific Committee

R-1.2.1: developing multispecies models for the North Atlantic (ongoing)

A large-scale ecosystem modelling project (MAREFRAME) is underway, which includes marine mammals in Icelandic and adjacent waters.

R-1.2.2: monitor stock levels and trends in stocks of all marine mammals in the North Atlantic (standing request)

The Scientific Committee had reviewed the various requests under this agenda item and had agreed to the following:

With regards to **R-1.1.2** (fisheries interactions in the Davis Strait ecosystem) this was considered outdated.

Request **R-1.1.5** (interactions between marine mammals and commercially exploited marine resources) should remain as a standing request and also takes the place of **R-1.1.3** (impact of marine mammals on the ecosystem, especially economically important fish species).

R- 1.1.8 (ecosystem modelling and marine mammal fisheries interactions): This request should remain ongoing until the results expected from Iceland are presented in the SC.

R-1.4.1 to 1.4.6: This series of requests are all regarding the economic aspects of marine mammals-fisheries interactions. The SC regards these requests as **outdated** and if the Management Committee would still like these issues addressed, a new, more specific request should be drafted. The SC also noted that socioeconomic impacts are included in a large-scale ecosystem modelling project (MAREFRAME) which includes marine mammals in Icelandic and adjacent waters.

Other information

The traditional perception of prey species preference of killer whales in the Northeast Atlantic has, to a large extent, been linked to herring. Recent Norwegian research on the ecology of killer whales in the Norwegian Sea during two summer-season ecosystem-based surveys 2006 and 2007, quantified spatial overlap between killer whales and the three most common pelagic fish species. No spatial relationships were found with herring or blue whiting. However, a significant relationship and spatial overlap with mackerel. Killer whale group size was also correlated to the size of mackerel trawl catches, indicating active group size adjustment to available prey concentrations.

In the years 2007–2011 a high priority part of the planned Joint Norwegian-Russian Research Programme on Harp Seal Ecology was to deploy satellite transmitters in the White Sea. Permits by the Russian Authorities were first given in 2012–2014, but unfortunately a lack of funding then prevented tagging. An application for funding has now been submitted to the Norwegian Research Council, and during the tagging experiment, PINRO will provide the necessary logistics required for helicopter- or boat-based live catch of seals in April–May 2015. For proper planning and budgeting in both institutes, a PINRO scientist must obtain the necessary permissions from Russian authorities before December 2014.

Iceland suggested the following new request for scientific advice:

The Scientific Committee is requested to review the results of the MAREFRAME ecosystem management project when these become available. In particular, the results should be reviewed with respect to the ongoing and standing requests on marine mammal interactions (R1.1.0) and multispecies approaches to management (R 1.2.0).

Conclusion

The Management Committee took note of the report from the Scientific Committee. It noted that requests 1.1.2 and 1.4.1 to 1.4.6 were all outdated, and that request 1.1.5 took the place of 1.1.3.

The Management Committee further agreed to recommend to Council the request that the Scientific Committee review results from MAREFRAME project as described above.

9.2 Environmental questions

In regards to **R-1.5.1** (radioactive material entering the North Atlantic ecosystem), the Scientific Committee considers this request outdated.

Conclusion

The Management Committee noted that request R-1.5.1 was outdated. The remaining part of the report from the Scientific Committee under this agenda item was presented in Council and there were no further discussion in the Management Committee.

9.3 By-catch data and monitoring

The report from the Scientific Committee under this agenda item was presented in Council and there were no further discussion in the Management Committee.

9.4 Other topics

No issues were raised on the agenda.

10. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

No issues were raised on the agenda.