

NAMMCO



# MEETING OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE FOR SEALS AND WALRUS

*13 September 2022  
Grand Hotel, Oslo & Hybrid*

**REPORT**

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The content of this report contains the view of the Working Group and does not necessarily represent the views of the NAMMCO Scientific Committee or Council.

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## 1. CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS

The Chair of the Management Committee for Seals and Walrus (MCSW), Amalie Jessen (GL), welcomed participants to the meeting (see Appendix 1 for the list of participants) and noted that Charlotte Winsnes from the NAMMCO Secretariat would act as rapporteur.

The Chair noted that all the meeting documents (see Appendix 2 for the list of documents) had been made available on the NAMMCO website prior to the meeting.

The Chair drew particular attention to the following documents as relevant for all agenda items:

- NAMMCO/29/MC/05: List of Proposals for Conservation and Management and Recommendations for Research, with Responses from the Parties.
- NAMMCO/29/MC/06: List of Active Requests from the NAMMCO Council to the Scientific Committee, with Responses from the Scientific Committee.

The Chair noted that prior to the meeting, Member Countries were invited to submit updates in writing on advances towards the implementation of previous proposals for conservation and management and recommendations for research. The received updates were reflected in document NAMMCO/28/MC/05.

It was also noted that all Member Countries had reported their catch statistics prior to the meeting and that the online NAMMCO catch database had been updated accordingly

The Chair informed that the meeting would focus on:

- *Reviewing the new information on seal species and walrus provided by the Scientific Committee during its last meeting in 2022 (SC/28).*
- *Considering both the new and reiterated proposals for conservation and management and recommendations for research (with implications for Member Countries) made by SC/28.*
- *Reviewing responses from SC/28 to active requests for advice and determining whether any requests maybe considered completed and closed.*

The MCSW was specifically asked to discuss and decide whether to:

- *endorse the SC proposals for conservation and management,*
- *endorse the SC recommendations for research (with implications for Member Countries)*

## 2. ADOPTION OF AGENDA

The agenda was adopted and is available in Appendix 3.

## 3. CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT MEASURES FOR SEAL AND WALRUS STOCKS

The Vice-Chair of the Scientific Committee, Aqqalu Rosing-Asvid (GL), presented the information on seals and walrus stocks from the Scientific Committee report (NAMMCO/29/08) under each species.

### 3.1 HARP AND HOODED SEALS

**Active and standing requests from Council:**

- *R-2.1.4 (standing) to regularly update the stock status of North Atlantic harp and hooded seals as new information becomes available*

- **R-2.1.9 (ongoing)** to investigate possible reasons for the apparent decline of Greenland Sea stock of hooded seals, and assess the status of the stock on basis of the results from the planned survey in 2007.

#### **Update from the Scientific Committee**

**R-2.1.4:** the SC reiterated that the Joint ICES/NAFO/NAMMCO Working Group of Harp and Hooded Seals (WGHARP) will meet during autumn in 2023 to implement the new management tools, to discuss and include new data, and to develop new advice for the management of harp and hooded seals.

**R-2.1.9:** the SC saw the request as ongoing and recommended rephrasing to delete the reference to the survey in 2007 as follows: *to investigate possible reasons for the apparent decline of Greenland Sea stock of hooded seals, and assess the status of the stock.*

Furthermore Rosing-Asvid drew attention to the following:

#### West Atlantic survey

There are reported anomalies, that make the latest survey results of the West Atlantic population (2017) somewhat different from earlier surveys. The estimate is the lowest since 1994 and only 4% of the seals were born in the Gulf. The timing of births in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence was much later than normal in 2017 while unusually early pupping occurred at the Front. Given the unusual ice conditions, distribution of whelping seals, and timing of pupping, assessing the results of the 2017 surveys relative to other estimates of pup production in the Northwest Atlantic is challenging.

#### White Sea

The White Sea has not been surveyed since 2013 and is thus considered to be data poor. Funding had been secured by Russian and Norwegian scientist for tagging in the White Sea, but the project has been postponed due to Covid-19 and most recently due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

#### Greenland Sea

Norway conducted a photographic-aerial survey in the Greenland Sea in March 2022. Results from this will be presented in the harp and hooded seal WG in the autumn 2023.

Rosing-Asvid also drew attention to two recently published publications related to hooded seals underlining that this information had not been presented or discussed at the SC meeting. The first relates to a study of killer whale diet composition based on fatty acid signature analysis. It shows that killer whales caught in Greenland (n = 18) generally had seals (including hooded seals) as their main prey. The second paper relates to a risk assessment review of mercury (Hg) exposure in Arctic mammals, which shows that hooded seals are among the most polluted species and in high risk of showing Hg-mediated health effects. He also showed a graphic document on the development of the catches in Greenland and noted that the catches had been gradually declining in Southwest and East Greenland during the past 20 years.

#### Comments from Member Countries

**Norway** informed that it had recently carried out a new aerial and ship-based survey of harp and hooded seals in the West Ice, to provide updated estimates of pup production and abundance. In parallel, the joint ICES/NAMMCO benchmark process for improving the overall assessment methodology (specifically, improving model flexibility to address the poor fit to observations) is underway, and an in-person meeting is scheduled for early December 2022. The updated population assessment for 2022, together with a revised assessment model, will be presented and evaluated during the upcoming meeting in the ICES/NAMMCO/NAFO working group on harp and hooded seals (WGHARP) in autumn 2023. This will form the basis for updated management recommendations and advise on harvest potential.

**Greenland** commented on the high number of by-caught harps seals and informed that the reporting of by-catch that had started in 2017 did not cover information on type of gear and the fishery involved. Catches are reported in two ways: 1) Piniarneq-booklet: a non-digital reporting to the municipalities by the hunters/fishermen. 2) Online reporting gives the hunters/fishermen the options to select the type of "hunt" (S/L, by-catch, net or weapon). The data is then automatically compiled and available for the Ministry. However, the online reporting only covers coastal hunters/fishermen and not offshore. This essentially means that numbers on by-catch does not currently provide a fair view of the total by-catch on seals. In order to provide a fair view, Greenland will need to also collect by-catch data from the Piniarneq-booklet and the offshore hunters/fishermen. It will be possible to collect the missing data by adding the by-catch report option to the booklet from 2024. This has been put into the coming 2023 booklet. Two other ministry divisions have to be involved for offshore reporting.

### Conclusion

The MCSW noted the report from the Scientific Committee and the updates from Norway and Greenland.

The MCSW **endorsed** the recommendation from the Scientific Committee to rephrase R-2.1.9 as outlined by the Scientific Committee.

## 3.2 RINGED SEAL

### Active and standing requests from Council:

- **R-2.3.1** (ongoing) 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-2.3.3** (ongoing) to convene a working group in 2022 with the aim of conducting a thorough review of the existing data and to go ahead with the assessment of stocks for which it was possible. If the data required for a full assessment of (some of) the stocks were not available, the WGs and the SC should identify, and prioritise, which specific data essential to their assessments are still needed.”

### Update from the Scientific Committee

**R-2.3.1:** the SC recommended rephrasing to include climate change as an environmental change alongside disturbance and pollution.

**R-2.3.3:** a ringed seal WG (likely as a CAFF/NAMMCO workshop) was planned for 2022 (to follow a few months after a CAFF/NAMMCO workshop on bearded seal). However, these workshops were postponed due to a stop for CAFF meetings as a result of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and is now tentatively scheduled for 2023.

### Comments from Member Countries

Greenland informed that a new species of ringed seal had been discovered and there is a wish to protect this new species. However, there is not enough documentation to start a revision of the Executive Order on seals yet.

### Conclusion

The MCSW noted the report from the Scientific Committee and the update from Greenland. The MSCW **endorsed** the recommendation from the SC to rephrase R-2.3.1 to include climate change as an environmental change.

### 3.3 GREY SEAL

#### Active request from the Council:

- *R-2.4.2 (ongoing) to provide a new assessment of grey seal stocks throughout the North Atlantic.*

#### Update from the Scientific Committee

The SC agreed to postpone the Coastal Seal Working Group (CSWG) to 2023 with the argument that there would be more data available, and all analysis were anticipated to be completed in time for the CSWG.

#### Comments from Member Countries

**Faroe Islands** has carried out a minimum count giving an estimate of 600 animals. Future plans include tagging and placing camera traps at haul-out sites as this is thought to provide a correction factor for animals not available during the surveys.

**Norway** noted that the grey seal pup production estimates for the period 2017 –2021 was completed.

**Norway** informed that they were currently revising the management plans for grey and harbour seals. Important new aspects in the revision will be:

1. More scientific-based management units (MU) for harbour seals
2. Viability analysis for estimating minimum MU size for recommending hunting quotas
3. Revising the target population size of grey and harbour seals
4. Incorporating previous recommendations from the NAMMCO Scientific Committee

The aim is to have draft revised management plans to be submitted for consideration by the CSWG in 2023.

**Iceland** informed that a new survey is scheduled in October 2022 and that the analysis will be finalized by December.

**Iceland** noted that the Icelandic stocks were not discussed in the coastal seal working group meeting last year. A new census is planned for autumn 2022. In the last estimate from 2017, the population was estimated to be 6269 animals (95% CI=5375-7181). This is a 49% increase since the estimate from 2012. Management objective for the Icelandic grey seal population is 4100 animals. The hunting ban, which was initiated in 2019, allowed for the possibility to apply for exemptions to hunt for subsistence, but this direct hunt has been very low, compared to the numbers hunted before the ban; 0 grey seals in 2021 and 10 in 2020. However, as previously discussed, high bycatch rates are estimated for grey seals in Iceland (990 animals annually in 2014-2018).

#### Conclusion

The MCSW noted the report from the Scientific Committee and the updates from member countries. It was noted that the CSWG meeting had been postponed to 2023.

### 3.4 HARBOUR SEAL

#### Active request from the Council:

- *R-2.5.2 (ongoing) to conduct a formal assessment of the status of harbour seals in all NAMMCO areas as soon as feasible”.*

#### Update from the Scientific Committee

As informed under 3.3 Grey seal, the plan is to postpone the CSWG to 2023 when all analyses will be completed and more data be available.

The difficulty of getting reliable by-catch estimates because of misidentification was noted, and the SC recommended that in the Norwegian Coastal Reference Fleet, the collection of the lower jaw of seals become mandatory.

### **Comments from Member Countries**

**Iceland** noted that they were not involved in the coastal seal working group meeting last year. The newest population estimate from 2020 was presented to the SC in 2021 and a new estimate was initially planned for 2022, but has been postponed to 2023. The population estimate of 2020 was 10,319 (CI95% 6733-13906 animals, which is 14% lower than the Icelandic management objective of 12,000 animals. As mentioned for the grey seals, the general seal hunting ban which was initiated in 2019, allowed for the possibility to apply for exemptions to hunt for subsistence hunt, but the direct hunt has been very low. One harbour seal was hunted in 2021 and 4 in 2020. However, as previously discussed, the bycatch rate is high for both harbour and grey seals in Iceland, estimated to 1390 animals annually for harbour seals (2014-2018).

Since seal watching tourism is increasing in **Iceland**, efforts have been made to increase monitoring and research on this topic is ongoing, as well as interdisciplinary studies on how to work with different stakeholders.

**Norway** have continued their counts of harbour seals along the entire mainland Norwegian coast during the molt, and harbour seals have been equipped with GPS/GSM tags along the SE coast of Norway during 2017-21. Also, on Svalbard 10 harbour seals have been tagged in 2021 as part of a case study in Kongsfjorden to describe impacts of climate change.

**Norway** repeated the update given for grey seals under agenda item 3.3 on the revision of the management plans for grey and harbour seals. Important new aspects in the revision are:

1. More scientific-based management units (MU) for harbour seals;
2. Viability analysis for estimating minimum MU size for recommending hunting quotas;
3. Revising the target population size of grey and harbour seals;
4. Incorporating previous recommendations from the NAMMCO Scientific Committee.

**Norway** aims at having draft revised management plans to be submitted for consideration by the Coastal Seal WG in 2023.

### **Conclusion**

The MCSW noted the report from the Scientific Committee and the updates from Iceland and Norway and noted the postponement of the CSWG to 2023. It was noted that the recommendation on the collection of the lower jaw of seals in the Norwegian Reference Fleet had been dealt with by the MCJ.

### **3.5 BEARDED SEALS**

#### **Active requests from Council:**

- **R-2.7.1** (ongoing) to convene a working group in 2022 with the aim of conducting a thorough review of the existing data and to go ahead with the assessment of stocks for which it is possible. If the data required for a full assessment of (some of) the stocks were not available, the WGs and the SC should identify, and prioritise, which specific data essential to their assessments are still needed.

#### **Update from the Scientific Committee**

The Joint NAMMCO/CAFF Bearded seal Workshop scheduled to happen in 2022 has been postponed to 2023 (due to the Russia-Ukraine war), but as SC/28 found it important to progress with a status review, a 3 hrs online meeting will take place in November 2022 to get an overview of data and analysis for both ringed and bearded seals. (SC/28, 2022)

#### **Recommendation for research with implication for Member Countries**



*Greenland* prioritises the analysis of data on local abundance and make it available to the Bearded Seal WG (planned for March 2023).

#### Proposal for conservation and management

*Greenland and Norway* make catch data available in such a way that the origin of the catch can be attributed to smaller areas than those reported now (West and East Greenland and Svalbard).

#### Comments from Member Countries

No comments were made by the member countries.

#### **Conclusion**

The MCSW noted the report from the Scientific Committee and **endorsed** the SC recommendation to Greenland to prioritise the analysis of the data of local abundance in time for the Bearded Seal WG. The MCSW also **endorsed** the SC proposals on catch data availability directed to Norway and Greenland.

### **3.6 WALRUS**

#### **Active and standing requests:**

- *R-2.6.3rev (ongoing) provide advice on the effects of human disturbance, including fishing and shipping activities, tourism, hyper carbon explorational and mineral extractions on the distribution, behaviour and conservation status of walrus in Greenland.*

#### **Update from the Scientific Committee**

The SC reiterated the recommendation that a workshop to assess disturbance from the Baffinland/Mary River mine project be held and consider impacts on narwhals, beluga and walrus. This should not be limited to the Mary River mine project but include impacts from all mining activities. The WS is planned for December 2022 and will be organised by the joint JCNB-NAMMCO Working Group and it will consider disturbances caused by the Baffinland/Mary River mine project (Iron) and Dundas project (Ilmenite) in the Wolstenholme Fjord.

#### Comments from Member Countries and observers

**Greenland** noted that the request subtracting the struck and loss rates, with the advice being given as total allowable landings, was implemented in 2019.

**Greenland** also took note of the answer from the Scientific Committee 2019 that there are no biological issues to introduce hunt whole year round, including females and calf being reported individually.

A new executive order, in the process of being presented to the Cabinet for adoption, will include all earlier NAMMCO recommendations such as the subtraction of struck and lost mentioned, allowing hunting whole year round and stock delineations. Furthermore, Greenland informed of the inclusion in the executive order of map and explanation of the stock delineations in Greenland.

**Canada** acknowledged the concerns voiced by Greenland about mining activities and looked forward to the deliberations of the planned Workshop.

#### **Conclusion**

The MCSW noted the report from the Scientific Committee on the Disturbance workshop planned for December 2022.

#### **4. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

There was no other business.

#### **5. CLOSE OF MEETING**

The Chair thanked the participants for their attendance and contributions.

The meeting was closed at 14:30 on 13 September 2022.

#### **6. ADOPTION OF REPORT**

A draft of the report was circulated on 14 September 2022 and was finalised and adopted on 15 September 2022.

## APPENDIX 1: PARTICIPANT LIST

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**APPENDIX 2: JOINT LIST OF DOCUMENTS OF THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES**

Doc. No.	Title	Agenda
NAMMCO/29/08	Report of the 28th Meeting of the Scientific Committee	MCJ, MCC, MCSW
NAMMCO/28/MC/01	Joint List of Documents for the Management Committees	MCJ, MCC, MCSW
NAMMCO/28/MC/02a	Draft Agenda Joint Meeting of the Management Committees (MCJ)	MCJ
NAMMCO/28/MC/02b	Draft Annotated Agenda Joint Meeting of the Management Committees (MCJ)	MCJ
NAMMCO/28/MC/03a	Draft Agenda Management Committee for Seals and Walrus (MCSW)	MCSW
NAMMCO/28/MC/03b	Draft Annotated Agenda Management Committee for Seals and Walrus (MCSW)	MCSW
NAMMCO/28/MC/04a	Draft Agenda Management Committee for Cetaceans (MCC)	MCC
NAMMCO/28/MC/04b	Draft Annotated Agenda Management Committee for Cetaceans (MCC)	MCC
NAMMCO/28/MC/05	List of Proposals for Conservation and Management and Recommendations for Research, with Responses from Parties	MCJ, MCC, MCSW
NAMMCO/28/MC/06	List of Active Requests from the NAMMCO Council to the Scientific Committee, with Responses from the Scientific Committee	MCJ, MCC, MCSW
NAMMCO/28/MC/08	Letter of Concern from the Scientific Committee	MCC
NAMMCO/28/MC/08	User Knowledge: «food for thought» for NAMMCO	MCJ

MC: Management Committee

MCJ: Joint Meeting of the Management Committees

MCC: Management Committee for Cetaceans

MCSW: Management Committee for Seals and Walruses

## **APPENDIX 3: AGENDA**

- 1. Chair's Opening Remarks**
  
- 2. Adoption of Agenda**
  
- 3. Conservation and Management Measures for Seal Stocks**
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  - 3.6. Bearded seals**
  - 3.7. Walrus**
  
- 4. Update on Members Responses to Proposals for Conservation and Management**
  
- 5. Any Other Business**