

OBSERVERS' REPORT ON THE 19TH MEETING OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO THE AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF SMALL CETACEANS OF THE BALTIC, NORTH EAST ATLANTIC, IRISH AND NORTH SEAS (ASCOBANS)

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The 19th meeting of the Advisory Committee (AC) to the Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic, North East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas (ASCOBANS), was held in Galway, Ireland from 20th to 22nd March 2012. The scientific session was chaired by Sami Hassani (France), the administrative session was chaired by Penina Blankett (Finland). Main topics at the AC meeting:

1. Baltic Sea harbor porpoises, **the “gap” area**:
 - The harbor porpoises in the Western Baltic, the Belt Seas and the Kattegat form a different population to the Baltic proper and the North Sea. It is likely that the population in this area has dropped from 28000 (1994) to 11000 animals (2005) (60% decline). By-catch is an issue, but the magnitude of the problem is uncertain.
 - ASCOBANS agreed that it is important to have a separate conservation plan for this area.
2. The coordinator (Geneviève Desportes) and the Working Group of the ASCOBANS **Conservation Plan for Harbour Porpoises in the North Sea** recommend: a follow-up SCANS II survey, improve international cooperation and bring smaller fisheries and recreational fisheries under the reformed Common Fisheries Policy.
3. The ASCOBANS **Bycatch working group** recommended: close collaboration with ICES, reviewing of the 1.7% removal rate, consideration of the new results from a Norwegian study on bycatch in small boat fisheries.
4. The **Noise Working Groups** of ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS have joined into one.
5. Two surveys were conducted on the **Dogger Bank** independently, using (1) a vessel with towed hydrophone and (2) dedicated aerial surveys. Harbour porpoise was the most common cetacean (estimated density from aerial surveys: 1.82 animals / km²; CV 0.31), with most of the records on the slopes of the bank.
6. **Small cetacean hunt** outside ASCOBANS agreement area
 - Tagging data indicates that the pilot whale population that inhabits the Faroese waters also occurs in the ASCOBANS agreement area. NAMMCO considers the Faroese hunt sustainable; however, uncertainties relating to abundance, population structure, distribution and trends remain and ASCOBANS welcomes future studies (e.g. T-NASS, CODA & SCANS surveys) to improve the current knowledge. The Advisory Committee welcomed the detailed information the Faroese authorities have provided regarding the small cetacean hunts.
7. An Intersessional Working Group on **Marine Debris**, to be chaired by the North Sea Foundation, was established.
8. In collaboration with ACCOBAMS, the ASCOBANS Secretariat is working to acquire **satellite-based data on shipping density** in order to facilitate further analysis to identify high risk areas and trends.
9. There will be an ECS/ASCOBANS/ACCOBAMS **Workshop on Management of Marine Protected Areas for Cetaceans** at the 2013 ECS Conference in Portugal.
10. The **ASCOBANS Outreach and Education Award** 2012 will be given to Mats Amundin of Kolmården Djurpark in Sweden.

The full reports as well as all related working documents are available via <http://www.ascobans.org/>.