

# Scientific advice on responsible tagging of harbour porpoises

Fifth advisory report on harbour porpoise research

Harbour Porpoise Advisory Committee, July 2025

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## Background of this requested advice

The Dutch government is responsible for adequate protection of harbour porpoises and, where necessary, to develop effective measures and/or regulation that ensure an adequate level of protection. To assess the impact of human activities and the effectiveness of potential management measures, understanding of habitat use by harbour porpoises in the North Sea is essential, but knowledge on this topic is insufficient. For example, it is unclear whether harbour porpoises (are able to) use the entire area, or whether there is a coastal (sub)population that is dependent on specific areas. Tagging harbour porpoises has the potential to improve understanding, and in the absence of an alternative, tagging is considered to be necessary for species protection. As a result, a (pilot) study was launched in 2023 to determine whether tagging harbour porpoises is feasible and whether the desired data are become available.

On March 12, 2025, an incident occurred during harbour porpoise tagging near Texel: a harbour porpoise drowned in the net used by the researchers. Following this accident, WMR and TNO conducted an internal investigation into the cause and proposed measures to prevent this from happening in the future.

After an initial internal evaluation and consultation with international experts, the management of WMR and TNO, the research institutes responsible for the execution of the research programme, issued a final assessment. According to the management assessment the incident was caused by an unfortunate coincidence of multiple factors, and adjustments to the working methods would prevent such incidents, and these adjustments will be implemented.

At the request of the commissioners, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature and the Directorate General for Public Works and Water Management (Rijkswaterstaat), the Commission evaluated this analysis and planned improvement measures.

## Conclusions of the Commission

- Overall, the Commission is of the opinion that the parties involved (WMR and TNO) took up this incident seriously and responsibly, first conducting an internal evaluation at the level of the operators/researchers, supplemented by consultation of independent foreign experts, and concluding with an overarching conclusion at the level of the responsible management.
- Insufficient oversight by the responsible trial leaders during the trial appears to be a major factor. During the tagging operation, a situation arose where the focus shifted entirely to the

two visibly captured animals, and the net that remained in the water was not adequately guarded. To prevent this lack of oversight, adequate measures are proposed, with a clear division of tasks between boats and separation of duties, in order to ensure that there is always (one) person that remains responsible for oversight and control. Proposed measures also ensure that sufficient attention remains paid to the net, which (necessarily) remains in the water for some time after the capture attempt. The Commission strongly endorses this improvement.

- The evaluation report has been anonymized, partly due to potential reactions on social media and the legitimate desire to protect the researchers. The Commission has understanding for this action. The result of the action to anonymize is that the names of the foreign experts consulted are also not mentioned in the report; their identity has been communicated to the Commission.
- The internal evaluation identified a possible measure to investigate whether it is possible to make (technical) adjustments to the boats used in the tagging operation, making them less susceptible to becoming entangled in the net. This measure is not reflected in the main conclusions and management recommendations. However, the Commission recommends to take up this topic and assess whether technical adjustments can be implemented.
- Furthermore, the Commission has been given access to initial (provisional) data from the tag that was successfully attached to the first porpoise caught March 12th. These data indicate that tags have significant added value, providing new insights into habitat use of harbour porpoises, and (as mentioned above) currently there is no alternative method available to obtain this data. Although a single, provisional result, it underscores the relevance and value of the tagging research.

## Final conclusion

In view of the thorough evaluation of the accident, the extensive investigation of possible measures and the promising initial results of harbour porpoise tagging, the Harbour Porpoise Advisory Committee recommends that harbour porpoise tagging in order to obtain understanding of habitat use should be continued, provided that the proposed adjustments to the methodology will be implemented.