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United Nations Environment Programme Mediterranean Action Plan

Meeting of the Ecosystem Approach Correspondence Group on Monitoring (CORMON) Biodiversity and Fisheries

Athens, 7-8 April 2025

Agenda Item 6 : Main elements and outline for the revision of the Ecosystem Approach Roadmap and IMAP

Results of the ABIOMMED project: D1C1 criterion assessment for cetaceans in the ACCOBAMS area

EcAp/MSFD

SPA/RAC
Tunis, 2025

Note by the Secretariat

The results of the ABIOMMED project, funded by the EU, were presented at the 15th ACCOBAMS Scientific Committee Meeting (Tunis, May 2023) with particular emphasis on activities aimed at enhancing the implementation of cetacean criteria under MSFD Descriptor D1 for coordinated monitoring and assessment in the Mediterranean with EcAp/IMAP processes.

A key outcome was the harmonization of working groups, merging the MSFD cetacean monitoring group with another group focused on aligning MSFD and EcAp/IMAP frameworks. This decision follows ACCOBAMS Resolution 6.12, ensuring better coordination with other regional conventions, including the Barcelona Convention.

The project also proposed strategies to enhance bycatch monitoring (IMAP CI12) and assess sustainable removal limits using the Potential Biological Removal (PBR) approach. These efforts aim to improve data collection and ensure consistent conservation strategies across Mediterranean subregions.

The document below presents the conclusions of the Working Group MSFD/EcAp. The ACCOBAMS Scientific Committee has endorsed these conclusions during their 6th Meeting (December 2024) and respectfully asks the Correspondence Group on Monitoring (CORMON) Biodiversity and Fisheries to consider them for the update of IMAP and the next phase of its implementation.

Results of the ABIOMMED project: D1C1 criterion assessment for cetaceans in the ACCOBAMS area EcAp/MSFD

1. At the Fifteenth Meeting of the ACCOBAM Scientific Committee (Tunis, 10th & 11th May 2023), the results from an EU-funded project - ABIOMMED[1] project - were presented, with particular emphasis on activities aimed at enhancing the implementation of cetacean criteria under MSFD Descriptor D1 for coordinated monitoring and assessment in the Mediterranean. A key objective of ACCOBAMS-lead Activity 4 was the development of proposals for regionally harmonised monitoring and assessments strategies and selection of associated approaches to estimate thresholds, through the establishment of an expert working group – the Working Group on cetacean monitoring under MSFD - including national contact persons for MSFD reporting on cetaceans. At the 15th SC meeting, in line with the sentiment of ACCOBAMS Resolution 6.12, *'Implementation of the EU MSFD and relevant Ecosystem Approach processes*' establishing a Working Group related on the harmonisation of MSFD and EcAp/IMAP frameworks, it was decided that these two Working Groups would be merged and the larger WG would also assume the responsibility to liaise with Working Groups established under other organizations (i.e., those established under the Barcelona Convention).

2. Regarding the primary MSFD criterion D1C1 and the IMAP Common Indicator 12 (CI12: Bycatch of vulnerable and non-target species and a road map to deal with the Ecological Objective 1 (EO1) "*Biological diversity is maintained or enhanced. .... the distribution and abundance of ... marine species are in line with prevailing physiographic, hydrographic, geographic, and climatic conditions*" has been proposed; UNEP/MED WG.500/4), the ABIOMMED WG agreed on the following:

1) To effectively monitor cetacean bycatch in the Mediterranean GFCM/GSAs, a series of action should be carried out, including:
    a. Improving scales of monitoring, by revising the existing IMAP/EcAp proposals and recognizing scales for the cetaceans' species in the Mediterranean.
    b. Define subregional and regional scales of assessment in line with species' ranges.
    c. Carry out a Bycatch Risk Assessment (BRA[2]) on each species for the potentially most dangerous fishing gears at regional scale, as soon as possible.
    d. Where bycatch totals are suspected to reach a threshold value of 1% of the total population, to establish a sustainable removal limit for cetaceans using the Potential Biological Removal (PBR)[3] approach (or a modified PBR as per OSPAR decisions) as a standard method to estimate thresholds. The PBR is the most frequently estimator employed for cetacean mortality (not limited to fisheries) and is widely regarded as practical and feasible. In this context, as first step, it was recommended:
        i. Consider the best estimate (N) of the species at the regional level for deep divers and fin whale and at the sub-regional level for small cetaceans.
        ii. Consider *Rmax* and *Fr* values of the U.S. PBR formula, according to the most recent IUCN assessments on Mediterranean cetacean species (https://www.iucnredlist.org/), as follow:
            ✓ Endangered, Vulnerable, Critically Endangered species: *Rmax* 0.02 – Fr 0.1
            ✓ Least concern species: Rmax 0.04 – Fr 0.5
        iii. Establish regional (Mediterranean) threshold values for species mortality of fin whale and deep diver[4] species.
        iv. Establish Sub Regional (Western Mediterranean, Central Mediterranean and Ionian Sea, Adriatic Sea, Aegean – Levantine) threshold values for species mortality of small odontocete[5].

[1] "*Support Mediterranean Member States towards implementation of the MSFD new GES Decision and programs of measures and contribute to regional/subregional cooperation*".
[2] ICESC Working Group on Bycatch of Protected Species (ICES WGBYC).
[3] $PBR = 0.5 \cdot R_{max} \cdot F \cdot N_{min}$
[4] Sperm, Cuvier's beaked whale, long finned pilot whale and Risso's dolphin
[5] Striped, common bottlenose dolphin, common dolphin

2) More conservative methods for setting mortality limits are the Catch Limit Algorithm (CLA) and the Removal Limit Algorithm (RLA) (a modification of CLA tested on harbour porpoise). However, it requires more data especially on total mortality over time and requires extensive simulations to be tested on all species.

3) There is a globally recognised need to define more robust data collection methods on bycatch events and rates per fishing *métier*, total fishing effort, as well as on population demographic characteristics at a sub-regional scale for the most species.