



ECS Letter of Concern:

The need to prevent European harbour porpoise bycatch

Catania, Sicily 12th April 2024

The conservation of harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) appears to be failing in Europe, with bycatch posing the most serious and urgent threat. There are particular bycatch concerns, with population level impacts identified in the Baltic proper (Carlen et al., 2021; also see ECS Letter of Concern re. Baltic Proper porpoise bycatch), the Belt Sea (Owen et al., 2024), Black and Mediterranean Seas (Popov et al., 2023; Cucknell et al., 2016), as well as in the Northeast Atlantic, including the Celtic Sea (ICES, 2018) and the Iberian population off the Spanish and Portuguese coasts (Pierce et al., 2024; Torres-Pereira et al., 2023). Some of these populations are small, locally endangered and, where data exist, declining. Bycatch in static nets is the most pressing issue (for example, Brownell et al., 2019; Dolman et al., 2016; Northridge et al., 2016).

European laws have failed to generate effective protection. Despite decades of scientific attention to this issue, there are no harbour porpoise populations in European waters where bycatch has been adequately managed.

There is a need for urgent action. Management at both the national and ocean basin level should be applied in parallel to further research efforts.

The European Cetacean Society therefore requests that the competent authorities urgently adopt and enforce regulations for effective measures to minimise and, where possible, eliminate harbour porpoise bycatch.

References

- Brownell, R. Jr, Reeves, R., Read, A., et al. 2019. Bycatch in gillnet fisheries threatens Critically Endangered small cetaceans and other aquatic megafauna. *Endangered Species Research* 40:285–296. <https://doi.org/10.3354/esr00994>
- Carlen, I., Nunney, L. and Simmonds, M. 2021. Out of sight, out of mind: How conservation is failing European porpoises. *Front. Mar. Sci.* Vol. 8 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2021.617478>
- Cucknell, A-C., Frantzis, A., Boisseau, O., Romagosa, M., Ryan, C., Tonay, A., Alexiadou, P., Öztürk, A. and Moscrop, A. 2016. Harbour porpoises in the Aegean Sea, Eastern Mediterranean: the species' presence is confirmed. *Mar. Bio. Rec.* 9, 72. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41200-016-0050-5>

Dolman, S., Baulch, S., Evans, P., Read, F. and Ritter, F. 2016. Towards an EU Action Plan on Cetacean Bycatch. *Mar. Pol.* 72. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2016.06.020>

ICES. 2018. Report of the Working Group on Bycatch of Protected Species (WGBYC), 1-4 May 2018, Reykjavik. ICES CM 2018/ACOM:25.

Northridge, S., Coram, A., Kingston, A. and Crawford, R. 2016. Disentangling the causes of protected-species bycatch in gillnet fisheries. *Cons. Bio.* <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.12741>

Owen, K., Gilles, A., Authier, M., Carlström, J., Genu, M., Kyhn, L., Nachtsheim, D., Ramírez-Martínez, N., Siebert, U., Sköld, M., Teilmann, J., Unger, B. and Sveegaar, S. 2024. A negative trend in abundance and an exceeded mortality limit call for conservation action for the Vulnerable Belt Sea harbour porpoise population. *Front. Mar. Sci.* 11. | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2024.1289808>

Pierce, G.J., Petitguyot, M., Gutierrez-Muñoz, P., Fernandez, D., Marçalo, A., Blakeman, S., Puig-Lozano, R., Saavedra Penas, C., Vázquez Bonales, J.A., Suarez-Bregua, P., Hernandez Gonzalez, A., López, A., Covelo, P., Pin, X., Vázquez, U., González, M., Martínez-Cedeira, J., Vilas, N., Read, F.L., Leaper, R., Simmonds, M., Pinn, E., and Dolman, S., 2024. Iberian porpoise: an update. Paper SC/69B/HIM12 (Rev 1) submitted to the International Whaling Commission's Scientific Committee.

Popov, D. Meshkova, G., Vishnyakova, K., Ivanchikova, J., Paiu, M., Timofte, C., Oztürk, A.A., Tonay, A.M., Dede, A., Panayatova, M., Düzgünes, E., and Gol'din, P. 2023. Assessment of the bycatch level for the Black Sea harbour porpoise in the light of new data on population abundance. *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 10:1119983. doi: 10.3389/fmars.2023.1119983

Torres-Pereira, A., Araújo, H., Monteiro, S.S., Ferreira, M., Bastos-Santos, J., Sá, S., Nicolau, L., Marçalo, A., Marques, C., Tavares, A.S., De Bonis, M., Covelo, P., Martínez-Cedeira, J., López, A., Sequeira, M., Vingada, J. & Eira, C. 2023. Assessment of harbour porpoise bycatch along the Portuguese and Galician coast: insights from strandings over two decades. *Animals* 3, 2632. doi: 10.3390/ani13162632