Istanbul, 8th November 2019: Today, the 7th Meeting of the Parties (MoP) to the Agreement for the protection of whales and dolphins in the Mediterranean and Black Seas (ACCOBAMS) came to a close. The government of the Republic of Turkey – which became the most recent addition to the 24-party Agreement in 2018 – hosted the conference. The main concerns raised and decisions adopted during the MoP include the impact of ship strikes on populations of large whale, ocean noise caused by the oil industry, shipping and military activities, as well as bycatch of whales and dolphins in fishing gear.

Indeed, collisions with large vessels, in particular with cargo ships, are among the biggest threats to the two species of large whales in the Agreement area – fin whales and sperm whales. There is consensus amongst range states that specific measures need to be imposed in areas and at times of high density of whales, in particular in areas important for marine mammals (IMMAs) and marine protected areas (MPAs). Such concrete measures include the shift of shipping lanes and the reduction of speed to 10–12 knots in areas of critical importance to whales.

“Reducing shipping speed is a win-win-win measure, as it reduces the risk of collisions with whales, greenhouse gas emissions, and noise levels,” says Nicolas Entrup, Co-Director of International Relations at OceanCare in Istanbul. “If you drive tankers through the whales’ living room, collisions are pre-programmed,” says the OceanCare spokesperson, raising particular concerns over the high risk of collisions with sperm whales in the Hellenic Trench area off Greece. The Hellenic Trench is home to sperm whales, probably the most endangered large whale subpopulation in the central and eastern Mediterranean Sea, numbering only around 200 animals with a tendency to decrease further.

The area is also exposed to intensive noise generated by the oil industry in their search for new hydrocarbon deposits. Concerns over the impacts of noise pollution has also been subject to a decision adopted by the Parties urging Range States to undertake Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) prior to noise-generating activities and, by doing so, to make use of the specific EIA Guidelines adopted by the Parties to the Convention for the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS) in 2017.

Welcoming the decisions by the Parties to ACCOBAMS, OceanCare remains worried about the situation of whale and dolphin species in the Agreement area. The Agreement is only as good as the extent to which it is implemented. In an attempt to facilitate the implementation of the provisions adopted by Parties, ACCOBAMS established a follow-up mechanism in 2013. This Committee provides the basis to promote and improve the putting into effect the decisions taken by the Parties. Within the past four years, OceanCare has submitted five complaints to the “Follow-Up Committee” against Range States not meeting their obligations to implement agreed conservation action. Those cases address concerns over intensive noise events, such as seismic and military activities, as well as over countries failing to properly implement the conservation plan for Common dolphins in the Mediterranean Sea. The latter and another complaint remain to be addressed properly.

With that in mind, „one can only be cautiously optimistic. The last triennium has demonstrated that while ACCOBAMS is taking a step towards enhanced implementation, this process is still in its infancy. Time will tell how this process will evolve and if meaningful implementation efforts will be taken. However, time is running out very quickly, as the pressure on whales and dolphins in the region is simply too strong,” Nicolas Entrup comments. Governance is an essential component to the overall success of an agreement. OceanCare is convinced that only if Parties are ready to be held accountable to implementing the decisions that they adopt, ACCOBAMS can flourish into the Agreement that it has the potential to be.
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About OceanCare
OceanCare is a Swiss non-profit organisation. It was founded in 1989 and has a strong commitment to realistic and cooperative initiatives. The organisation works at national and international level in the areas of marine pollution, environmental changes, fisheries, whaling, sealing, captivity of marine mammals and public education. OceanCare holds Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) and is a partner of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), and the UNEP/CMS Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Contiguous Atlantic Area (ACCOBAMS). OceanCare has also been accredited as a Major Group to the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), which is the governing body of UNEP and is a part of the UNEP Global Partnership on Marine Litter. www.oceancare.org