

## **Turkish-Greek conflict from a marine conservation perspective: Search for fossil fuels poses risk to marine life.**

**OceanCare identifies the true victims resulting from the dispute over hydrocarbon resources in the eastern Mediterranean Sea.**

***Wädenswil/Switzerland, 13th October 2020: The Turkish research vessel ORUC REIS is reported to continue conducting seismic activities in the eastern Mediterranean Sea for another 10 days, which will again lead to tension between Turkey on the one side and Greece, Cyprus and the European Union on the other. The conflict arises over the fundamental disagreement over the exploitation of hydrocarbon resources and claims over maritime areas in the eastern Mediterranean.***

The international marine conservation organisation, OceanCare, which holds Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC), draws attention to the risk seismic activities pose in general, no matter which country is undertaking them. Airguns employed in the course of seismic surveys emit impulsive sound waves of up to 260 decibels towards the seabed every 10 to 15 seconds, 24 hours a day. These intense noise impulses are one of the loudest noise-generating activities produced by humans and pose a threat to marine life. Research has documented the severe negative impacts of such noise on whales, fish, but also invertebrates, including the killing of all krill larvae in an entire study area and has also demonstrated the significant decline of fisheries catch rates.

“From a marine conservation perspective, it doesn’t matter under which flag a research vessel is operating airguns, as it’s dangerous for marine wildlife” says Nicolas Entrup, OceanCare Policy Expert managing the ocean noise pollution programme. “Greece and Turkey, both nations are engaged in seismic activities, including in the Hellenic Trench, the deepest region in the Mediterranean Sea, which is inhabited by endangered sperm whales and deep diving beaked whales. These species are especially at risk from such extreme underwater noise” criticizes Entrup.

OceanCare also draws attention to the fact that seismic activities, including those conducted by the ORUC REIS, likely violate the provisions of the Agreement to protect whale and dolphin species in the whole Mediterranean Sea (ACCOBAMS), to which both States – Greece and Turkey – are Party. In 2010 and in 2019, Parties to ACCOBAMS adopted Guidelines to manage anthropogenic underwater noise, including specific explanatory notes on how to manage seismic surveys. Interestingly, the host country of the most recent ACCOBAMS Meeting of the Parties (MoP) when adopting these Guidelines was Turkey, which had ratified the agreement just prior to the MoP. The Guidelines state that habitats of importance to whales and dolphins shall be avoided and the most practicable source power employed in other regions.

“We urge the Turkish and Greek governments to halt any seismic activities in the region. From a whale conservation perspective, an immediate ban of such activities shall be imposed for important marine mammal areas, such as the Hellenic Trench, including the region south of Crete, and the waters of Northern Cyprus. From the perspective of marine conservation as well as a broader environmental perspective, we urge all States to halt all oil and gas exploration activities to support reaching the objectives of the Paris Agreement” says Nicolas Entrup.

OceanCare wishes to also highlight the fact that with France, another Mediterranean Range State has already imposed such a ban on exploration activities in its waters.

Furthermore, Spain will also prohibit any new activity of exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons in all its territory, terrestrial and marine, once the Climate Change and Energy Transition Law is approved, which is currently being processed in Parliament. "This law is a clear signal to oil companies that they must accelerate their commitment to be net zero carbon by 2050. The aforementioned law will allow the massive deployment of renewable energies, which will help Spain to become a leading country in production of green hydrogen, which is called to be a key energy vector in the decarbonization of the economy. Greece and Turkey must understand that fossil fuels have no future and that it is a serious mistake to continue betting on maintaining an economy based on oil and gas", says Carlos Bravo.

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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), as well as UNEP/MAP. [oceancares.org](http://oceancares.org)

## **Additional background information:**

### **UNCLOS**

In 1982, countries signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), an international agreement that defines the duties and rights of nations with respect to their use of the ocean. *Inter alia*, the Agreement sets out to clarify which sovereign state has special rights with regard to exploration and exploitation of marine resources in a given area. The treaty moreover addresses the limits of continental shelf jurisdiction. Although Turkey has not signed the Convention, it is generally considered that the rules of the Treaty reflect international law and are therefore binding on all States.

Both Turkey and Greece believe that certain areas (i.e. off the coasts of Cyprus and Crete, for example), which are believed to hold promising oil and gas resources, belong to their own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Although the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea may shed light on the conflict, it is not quite so simple. Turkey has not signed the Convention and refers to bilateral agreements, such as the agreement with Libya, which provides for the creation of an EEZ from the southern Mediterranean coast of Turkey to the north-eastern coast of Libya. Greece, however, claims that such bilateral agreements are null and void, and cites the Convention as its legal basis. Without a clear solution, both Greece and Turkey will claim these areas for themselves and defend their 'right' to exclusive exploitation.

### **ACCOBAMS**

The Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and contiguous Atlantic area (ACCOBAMS) entered into force in 2001. Currently it has 24 Parties: Albania, Algeria,

Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Egypt, France, Georgia, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Syria, Tunisia, **Turkey** and Ukraine.

Parties are required to undertake impact assessments to be carried out in order to provide a basis for either allowing or prohibiting the continuation or the future development of activities that may affect cetaceans or their habitat in the Agreement area, including ... offshore exploration and exploitation, ... as well as establishing the conditions under which such activities may be conducted; Parties shall endeavour to establish and manage specially protected areas for cetaceans corresponding to the areas which serve as habitats of cetaceans and/or which provide important food resources for them.

Parties adopted numerous Resolutions urging themselves to avoid, reduce and mitigate ocean noise pollution. In ACCOBAMS Resolution 4.17 "Guidelines to Address the Impact of Anthropogenic Noise on Cetaceans in the ACCOBAMS Area" and Resolution 7.13 "Anthropogenic Noise" Parties adopted guidelines which provide detailed guidance on how countries, including Turkey and Greece, have agreed to manage anthropogenic underwater noise in the Mediterranean Sea.

### **Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs)**

IMMAs are defined as ***discrete portions of habitat, important to marine mammal species, that have the potential to be delineated and managed for conservation***. The wider Hellenic Trench, including waters south of Crete, has been proposed as a Marine Protected Area and has already been declared as an IMMA. Two areas at the northern coast of Cyprus have also been declared as IMMAs. See e-atlas at: <https://www.marinemammalhabitat.org/immas/>