

Press release OceanCare

High-risk collision hotspots in the Mediterranean Sea: Urgent measures required to save whales from vanishing

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From November 29 to December 2 representatives from 24 Mediterranean and Black Sea Range States meet in Malta deciding upon future conservation measures within the Agreement (ACCOBAMS) to protect whales and dolphins in these two seas. The international marine conservation organisation OceanCare is particularly concerned about the survival of the two large whale species in the MedSea, fin whales and sperm whales, which are both classified as endangered. It is a matter of urgency to reduce ship collisions, as it is the main direct cause of death for those marine giants. Yet, it is about three core measures to protect these animals, claims OceanCare.

Reducing the risk of collisions with whales:

1. Re-routing shipping lanes out of the core habitats of whales where possible.
2. Reducing speed is proven to be the most effective way to prevent collisions in case re-routing is not possible.
3. Smart technology can be a complementary measure in high-risk zones alerting captains about the presence of whales.

«It is known what needs to be done. Now action has to be taken. Re-routing, slowing down and new technologies in high-risk areas where no re-routing is possible, can be the recipe for a success story. Policy makers and shipping sector needs to understand: we jointly can achieve the recovery of whale populations in the Mediterranean Sea» says Nicolas Entrup, Director for International Relations at OceanCare.

Ship collisions – primary threat for whales in the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean Sea is one of the busiest regions of merchant shipping, as well as a huge amount of fast ferries. It is estimated that more than 220,000 large ships transit the Mediterranean every year. Both large whale species in the Mediterranean, the fin and sperm whales, are classified as endangered. While the population of fin whales in the Mediterranean may have been reduced by up to 50% in the past two decades, the situation for sperm whales in the eastern Mediterranean Sea is especially dire: According to scientific estimates, just around 200 of these marine giants are left in the Hellenic Trench. That region is passed by around 30,000 large ships every year. The risk of lethal collisions relates to vessel size and speed. Between 1992 and 2021, more than 50% of the sperm whales found stranded on the Greek coastline showed clear marks of collisions with ships.

High-risk hotspots: Urgent measures required

States are obligated, under international, regional and national requirements to protect these species. The high-risk areas for ship collisions with whales in the Mediterranean Sea are:

the Hellenic Trench for eastern Mediterranean sperm whales the north-western Mediterranean Sea, including the Pelagos Sanctuary and Whale Migration Corridor, as well as the Eastern Alboran Sea and the Strait of Gibraltar for fin and sperm whales.

1. Re-routing to protect whales

The preferred measure for protecting whales from ship strikes is moving shipping lanes out of their core habitat. In recent months a coalition formed by IFAW, OceanCare, the Pelagos Cetacean Research Institute and WWF Greece has been successful in convincing major player within the shipping sector about changing routes when crossing the Hellenic Trench off Greece. MSC, the world's largest shipping company, adjusted their routes according to the scientific advice, the Association of German Shipowners (VDR) urged its members to follow suit. In mid-October 2022, the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) referred to those examples as role model to be followed in a communication to their global membership.

2. Slowing down – effective immediate action

Reducing vessel speed is an effective measure to protect whales in areas, where re-routing is no option. If ships reduce their speed by just a tenth, the risk of a fatal collision with whales decreases by 50%. For protected areas, a speed limit of around 10 knots is to be recommended. Reducing speed is a recommended measure also to reduce other pollutants, including CO₂ as well as ocean noise. In fact, in November 2021, the ACCOBAMS Scientific Committee adopted a recommendation stressing that «when it is not possible to establish routes to keep whales separated from ships, the only measure proven to reduce fatal collisions with most large whales is to reduce speed».

3. «SAVE WHALES» – smart technology to help protecting sperm whales

The status of some populations, such as the eastern Mediterranean sperm whales require additional measures to prevent their extinction, in particular where re-routing is not an option. In that context OceanCare has funded the development of the SAVE Whales system by an international and multi-disciplinary team, led by Greek researchers from Pelagos Cetacean Research Institute and the Institute of Applied and Computational Mathematics – FORTH. Save Whales uses solar-powered high-tech buoys equipped with hydrophones to localise sperm whales by their clicking sounds, and transmits their position in real time to relevant marine traffic. If a ship is on a collision course with a whale, the ship's captain can be warned in time to change course or reduce speed. «Save Whales», which has been tested in a three-year pilot project successfully, is the first system worldwide for the integrated localization of sperm whales. OceanCare works in partnership with Pelagos Cetacean Research Institute, FORTH and the Greek environmental think tank, The Green Tank, promoting the implementation of the system by the Greek government.

Breaking news: Save Whales Video

OceanCare is launching an animated video explaining the threat of ship collisions to sperm whales in the Eastern Mediterranean, what can be done to protect them and how the «Save Whales System» works. The video is rights-free, clean and subtitled, and available in 4 languages: English, German, Greek and Spanish. Link to video: https://youtu.be/r_qBbs2dabw

The 8th Meeting of the Parties to the Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and contiguous Atlantic area (ACCOBAMS) takes place between the 28th November and 2nd December in Malta. The purpose of this regional Treaty is the conservation of whales and dolphins in the agreement area and to reduce threats these marine mammals face. At current stage, 24 Range States are Party to the Agreement. Since 2003, OceanCare is a recognized partner of ACCOBAMS addressing threats and supporting conservation research in the area. At this year's meeting (MOP8) State representatives will discuss measures mitigating threats such as ocean noise and plastic pollution, illegal

driftnetting, ship strikes, as well as the development of specific conservation plans how to prevent the endangered species to vanish from the region.

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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 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. Since 2021, OceanCare is accredited observer to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the International Seabed Authority (ISA). The organisation has been an observer at the IWC since 1992. OceanCare has also been accredited as part of the Major Group 'Science & Technology' 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