



Press release OceanCare

The Mediterranean and Black Seas are not a safe place for whales and dolphins

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On Friday, 2nd of December 2022, the 8th Meeting of the Parties (MOP) of the Convention to protect whales and dolphins in the Mediterranean and Black Sea region (ACCOBAMS) ended with poor future prospects. Although whale species are endangered and even highly endangered, the conference did not decide on any effective countermeasures.

"The outcome of the conference is sobering. Timid and vague measures have hardly the potential to safeguard the protection of endangered whales and dolphins. The Range States risk the continued vanishing of these amazing marine mammals in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, some of them even over the next two decades," said Nicolas Entrup, Director of International Relations at OceanCare.

Climate crisis, the war, underwater noise from oil and gas exploration and plastic pollution
9 out of 11 whale, dolphin and porpoise species found in the Mediterranean and Black Sea region are listed in one of the threatened categories of the IUCN Red List. 2 out of the 3 cetacean species in the Black Sea are classified as endangered. Five out of the 11 Mediterranean cetacean species are endangered, with one species and 4 subpopulations classified as critically endangered facing extinction. Grave concerns have also been expressed for the eastern Mediterranean sperm whales, where just around 200 animals remain, the common dolphin in the Gulf of Corinth with just around 20 animals left or the three Black Sea species where significant impacts in response to the war are already documented.

The marine mammals and other wildlife in the region are exposed to a cocktail of numerous severe threats.

Climate crisis. The War. With the northern part of the Black Sea being a current zone of intense warfare activities and the Mediterranean Sea being a climate change hotspot that already became warmer, more acidic and saltier, these slowly reproducing animals are overwhelmingly exposed to a wide range of pressures and threats, making it difficult to survive. The international marine conservation organisation OceanCare concludes that it will require massive efforts to prevent the loss of these amazing animals in the region.

During surveys in spring and summer of 2022, the Bulgarian Conservation Research Organisation - The Green Balkans- identified a significant increase in the presence (or density) of all three cetacean species in Bulgarian waters, especially as compared to the previous five years. The most common explanation of this unusual density is that animals are fleeing from the northern area in reaction to intensified warfare activities by explosions as well as the deployment of active sonar systems. One of the documented consequences has been increased bycatch rates of these species in fishing gear and an increase in the number of strandings.

Ocean noise pollution. Ocean noise pollution is one of the most prominent threats, inter alia caused by seismic surveys during oil and gas exploration and military activities. Despite the ongoing climate and biodiversity crisis, several countries, including Algeria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Lebanon, Montenegro, Romania and Turkey continue to explore and heavily exploit hydrocarbons in the Mediterranean and Black Sea. Despite the years it takes to explore and develop new oil and gas deposits, the ripple effects following the war in the Ukraine have led

to the perception that searching for new deposits is a quick fix. The contrary is the case, distracting from the urgent need to decrease dependency on fossil fuels as required by the Paris Agreement. Airguns applied when searching for oil and gas in the seabed pose a severe threat to all marine wildlife.

Pollution and the impacts of fisheries. Driftnets that are prohibited in the Agreement Area are still employed illegally and remain a deadly trap for large and small whales and other marine life. In addition, thousands of kilometres of abandoned fishing gear floating adds to the pressure.

The Mediterranean Sea is heavily impacted by marine plastic pollution and especially poses an existential threat to cetaceans, who are rapidly decreasing in numbers. Sperm whales and fin whales are species documented to be exposed to enormous amounts of plastic ingestion with lethal consequences. Plastics pose a problem from the very beginning of their lifecycle and so a firm commitment by ACCOBAMS Parties to end plastic pollution and to do so along the whole plastic lifecycle is warmly welcomed.

Ship Collisions - To the positive side

In reaction to the threat posed by ship-collisions with the two large whale species – fin whales and sperm whales – in the Mediterranean Sea, the Range States confirmed that the two main measures reducing the risk of ship strikes are the avoidance of navigating through core whale habitats and the reduction of vessel speed. Furthermore, France, Italy, Monaco and Spain have submitted a proposal to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) to declare the Northwestern Mediterranean as a “Particular Sensitive Sea Area” (PSSA) in response to the threat posed by ship strikes to the future of the two large whale species. The proposal will be decided upon by the IMO in the week from the 12th of December.

Success by OceanCare

Complaining about the poor implementation of agreed conservation action by Range States to the Agreement, OceanCare had submitted four formal complaints in the previous six years which have been subject to a formal review. The review panel (Follow Up Committee) submitted conclusions from those cases to the Parties which have now been endorsed. Following the submission by OceanCare relating to Greece’s failure to assess and control military manoeuvres, especially active sonar around the south east of Crete, the Committee recalled the need to apply ACCOBAMS Guidelines, including the need to take steps to avoid key cetacean habitats and areas of cetacean density. Based on an OceanCare submission raising concern over the lack of assessment and control of petroleum exploration activities, the Committee reminded countries of the need to apply the precautionary principle and to assess the impacts of an activity before it is approved, including for offshore exploration and exploitation. Portugal also clarified that by now it has imposed a ban on oil and gas exploration which OceanCare congratulated the country for. One submission criticized all Mediterranean Range States for failing to implement a conservation plan for the endangered common dolphin. The Committee confirmed that there is a lack of implementation and urged countries to take action accordingly.

“The complaints submitted by OceanCare over the years have now been proven well-founded and have consequently led to the recognition that there is a significant deficit in areas such as oil and gas exploration licensing, the failure to impose precautionary measures when military manoeuvres are undertaken and by implementing conservation plans for threatened species” says Nicolas Entrup, Director for International Relations at OceanCare. *“The countries have to take action otherwise the Mediterranean and Black Seas will become regions where the extirpation of whales and dolphins is documented, but not prevented. It is certain that currently the “ship of the biodiversity crisis” navigates in the wrong direction”* concludes Entrup.

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Media contact:

Ilka Franzmann Phone +49 – 170 - 280 51 81 ifranzmann@oceancare.org
communication manager OceanCare

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