3-7 July: crucial meeting of IMO's Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC)

Global pressure on IMO to take key decisions next week on decarbonisation of shipping and to protect whales from strikes

- **Whether or not to commit to full decarbonisation of shipping in line with the Paris Agreement in 2050 with ambitious interim targets for 2030 and 2040.**
- **The adoption of new Guidelines for the reduction of underwater noise.**
- **Protect endangered blue whales, fin whales and sperm whales in the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean from being hit by vessels**

Madrid, Zurich, 28th of June 2023. The first week of July will be decisive whether the UN International Maritime Organisation (IMO) lives up to the challenge of adopting a series of key decisions to effectively address the climate emergency and the escalating crisis of marine biodiversity loss.

Shipping: the world's laggard in the global decarbonisation efforts

The IMO is reviewing its current climate targets which consist only of a 50% reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from ships by 2050. This is clearly a target that is not consistent with the Paris Agreement, which calls for achieving climate carbon neutrality by 2050 at the latest.

IMO negotiations are currently taking place between 26 and 30 June (at the 15th meeting of the Intersessional Working Group on Greenhouse Gases, ISWG-GHG 15) and then at the 80th meeting of the Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC 80) from 3rd to 7th July where decisions will be taken.

In the latest round of negotiations, held from 20-24 March (ISWG-GHG 14), 45 of the participating countries agreed that shipping should reach zero emissions by 2050. Support for additional interim measures also grew, with 37 and 43 countries calling for the adoption of targets for 2030 and 2040, respectively.

International institutions, such as the World Bank, but especially the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have also called on the IMO to set a target for reducing emissions from international shipping by 2030.

In turn, the decarbonisation pathway for maritime transport compatible with the Science Based Targets (SBTi) initiative ***(1)*** set at least 36% GHG emission reductions from this sector by 2030 and at least 96% by 2040.

For its part, the European Union (EU) supports the objective of phasing out GHG emissions by 2050 at the latest, taking into account the entire life cycle of fuels, following a decarbonisation pathway that is compatible with the objective of not exceeding a global temperature increase limit of 1.5 °C. Furthermore, interim targets of at least 29% reduction by 2030 and at least 83% by 2040 are called for, in both cases compared to 2008 emissions. In addition, it proposes that 10% of the energy used by the global fleet in 2030 should come from fuels and/or energy sources with zero or near-zero GHG emissions. In addition, the EU proposes a combination of medium-term measures, such as the adoption of a GHG emissions levy helping to reduce the price gap between traditional fuels and low and zero GHG fuels and supporting energy efficiency improvements.

"It would be the necessary step forward for humankind if the IMO, acting responsibly, were to agree at MEPC80 on an absolute zero GHG emissions target for 2050 and the adoption of interim targets for

2030 and 2040 to increase ambition as well as pressure to make targets measurable", said Nicolas Entrup, Director of International Relations at marine protection organisation OceanCare.

"Actually one may think it should be a no-brainer to bring the IMO targets in line with those of the Paris Agreement. We simply can't afford any other less ambitious path," Entrup added.

Likely the most cost-effective measure to achieve GHG emission reductions in shipping, with immediate effect and at minimal cost, is to reduce the speed of vessels. If a ship reduces its speed, it consumes less fuel (10% reduction in speed = 27% less fuel) and therefore emits less GHGs and air pollutants. Taking into account all factors affecting shipping and maritime transport (such as weather conditions and, at fleet level, the additional vessels that might be needed to provide the same transport service when a speed reduction is applied), studies show that **CO_2 emissions could be reduced by around 13% and 24%, if ships reduced their speed by 10% and 20% respectively.**

Moreover, reducing speed has other positive environmental effects: in addition to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, it also reduces the emission of air pollutants (such as sulphur oxides, SO_x; nitrogen oxides, NO_x; and black carbon), underwater noise and the risk of ships colliding with marine wildlife. Specifically, **current data show that a 10% decrease in vessel speed across the global fleet could reduce shipping noise by 40%.**

"The adoption of a mandatory ship speed reduction measure would achieve these multiple environmental benefits while creating a level playing field for all shipping companies", said Carlos Bravo, OceanCare's Ocean Policy Expert, who will be attending the IMO MEPC meeting in London.

Revision of the 2014 IMO Guidelines on Underwater Noise Reduction

Underwater noise pollution is a problem for many marine species: to date, negative impacts on at least 150 species have been documented, ranging from plankton, invertebrates and fish to cetaceans. It is a problem of increasing severity in our seas: according to the joint report of the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) and the European Environment Agency (EEA) "European Maritime Transport Environmental Report 2021", **total noise energy emissions to the sea from shipping have more than doubled between 2014 and 2019 in all EU waters.**

The main driver of underwater noise from ships is the cavitation phenomenon produced by propellers. The IMO adopted Guidelines for the reduction of underwater noise in 2014, which have actually had no effect, mainly due to their voluntary nature. This failure prompted a group of countries, led by Canada, to propose in December 2019, during MEPC 75, to launch a process to revise these guidelines.

In January 2023 the IMO Sub-Committee on Ship Design and Construction (SDC) at its 9th meeting agreed on revised Guidelines and a Work Plan until 2026. Both the revised Guidelines and the Work Plan are to be finally approved at MEPC 80.

Final approval of a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area in the north-western Mediterranean

In December 2022, at the proposal of Spain, France, Italy and Monaco, the MEPC, at its 79th meeting, provisionally approved the designation of a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) in the north-western Mediterranean Sea with the aim of reducing collisions of ships with large whales (sperm whales and fin whales), which still inhabit this area of intense maritime traffic. The movement of ships in this area is very high, around 220,000 per year, with average speeds of between 14 and 20 knots in the case of merchant ships or even up to 35 knots in the case of high-speed vessels.

On that occasion it was recognised by the MEPC that the North-Western Mediterranean PSSA is ecologically particularly important, at the level of the Mediterranean Sea but also globally ***(2)***; its

vulnerability due to international shipping activities, including those of cargo and passenger ships, pleasure craft and fishing vessels was highlighted; and it was stated that the area to be protected is particularly frequented by two whale species particularly vulnerable to the risk of collision with vessels due to their size and behaviour: the fin whale (the second largest whale in the world) and the sperm whale, both of which are endangered in the Mediterranean according to the IUCN Red List.

In May 2023, the IMO's Sub-Committee on Navigation, Communications and Search and Rescue (NCSR) examined and decided to approve the security measures proposed in the PSSA proposal. It is therefore expected that the IMO, through the MEPC in July, will give final approval to the PSSA and the associated security measures proposed. In December 2022, Range States of the Mediterranean Sea all agreed at a Meeting of the Agreement to protect whales in the Mediterranean (ACCOBAMS) to *"promote the application of vessel speed reductions (e.g., slow steaming) as an operational measure that results in multiple environmental benefits, including the reduction of underwater noise and greenhouse gas emissions, as well as of the risk of ships strikes, and to promote such measures in the context of the proposal of Particularly Sensitive Sea Area in the North-western Mediterranean"* (ACCOBAMS Resolution 8.17).

Protecting an important population of blue whales in southern Sri Lanka

In order to protect blue whales and improve navigational safety, the IMO is also expected to support an application for the establishment of a new Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS) south of Sri Lanka, jointly submitted by the environmental organisation International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) together with the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and the most representative international private shipping associations such as the World Shipping Council (WSC), International Chamber of Shipping (ICS), Baltic and International Maritime Council (BIMCO), International Association of Independent Tanker Owners (INTERTANKO), International Association of Dry Cargo Shipowners (INTERCARGO), Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), International Parcel Tankers Association (IPTA).

The current TSS, located just south of Dondra Head on the southern coast of Sri Lanka, is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world and carries large volumes of international shipping traffic directly over the critical habitat of the northern blue whale population of the Indian Ocean, posing a particularly high risk of collision with ships, with serious or lethal effects for these endangered cetaceans.

The establishment of a new TSS approximately 15 nautical miles south of the existing one would bring significant environmental and safety benefits for the thousands of vessels transiting this important East-West trade route, smaller fishing vessels and a significant reduction in the risk of vessel collisions with blue whales feeding in the waters surrounding the existing TSS.

Currently around 33% of shipping traffic already uses the southernmost high seas route proposed from this set of organisations, due to concerns about whales and the safety of smaller vessels, but ships have to do so without the safety benefits of a TSS under the auspices of the IMO.

The number of blue whales killed by ships off Sri Lanka in the last few years is not known but one study estimated 30-60 a year. The ocean currents and winds off southern Sri Lanka mean that many whales killed by ship strikes would likely drift off-shore and sink, so only a small proportion would be detected by washing up on the beaches. Nevertheless, the stranding rates are high, especially for blue whales along the south coast of Sri Lanka; where cause of death has been identified this has been due to ship strikes.

ENDS

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NOTES

(1) STBi

The Science-Based Targets initiative (SBTi) was established in 2015 to help companies set emissions reduction targets in line with climate science and the goals of the Paris Agreement. Since 2015, more than 1,000 companies have joined the initiative to set a science-based climate target.

(2) Environmental value of the area included in the PSSA

The NW Mediterranean PSSA comprises the waters between Valencia and Genoa, defined by cetacean researchers as critical habitat for fin whales and sperm whales, and includes areas of extreme environmental value. These include:

- the Mediterranean Cetacean Migration Corridor, located between the coast of Catalonia and Valencia and the Balearic Islands, declared a Marine Protected Area by the Spanish Government and a Specially Protected Area of Mediterranean Importance (SPAMI) by the Barcelona Convention,
- the Pelagos Cetacean Sanctuary in the Ligurian Sea,
- the Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMA) called "Gulf of Lions Shelf" and "Slopes and Canyons System of the North-Western Mediterranean Sea".