

**Agenda Item 6.4:      Review of new information on population distribution**

**Joint Cetacean Protocol. An information paper for ASCOBANS**

**Submitted by:      United Kingdom**



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## Joint Cetacean Protocol – an information paper for ASCOBANS

At the time of its publication, the *Atlas of cetacean distribution in north-west European waters* (Reid *et al.* 2003) represented the most complete summary of the 28 species of cetacean that have been recorded in those waters from the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The data sources used to compile a Joint Cetacean Database (JCD) and the annual distribution maps were the European Seabirds at Sea (ESAS) database, the SeaWatch database, and the SCANS(I) database.

The *Atlas* has been cited extensively and maps from it reproduced in many publications ranging from environmental assessments to scientific reports. The transformed data underlying the distribution and (relative) abundance maps have also been released to several organisations for further analysis and mapping. This degree of use might seem surprising given the various shortcomings of the *Atlas*. The ESAS and SeaWatch databases comprise data collected from a variety of different organisations in north-west Europe but notwithstanding this, and the fact that more than 30 000 records of 138 000 individual animals contributed to the compilation of the distribution maps, many other data-sets were not included. The maps also require to be interpreted very carefully – they hide much spatiotemporal variation and possible bias in sightings data (see Methods chapter in the *Atlas*).

Since publication of the *Atlas*, many new data relating to the distribution of cetaceans have been collected. The ESAS and SeaWatch databases, notably the latter, have been augmented by data from opportunistic, generic surveys as well as systematic, geographically targeted ones; and of course, SCANS has been repeated in a more extensive area. In addition to recently collected data, there are also other data-sets across Europe that were not used in the *Atlas*. So while many of the species maps in the *Atlas* depict roughly accurate dispersion patterns of cetaceans, the scope exists to render these maps more current and comprehensive by the inclusion of more data.

There are probably several national mechanisms that would be served by an updated *Atlas*. For example, some countries will have formulated their own targets in respect of the Convention on Biological Diversity aim to halt biodiversity loss by 2010. However, perhaps the most appropriate instrument driving the need for a new *Atlas* is the EC Habitats and Species Directive (HSD; EEC 1992). All species of cetacean are included in Annex 4 of the Directive, which places an obligation on all member states of the European Union to accord them strict protection.

This obligation carries with it the requirement to report on the species conservation status every six years. Favourable (or otherwise) conservation status (FCS) must be assessed with regard to three parameters: natural range; population size; and habitat area. While some flexibility is accorded national experts, EC advice recommends the use of time series data to detect change in FCS, possibly in comparison against favourable reference values. Member States are currently in the process of reporting on FCS and this has proved to be quite difficult for cetaceans. The particular difficulty is simply that there are few systematically collected, robust data that enable powerful assessment of the natural range, population size, or habitat area, and changes thereof, of most cetacean species in European waters.

A revised, updated JCD perhaps offers a cost effective way to address FCS reporting requirements for the next HSD reporting round in 2013. Despite their shortcomings, a new JCD and *Atlas* would aim to use the best possible data to enable assessment against operationally defined reference values of changes in range and population of most species of cetacean in European waters.

Currently, the UK is proposing such an approach to assist in HSD reporting. The Republic of Ireland are active collaborators in the venture, and there is scope for the inclusion of other European Member States as partners. Indeed, EC guidance on reporting states that populations should be regarded without reference to political boundaries. Where Member States share cetacean populations they should undertake FCS assessment jointly, and the results presented in the context of the transboundary situation by each Member State. As most cetacean species occur in the waters of more than one country (and in non-EU Member States), there is in fact clear encouragement for common, shared assessment of FCS.

A proposal to revise the JCD is being actively discussed among UK and some European partners. The aim is to establish by 2009 a new Joint Cetacean Protocol (JCP) rather than a database, a virtual, web-based solution that would demand little maintenance and would, if necessary, restrict access to data not properly in the public domain. The JCP is envisaged to play host to the data included in those databases included in the JCD, updated where appropriate, as well as additional databases not included in the original JCD partnership; a revised *Atlas* would also ensue.

Much of the groundwork required of a JCP was completed with the establishment of the JCD. However, new analyses will be required to render all data-sets in the JCP comparable. Initial assessment of possible analytical approaches is currently being undertaken, and a pilot, refinement project with the UK and the Republic of Ireland as partners, is planned for the Irish Sea.

Clearly, there is considerable scope for efficiency gains across the EU by wider co-operation to enable Member States meet their future reporting requirements not only under the HSD, but also possibly other instruments. Parties and observers to ASCOBANS are invited to become partners in this initiative by contributing further data-sets and joining the JCP group. Please contact either Jim Reid ([jim.reid@jncc.gov.uk](mailto:jim.reid@jncc.gov.uk)) or Tim Dunn ([tim.dunn@jncc.gov.uk](mailto:tim.dunn@jncc.gov.uk)), both of the UK Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

## **References**

- EEC. 1992. Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora. Official Journal L206 (22.7.1992), 7-50
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