

Speech by Peter Reijnders

Winner of the ASCOBANS Lifetime Award for Outstanding Contribution to Cetacean Conservation

**on the first day of the 6th Meeting of Parties to ASCOBANS
16-18 September 2009**

First of all I would like to thank the proposers of my nomination for this award, and subsequently all of you who supported this initiative. It is a great honour and I feel flattered that you express in the way the contribution I have apparently made to ASCOBANS and conservation of marine mammals.

It is definitely not out of courtesy that I would like to emphasise that such contribution cannot be achieved by one person alone: ideas, plans, commitment and effort are shaped and facilitated in discussions with the many inspiring people I encountered through the years. In hindsight that holds also for the conflicting ideas and negative attitudes of persons; these have also been helpful although not always appreciated at the very moment they were expressed.

Having the opportunity to address you in this MOP, I would like to take a short moment of your time to express my concern about ASCOBANS and its future. The reason is that I still strongly believe in ASCOBANS and its potential to continue making an important contribution to the conservation of small cetaceans.

Beforehand I like to make clear that I am speaking on my own behalf and neither as a member nor with the consent of the Dutch delegation.

Two documents in the pile of papers you have received for this MOP are of special relevance. It is the AC Strategy paper on the Options for future Arrangements for ASCOBANS and the UNEP document "Management Study of the NEW Arrangements for the ASCOBANS Secretariat 2007-9".

I am surprised that this latter important document has only got a restricted distribution here, because the full text can easily be found and read at the UNEP website under EOU/reports.

Right, I fully concur with the analyses in the AC document on strengths and weaknesses of ASCOBANS. I also largely agree with their identified future challenges to be addressed. As we may expect from the AC, it addresses issues regarding content: prioritising its conservation efforts (such as bycatch and noise), strengthening ASCOBANS' efforts to influence other international bodies especially the EU and economic sectors, re-establishing good working relations with DGs Mare and Environment and involvement in the implementation of the EU Marine Strategy.

However, it also signals the need to stabilise the situation with regard to the Secretariat and finance.

The UNEP document has a different character. It reviews the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the new Secretariat arrangements and analyses whether this has promoted synergy within CMS and heighten the profile of ASCOBANS. The outcome does not make one very happy. It speaks about harsh criticism on leadership of the CSM-ASCOBANS Secretariat and soured relations among Parties and between Parties and not least the view that the expected benefits of the merger have not been realised. Those who have followed ASCOBANS can only underline these sentiments.

Somewhat disappointing in this analysis is the fact that it, besides clear criticism, simultaneously takes a defensive position when it concerns the CMS Secretary's performance. Understandable: for a good and neutral balance one needs to consider both sides and the absolute truth never exists. However, this is in my view exactly part of the past problems. The position taken is predominantly one from a CMS/UNEP perspective. This is part of the problem, but at the same time there lies in my view, part of the solution. It has not been very beneficial that in instances gradually the impression arose that ASCOBANS is there to serve CMS and UNEP, and not the other way around. That has led to a certain estrangement and drifting apart from the Secretariat and the AC and Parties. Even an outsider can understand that this can quickly lead to loss of transparency how decisions are taken and ultimately to the loss of confidence in the system

It is not my intention to criticise a person or persons. No; this analysis is meant as a constructive overview and sharing of thoughts. Thus the MOP can really create a positive momentum and revitalise so to speak ASCOBANS. It is a challenge to the Parties. Because they also have the obligation to enable the Secretariat to function efficiently as a stand-alone Secretariat, e.g. by increasing staff and taking the commitment to involve their national experts in the work of the AC, and not relying too much on the free services provided for instance by the NGOs and IGOs.

Having mentioned earlier that ASCOBANS and achieving its objectives should be paramount; this also puts a special responsibility on the Parties. More and more becomes apparent that countries are using the EU-Habitat Directive to set their level of conservation efforts at the minimum required by the European Commission. That is regrettable, because in my view you as the Parties should realise that YOU own ASCOBANS. It was your baby when you created it one and a half decades ago for very good reasons. It should not be considered an obstacle but rather as a tool and a useful vehicle to realise an adequate conservation of at least the small cetaceans.

Thank you once more for this much appreciated Award and for your attention in the past minutes.