



What is the ASCOBANS Recovery Plan for Baltic Harbour Porpoises (Jastarnia Plan)?

Background

Although still numerically abundant as a species, at least in comparison to many other cetaceans, the harbour porpoise has experienced major declines in portions of its range, including and perhaps most notably the Baltic Sea.

The causes of population decline in the Baltic may include the commercial catching of porpoises historically, the periodic catastrophic mortality resulting from severe winter ice conditions, and habitat degradation of various kinds. Whatever other factors may be involved, however, it is very likely that incidental mortality in fishing gear (bycatch) has played a major role in reducing porpoises to a small fraction of their historical abundance in the region, and is now helping to prevent their recovery.

The need for a Baltic harbour porpoise recovery plan has been recognised for a long time, not only by ASCOBANS, but also by other international bodies (IWC, IUCN, HELCOM).

The Jastarnia Plan is the result of an **international collaborative effort** organised under the auspices of ASCOBANS. The 2nd Meeting of the Parties to ASCOBANS (Bonn, Germany, November 1997) adopted a Resolution on Incidental Take of Small Cetaceans inviting Parties and Range States to develop a recovery plan for porpoises in the Baltic Sea. The Jastarnia Plan is the culmination of a series of scientific initiatives and meetings since then. Preparatory work included, most notably, the deliberations of the ASCOBANS Baltic Discussion Group (ABDG), and a recovery plan workshop, held in Jastarnia, Poland, from 9-11 January 2002. While the ABDG was a smaller group consisting exclusively of scientists, the Jastarnia workshop was attended by 40 individuals, representing fishermen, environmental groups, government ministries, international conventions, and public and private institutions in six of the Baltic Range States. This was in line with the ASCOBANS policy of achieving **maximum involvement of regional experts and stakeholders**.

Aims and Objectives of the Plan

ASCOBANS has an interim goal of restoring the population of harbour porpoises in the Baltic Sea to at least 80% of its carrying-capacity level. Analyses have indicated that recovery towards this interim goal can only be achieved by reducing bycatch in this part of the Baltic to two or fewer porpoises per year (compared with the estimated current minimum bycatch of seven).

Therefore, the objectives of this recovery plan are to:

1. implement precautionary management measures immediately to reduce the bycatch rate to two or fewer porpoises per year in the portion of the Baltic that was surveyed in 1995,
2. improve knowledge in key subject areas as quickly as possible, and
3. develop more refined (quantitative) recovery targets as new information becomes available on population status, bycatch and other threats.

Both the ASCOBANS Baltic Discussion Group and the Jastarnia workshop stressed that **bycatch reduction** was the **highest priority** for Baltic harbour porpoise recovery, and that measures to achieve such reduction should begin immediately. Experience elsewhere has been that bycatch reduction strategies should not rely on a single approach to mitigation, but rather incorporate multiple approaches as a way of dealing with the uncertainty of outcome associated with any individual measure.

Achieving the Aims of the Plan

A key point about all of the following recommendations related to bycatch reduction is that **fishermen** and their representatives **need to be closely involved** in the implementation process.

In order to achieve the aim of reducing bycatch to the above-mentioned rate, the Jastarnia Plan advocates the following **measures**:

1. Reduction of fishing effort in certain fisheries

The most effective way to reduce bycatch is to reduce or eliminate fishing effort that involves gear known to cause high porpoise bycatch rates. Therefore, the Jastarnia Plan recommends that measures be taken by the Baltic Range States to reduce the fishing effort of driftnet and bottom-set gillnet fisheries in the Baltic. Fishing effort is understood to include both the amount of net deployed and the amount of time that the nets are in the water (soak time).

Since derelict (“ghost”) gear forms a component of effective fishing effort in the Baltic, the clearance of “ghost nets” would represent a reduction in fishing effort (and hence potential harbour porpoise bycatch) without affecting fishing yield, and should be seriously considered.

2. Change of fishing methods away from gear known to be associated with high porpoise bycatch (i.e. driftnets and bottom-set gillnets) and towards alternative gear that is considered less harmful

A changeover to gear that is less harmful to porpoises is one way of maintaining a fishery while achieving bycatch reduction. The Plan therefore recommends that trials of fish traps, fish pots, and longlines be initiated immediately, with the long-term goal of replacing gillnets in the cod fishery, particularly in areas where porpoises are known or expected to occur frequently. The development and introduction of replacement gear in the Baltic cod fishery should be undertaken as a high priority. Development work should be coordinated among the Range States and implementation should begin immediately when cost-effectiveness has been demonstrated.

A change from driftnets to less high-risk gear would almost certainly benefit porpoises, and it is therefore recommended that serious consideration be given to replacing driftnets in areas where porpoise bycatch is known or likely to occur. The Jastarnia Plan stresses that any such replacement or changeover would need to be considered in coordination with the competent fisheries management authorities. Any change in fishing gear to benefit porpoises will need to be considered in the light of possible undesirable effects on the target fish or other biota.

3. Compilation of standardised data on fishing effort

While *any* reduction in fishing effort (driftnets and bottom-set gillnets) within the areas used by porpoises would be expected to have some benefit in terms of reduced bycatch, it is preferable that effort reductions (and other forms of bycatch mitigation) be targeted on “high-risk” areas. Identification of such areas depends at least partly on knowing where, when, and how much fishing takes place. Therefore, one of the recommendations of the Plan is that ASCOBANS should commission, or persuade others to

commission, a contract study to compile data on fishing effort in the Baltic. It is important to emphasise that neither the contract study itself, nor possible follow-up studies, should be used as a reason for delaying implementation of other recommendations in the recovery plan. A corollary item that should be prepared immediately and made available through ASCOBANS is a concise summary of where and when porpoise bycatches have been documented in the Baltic Sea.

4. Implementation of a pinger programme on a short-term basis

Recognising that there may be a lag of several years before the necessary reductions in fishing effort and changeover to lower-risk gear (above) are fully implemented, it is recommended that pinger use should be made mandatory in specific high-risk areas and fisheries, on a short-term basis (two to three years).

Immediate and Continued Action

It is important that this recovery plan and the actions outlined within it be implemented without delay. Moreover, the plan suggests a formal process of re-evaluation and revision of the plan at least every five years. The first review should occur three years after the first implementation of pingers. It is also suggested that Baltic Range States (ASCOBANS parties and non-parties alike) be asked to supply ASCOBANS with updated information, on an annual basis, concerning progress in implementation.

Cooperation Between ASCOBANS and Other Regional and International Bodies

Although ASCOBANS is the only international body with an explicit mandate to improve the conservation status of harbour porpoises in the Baltic Sea, several other regional and international bodies also have important roles to play, particularly in regard to improving the quality of the Baltic marine environment and regulating Baltic fisheries. The Jastarnia Plan therefore stresses the need for close consultation and cooperation between ASCOBANS and these other bodies, notably IBSFC, which is the competent international fishery management organisation for the region, and HELCOM.

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