



Secretariat of the Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic and North Seas (UNEP/ASCOBANS)

Numerous species of small cetaceans live in the North Sea. These include dolphins, orcas and harbour porpoises. The harbour porpoise is the most common species of small cetacean in the North Sea and the only one native to the Baltic Sea.

While these animals are not deliberately hunted in the area covered by ASCOBANS, they do nevertheless face a variety of man-made threats. These include habitat loss, marine pollution, acoustic disturbances from various sources and, most importantly, incidental catch in fishing nets, so-called bycatch. Every year, thousands of animals get ensnared in fishing nets in the North Sea alone.

Since many small cetaceans are migratory species, the threats endangering their survival can only be addressed by cooperation across borders. For this reason, the Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic and North Seas (UNEP/ASCOBANS) was concluded under the auspices of UNEP/CMS in 1991. As at July 2006, ten range states have become Parties to ASCOBANS: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Further Range States are expected to accede soon.

All ASCOBANS Parties share the common concern that continuously high bycatch rates, habitat deterioration and other man-made disturbance are likely to threaten the existence of small cetaceans in the Baltic and North Seas. The Agreement promotes cooperation among these Parties, but also with non-Party Range States, relevant international organisations, non-governmental organisations and other regional stakeholders in order to achieve and/or maintain a favourable conservation status for the species it covers.

The ASCOBANS Secretariat has been based in Bonn, Germany since 1998.