

# The loss of a common dolphin species in a Natura 2000 site: conservation management absence despite extensive scientific evidence and explicit conservation recommendations

**T**he short-beaked common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) has suffered dramatic decline in the Mediterranean Sea during the last 40 years, in particular in the central part of this semi-enclosed basin. Although the causes for this broad decline are still poorly understood, the reasons have been well documented for a former key short-beaked common dolphin area; specifically, the waters east of Lefkada in western Greece. This area is designated a Natura 2000 Site of Community Importance (GR2220003). It has been fourteen years since ACCOBAMS (Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Contiguous Atlantic Area) recognized that immediate implementation of pilot conservation and management measures should be undertaken to sustain and restore the habitat of short-common dolphins in this area. The area was identified as high conservation importance within the ACCOBAMS 'Conservation Plan for Mediterranean Common Dolphins'. The protection of this species in this Natura 2000 Site and the need for urgent conservation measures were also accentuated in the IUCN 2002-2010 Conservation Action Plan for the World's Cetaceans.

During the subsequent fourteen years several additional commitments have sought to foster the necessary protection of short-common dolphins in the Mediterranean Sea:



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- In 2002, at the 1st Meeting of the Parties to ACCOBAMS, the urgent need for the implementation of conservation measures for short-common dolphins was formally recognized.
- In 2003 the Mediterranean population of common dolphins was classified as *endangered* in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Animals.
- In 2004 ACCOBAMS presented a comprehensive 90-page 'Conservation Plan for Mediterranean Common Dolphins'. The Plan was "strongly welcomed" by the 2nd Meeting of the Parties of ACCOBAMS (Resolution 2.20).
- In 2005 the Mediterranean population of common dolphins was included in

Appendix I and II of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS). The population was already included in Appendix II but the listing - formerly limited to a western Mediterranean population - was extended to the whole Mediterranean population of common dolphins.

- Also in 2005, the Scientific Committee of ACCOBAMS recommended immediate financial and institutional support to small-scale projects for common dolphin conservation.
- In 2006 the Scientific Committee of ACCOBAMS expressed deep concerns about the poor level of conservation measures to foster common dolphin recovery and reiterated the urgent need for the implementation of the 'Mediterranean Common Dolphin Conservation Plan' (Recommendation SC4.1). The Scientific Committee also expressed the need to establish an 'Emergency Action Plan' for western Greece (i.e. east of Lefkada and around Kalamos) to prevent the irreversible decline of the population.
- In 2007 the 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the Parties to ACCOBAMS proclaimed it was "deeply concerned that despite the strong scientific evidence, strategic planning and multiple expressions of concern and recommendations, *inter alia* by the ACCOBAMS Scientific Committee and relevant ACCOBAMS Partners, insufficient action has been taken to ensure recovery of the common dolphin in the region". The Parties were urged to implement the 'Conservation Plan for Mediterranean Common Dolphins' and introduce common dolphin conservation activities into their national action plans. The Secretariat of ACCOBAMS was requested to convey international concern for common dolphins to the Environment and Fisheries Directorates of the European Commission, and in particular to seek the inclusion of common dolphins in Annex 2 to the Habitat Directive (Resolution 3.17).

- In 2008 various non-governmental organizations joined forces, launching an 'Urgent Call' for immediate conservation action, in particular urgent fisheries management actions, to halt further



A short-beaked common dolphin heading towards the research platform.

decline of short-beaked common dolphins in western Greece. This call for action extended to the conservation of endangered marine megafauna listed under Annex II of the EU Habitat Directive, i.e. the bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) and the loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*), the preservation of marine biodiversity and the ecosystem services it provides, as well as of the long-term survival of artisanal fisheries communities. The document was submitted to the Greek Government and various other stakeholders, and was welcomed by the 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Parties to ACCOBAMS (Resolution 4.13).

- In 2010 the 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the ACCOBAMS Scientific Committee reiterated the need for the implementation of the 'Conservation Plan for Mediterranean Common Dolphins' in the Mediterranean Sea (Recommendation 6.3). The Scientific Committee also highlighted the high risk of local disappearance of short-beaked common dolphins in western Greece unless management measures to reduce overfishing were immediately undertaken. This included strict enforcement of national legislation and Council Regulation 1967/2006, appropriate penalties for illegal fishing, an immediate moratorium on purse seining and trawling, and prompt implementation of the ban of beach seining as demanded by EC Regulation 1967/2006.
- In 2010 beach seining, one of the most devastating fishing practices for ecosystems besides trawling and purse seining, was banned in Greece on May 31st in accordance with EC regulation 1967/2006 and National Decree No 60/24-1-2007.
- In 2010 the 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Parties to ACCOBAMS urged Parties and Range States to implement the 'Conservation Plan for Mediterranean Common Dolphins', to sanction illegal fishing, and "to give all the necessary importance to implementing existing laws for the sustainable management of fisheries resources as well as the existing regulations on by-catch, including, in the case of European Union Member States, Council Regulation 1967/2006 concerning management measures for the sustainable exploitation of fishery resources in the Mediterranean Sea" (Resolution 4.13).

Despite these calls over a period of ten years, today we face virtually complete disappearance of common dolphins in western Greece because of poor implementation of the conservation actions as listed explicitly in the ACCOBAMS 'Conservation Plan for Mediterranean Common Dolphins' and the repeated urgent calls outlined above.



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Short-beaked common dolphins travelling in the Mediterranean Sea.

What broader story does this situation tell us? It leaves many of us perplexed and concerned for other short-beaked common dolphin habitats in the Mediterranean Sea that have no protection status or a poorer scientific data basis compared to the situation in western Greece. It is unfathomable that an area designated as a Natura 2000 site and thus embedded in a regulatory framework, would suffer such a tragic cause-effect of fisheries mismanagement and dolphin population decline, especially in the face to clear information about prey depletion and explicit conservation measures having been formulated. And yet, despite all this, no significant conservation progress has been made so far.

The situation tells us that a new attempt is needed to prevent short-beaked common dolphins from vanishing in the Mediterranean Sea.



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Acoustic cetacean research.

In this spirit, OceanCare, Oceanomare Delphis Onlus and the Biology Conservation Research Foundation (BICREF) have organized the 1<sup>st</sup> international workshop "Conservation and research networking on short beaked common dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*) in the Mediterranean Sea" in Ischia Island (Italy) between 13-15 April 2016. The workshop has promoted greater international dialogue about Mediterranean short-beaked common dolphins, and has strengthened local, national and international scientific and conservation efforts for the species. Scientists and conservationists from different institutions and organizations, representing many Mediterranean countries, have reviewed the state-of-the-scientific knowledge of the species and identified conservation needs. The findings on the ecology, behaviour and

critical habitats of the species, conclusions and action plans resulting from the workshop will be published, after an ordinary peer review process, in a Special Issue of "Aquatic Conservation: Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems". As the assessment of the status of the short-beaked common dolphin in the Mediterranean Sea under the IUCN Red List criteria was made more than a decade ago, the workshop has also allocated a special session dedicated to providing the basis for a re-assessment of the status of the species within the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

This initiative has received broad patronage and support from ACCOBAMS, CMS, the IUCN Species Survival Commission (IUCN-SSC), the United Nations Environment Programme Mediterranean Action Plan (UNEP MAP), and the Regional Activity Center for Specially Protected Areas (RAC/SPA) among others and will provide a novel platform to finally enhance national, regional and international cooperation for the implementation of conservation measures for short-beaked common dolphins in the Mediterranean Sea, to ensure their recovery and long-term survival in this region.

Silvia Frey, Ph.D., conservation biologist, Director Science & Education with OceanCare, has been involved in different cetacean research and conservation projects in the Mediterranean Sea and is in particular interested in using scientific knowledge as a sound basis in order to better protect marine species and their habitat.



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