

Press release UNDER PRESSURE

Scientists warn: European whales and dolphins “Under Pressure” of extinction

Zurich, 22nd April 2021: When confronted with disturbing images of dolphins and porpoises entangled in fishing gear, stranded and hunted whales, many of us think of regions far away from Europe. But sadly, it is also happening here in European waters. A new report by leading scientists exposes this cruel and alarming reality.

33 species of whales, dolphins and porpoises live in European seas. From the enormous blue whales in the North Atlantic, sperm whales in the Mediterranean, orcas in the Strait of Gibraltar, to dolphins and harbour porpoises in the North Sea, these European whales are – in theory – among the best protected wildlife on the planet, enjoying a progressive and extensive legal framework. But in reality, they face a menacing array of threats both to their individual well-being as well as to the survival of their populations as such.

These are the findings of “UNDER PRESSURE”, a new report published by OceanCare, which brought together leading scientists from all over Europe to compile a comprehensive overview of the myriad of threats and the state of survival and conservation of Europe’s whales and dolphins.

Despite their legal protection on paper, in particular by the EU’s nature and species protection laws and international conservation conventions, whales and dolphins are still hunted by the thousands in European waters, are in constant conflict with fishing activities, face an agonising death as by-catch of fishing fleets or get entangled in floating fishing gear (“ghost nets”). They are constantly exposed to noise pollution from shipping, construction, underwater oil and gas exploration and military activities and live in polluted waters full of plastic debris. They are also contaminated by chemical pollutants which negatively impact their immune systems and reproduction rates, and on top of all this, they also face the overlying threat to their survival that comes with climate change.

“UNDER PRESSURE” takes a look at all the different 33 species that inhabit our waters, spread out in numerous regional populations. Of most concern are the orcas in the Strait of Gibraltar which number fewer than 40 animals; the around 50 common dolphins left in the Gulf of Corinth (Greece), and the fewer than 500 harbour porpoises left in the Baltic Sea. All are categorised as “critically endangered”, the ranking of utmost concern within the IUCN’s Red List. The North Atlantic’s right whale is also listed in the same category with fewer than 400 individuals, of which most live on the American side of the Atlantic, meaning this species is already technically extinct in the European part of the Atlantic.

“Europeans pride themselves as being progressive and “green”. So, it may come as a surprise to learn that for some species the risk to survival is greater to them in Europe than in other world regions”, says Nicolas Entrup, Co-Director of International Relations at OceanCare. “European waters are among the most polluted and dangerous seas of the world. If we want to give those slow breeding whales and dolphins a chance to survive off our coasts, the strict protection measures need to be enforced and any violation strictly sanctioned. We’ve been waiting for too long.”

“The public might be taken by surprise to find out that in the past ten years, more than 50.000 whales, dolphins and porpoises have been killed in directed hunts in northern European waters of the autonomous territories Greenland and the Faroe islands that belong to the Kingdom of Denmark, as well as Norway and Iceland” says Fabienne McLellan, Co-

Director at OceanCare focusing to end direct hunts and adds that “many of these hunts are not even overseen by any kind of management or internationally set quotas”.

Given its comprehensive scope and in-depth scientific studies, the report “UNDER PRESSURE” is set to be a standard work for years to come and intends to be a guideline for policy makers in Europe on what actions need to be taken to take the pressure off and to ensure the survival of Europe’s whales and dolphins.

“We certainly need to scale up appropriate actions to avoid losing cetacean populations and species, including by better protecting their habitats, which will also improve the health and resilience of European waters” concludes Fabienne McLellan, the report’s coordinator.

Recommendations:

Recommendations that are put forward in the report by the individual authors, as well as from OceanCare, include:

- ban the deliberate take (hunting) of all cetacean species by all European States
- ban the use of fishing gear known to cause significant cetacean mortality and habitat destruction
- a ban on all oil and gas exploration activities in European waters, including pending licences, following the example of France (and Spain, whose forthcoming Climate Energy Law includes a ban on all new hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation projects throughout its territory).
- impose speed reduction for shipping where possible
- phase out and totally ban the most hazardous substances and materials used in plastic packaging
- European States to support a new international, legally binding treaty on plastic, addressing the full lifecycle of plastics, including measures to reduce virgin plastic production and prevent microplastic pollution
- provide Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) with properly implemented and funded conservation management plans

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Further authors are available for interview upon request.

Further information:

- Report “UNDER PRESSURE” (attached)
- Campaign website: oceancare.org/underpressure
- Executive Summary and Recommendations (attached)

The report gives an overview of the conservation status of cetacean species, lays out the legal protective framework and then takes an in-depth look into the individual threats and what can and needs to be done. Each chapter has been written by leading scientists in their field.

Topics include:

- strandings, diseases and mortality
- commercial whaling in Europe
- bycatch
- noise pollution
- chemical pollution
- plastic pollution
- ocean acidification and ocean warming due to climate change

Images, videos and graphs:

- Graph of whales and dolphins directly threatened with extinction in European waters (attached)
- Image: minke whale – copyright: Getty Images (attached)
- Images, visuals and videos: Dropbox UNDER PRESSURE:
https://www.dropbox.com/sh/exmgkmbmqv02ix2r/AAD3xq6Ngal2JP0_UUTE1u8Ma?dl=0

Quotes by chapter authors:

I am surprised and concerned that so many cetaceans in Europe are more threatened than their counterparts elsewhere. Europe has the knowledge and the means to do better. Unless dedicated action comes soon, future generations may not enjoy porpoises, dolphins and whales in European waters and that would be a terrible loss.

Giuseppe Notarbartolo di Sciara, Honorary President of the Tethys Research Institute in Milan, and Co-chair IUCN Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force, lead author chapter “Overview of Cetacean Species in European Waters (including Red List Status)”

No EU citizen wants to eat fish that has been caught at the expense of iconic species like dolphins or whales. The legal framework to prevent the killing of marine mammals exists, now it is just a matter of political will to implement it.

Andrea Ripol, Fisheries Policy Officer, Seas At Risk, Brussels, lead author chapter “The Regulatory Framework for Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises in European Waters”

I would like to see many more marine areas being highly protected such that the whales, dolphins and porpoises themselves notice the difference.

Erich Hoyt, Research fellow WDC and Co-chair IUCN Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force, Bridport, UK, author chapter “Benefits and Pitfalls of Marine Protected Areas as a Conservation Tool for Cetaceans”

Cetaceans are being affected by many factors in our increasingly busy seas and it has never been more important than now to monitor their health. Working together to build functional stranding networks would help us to monitor both cetacean and ocean health.

Sandro Mazzariol, Associate Professor, University of Padua, author chapter “Cetacean Strandings, Diseases and Mortalities in European Waters”

Tens of thousands of cetaceans have been deliberately killed over the last decade in the North Atlantic, in stark contrast to the high level of protection the European Union affords them.

Mark P. Simmonds, O.B.E., Senior Marine Scientist, Humane Society International, London, lead author chapter “Whaling in Europe: An Ongoing Welfare and Conservation Concern”

Bycatch is definitely the most serious threat for some populations of cetaceans, such as Baltic and Black Sea harbour porpoises and Bay of Biscay common dolphins. Unless we take immediate action, we may not be able to see those cetaceans in the near future.

Ayaka Amaha Öztürk, Fisheries Faculty Member, Istanbul University, author chapter “Bycatch: A Serious Threat for Cetaceans in Europe”

What was once seen as a completely benign industry now has the potential to be a threat to individual whales or whale populations if not properly conducted and managed.

Erich Hoyt, Research fellow WDC and Co-chair IUCN Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force, Bridport, UK, author chapter “Whale and Dolphin Watching in Europe”

Whales and dolphins live in an acoustic world, which they primarily perceive by listening. But we are filling their homes with noise pollution. It is important to their health and survival that we act to significantly reduce noise in the ocean.

Nicolas Entrup, Co-Director International Relations and Programme Lead Invisible Pollution, OceanCare, Switzerland, co-author “The Threat Posed by Ocean Noise Pollution to Europe’s Cetaceans”

I think cetaceans are often remarkably resilient. Any single human activity may not appear as having a huge impact on them. But when you put these various threats together, their cumulative effects may become significant. Chemical pollutants, in particular, are invisible stressors that are very likely to act synergistically with other threats. We should strive to reduce all of them.

Tilen Genov, Founder and President, Slovenian Marine Mammal Society, author chapter “The Impacts of Chemical Pollutants on Cetaceans in Europe”

I am seriously worried that not enough action is being taken to prevent plastic pollution from entering the oceans and having a negative impact on cetaceans.

Silvia Frey, former Director for science and education, OceanCare, Switzerland, author chapter “Marine Plastic Pollution – Sources, Sinks, and Impacts on Cetaceans”

Without urgent and decisive action, the climate crisis will have dire welfare and conservation consequences for many of Europe’s cetaceans.

Mark P. Simmonds, O.B.E., Senior Marine Scientist, Humane Society International, London, lead author “Climate Change and Ocean Acidification – A Looming Crisis for Europe’s Cetaceans”

About OceanCare:

OceanCare has been committed to marine wildlife protection since 1989. Through research and conservation projects, campaigns, environmental education, and involvement in a range of important international committees, OceanCare undertakes concrete steps to improve the situation for wildlife in the world’s oceans.

OceanCare holds Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) and is a partner of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), and the UNEP/CMS Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Contiguous Atlantic Area (ACCOBAMS), as well as UNEP/MAP. OceanCare is accredited observer at the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). OceanCare has also been accredited as a Major Group to the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), which is the governing body of UNEP and is a part of the UNEP Global Partnership on Marine Litter. OceanCare has been an observer at the IWC since 1992.

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