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Our turn to protect dolphins

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Workshop "Protecting Cetaceans in the EU"

European Parliament, 21 September 2011

Members of the European Parliament, ladies and gentlemen,

The association between humans and cetaceans dates back to Ancient Greece: dolphins appear in a number of Greek myths, invariably as helpers of mankind. Now it is our turn to be helping dolphins and cetaceans. It is our duty to protect them from many human activities - and that includes fishing.

I'm glad we have the opportunity to discuss this pressing conservation issue today. I thank you for organising this event.

In my address I'd like to inform you about the steps we have taken to protect cetaceans in Union waters so far - and to also tell you how these should be developed even further, in my view, under a reformed CFP.

Let's start with the situation as it is today.

Seven years ago the EU adopted a Regulation to monitor and reduce incidental catches of cetaceans in fisheries. In 2009 the Commission reviewed this Regulation and held a workshop on its implementation. At the time, we noted a number of issues and made recommendations in a Communication to the Council and the European Parliament.

This afternoon I present to you a second Communication, just adopted by the Commission, that re-assesses the situation.

What does the Communication say?

Well, in summary, there is good news and bad news. I'll give you the good news first.

It is clear that, since our first assessment, things have improved. According to ICES the Regulation – and I quote - has "succeeded in providing a much more comprehensive picture of cetacean by-catch in European fisheries".

Both the annual reports from Member States and the scientific advice from ICES show that by-catch of cetaceans is low or non-existent in many of the fisheries observed. This suggests that the problem is not as widespread as first thought when adopting the Regulation.

But let me give you a word of caution there: scaling up the available data to the entire fleet is always a risky exercise. This is not an exact science, unfortunately.

Many Member States have made considerable efforts to monitor by-catches as required by the Regulation. They have become more knowledgeable about the impacts that their fisheries have on cetaceans and other marine species. This will enable them to streamline their research and monitoring activities.

Despite these improvements, however, the Regulation hasn't managed to prevent cetacean by-catch across the board. And here come the bad news.

Incidental catches of dolphins are still evident in several fisheries, for example in the pelagic trawl fishery for bass and tuna in the English Channel and in the Bay of Biscay.

According to scientific advice, several sub-populations of harbour porpoise and common dolphin which are known to interact with fisheries in the North Atlantic, the North Sea and the Baltic Sea are under threat and require protection.

For the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, current population estimates are inadequate and it is impossible to assess the extent of by-catches with any accuracy. But we do have evidence that too many cetaceans are being caught while fishing in those sea basins.

For the Mediterranean, we are working with Member States and the Fisheries Commission to improve monitoring and mitigation measures.

In the Black Sea we are planning to fund a research project to look at the adverse impacts of fisheries on cetacean populations there. These initiatives should improve our knowledge of the extent of the problem in these areas.

Moreover, the Regulation seems to have some inherent weaknesses that we want to correct. Allow me to highlight some of them.

First of all, according to our analysis, some of the monitoring targets are too broad and extensive. But in some areas incidental catches are sporadic or rare, whereas they recur systematically in others. That is where we should focus our efforts, rather than trying to cover too much.

When resources are scarce, we should think strategically.

For instance, sampling seems to have been insufficient in relation to small-scale fisheries, where we know that interactions with cetaceans are more frequent.

Another thing we should do is align the monitoring under the Regulation with the monitoring required under the Habitats Directive for cetacean species listed under the Directive.

Again, at a time when public finances are stretched to the limit, we need to be thrifty with the data collected and maximise their use.

Another weak point is that the Regulation relies on the acoustic deterrent devices called "pingers" as a mitigation measure. Now, as it turns out, fishermen are often reluctant to use them because of both practical and economic reasons.

Some of the practical issues have been improved by studies carried out by Member States, but we need more research in this area - and cooperation from the industry - to both improve the existing devices and develop alternative mitigation measures.

So how can we tackle these issues and provide better protection for cetaceans in the future?

The reform of the CFP will be crucial. Our proposals clearly express the intent to adopt an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management.

For cetaceans, we have considered two alternatives.

We could of course amend the current Regulation and correct the weaknesses identified so far. But we ruled out this option, because a) it would take too long and b) it would mean going on with the same old 'fragmented' approach.

Instead, we need a more integrated, systemic approach. We must manage in a coherent way all the components of the ecosystem that fisheries impact on, not just the fish. And not just cetaceans.

We want an ecosystem approach with adaptive management: this means an approach that takes into account the need to protect of cetaceans, and that does so in a way that is adapted to local conditions.

First of all, we want to incorporate the monitoring of cetacean bycatch into the Data Collection Framework, as a move towards a wider ecosystem approach to fisheries monitoring which includes non-target species such as cetaceans, seabirds, turtles and benthic organisms.

Secondly, we must continue to ensure linkage with monitoring requirements under other environmental legislation - such as the Habitats Directive or the Marine

Framework Directive - to avoid duplication and reduce the burden on industry and national administrations.

Thirdly, we want better mitigation measures to be incorporated under the new fisheries technical measures framework that we are working on as part of the reform process.

This framework would set out the scope, objectives and targets to be met in relation to cetacean bycatch. But, in line with the decentralization principle of our reform, it would be up to Member States to choose the best mitigation measures for each specific area and fishery.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Cetaceans are some of the most visible and iconic indicators of ocean health. It is clear we must give them proper protection. This will not be achieved without support from you, the Members of the European Parliament, and also from Member States, NGOs, the industry and the general public.

I count on your constructive support to make this possible. I ask you to bear this in mind when we discuss the reform of the CFP, in which we strongly advocate a move to a wider approach, encompassing all elements of the ecosystem - including cetaceans.

There are ways to reduce by-catch. A mixture of managerial and technological tools already exists. However, we all need to fully accept the principles of responsible fishing and apply them.

Thank you for raising public awareness on this issue.

And thank you for your attention.