

Northwest Atlantic



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Report of the Annual Meeting of the North Atlantic
Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO)

by

Delegate of Norway

The North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMC) held its Annual Meeting in Oslo, Norway from 1 to 4 September 1998. The meeting was attended by delegations from the member countries, Norway, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, as well as observers from the governments of Canada, Denmark, Japan, the Russian Federation and Saint Lucia. A number of inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations also attended the meeting.

Scientific research

The role of marine mammals in the ecosystem is a major focus of NAMMCO. Based on research reviewed by the NAMMCO Scientific Committee, it was concluded last year that minke whales, harp seals and hooded seals in the North Atlantic may have substantial direct and/or indirect effects on commercially important fish stocks. Further studies of the feeding habits of these species will continue. NAMMCO has now also begun to examine the economic aspects of marine mammal – fisheries interactions. Further work has been requested to address specific questions such as what would be the economic consequences of not exploiting harp seals or minke whales compared with continued harvest.

Interactions between dolphins and fisheries have caused concern in NAMMCO member countries. NAMMCO has therefore requested an assessment of the distribution, stock identity, abundance and feeding habits of white-beaked and white-sided dolphins in the North Atlantic area.

Further scientific work also requested through NAMMCO includes an assessment of the status of fin whales in the North Atlantic and further investigation of the stock structure of minke whales in the North Atlantic.

Planning is underway through the NAMMCO Scientific Committee for an international symposium on harbour porpoises in the North Atlantic to be held in September 1999, and an assessment of the population status of narwhals and belugas in the North Atlantic will also be carried out next year.

In addition, NAMMCO has decided on concrete steps to provide for a more active dialogue between scientists and resource users.

Management conclusions

The Management Committee accepted that for the Central Stock Area the minke whales are close to their carrying capacity and that removals and catches of 292 animals per year (corresponding to a mean of catches between 1980 and 1984) are sustainable. This was based on an assessment finalized by the NAMMCO Scientific Committee in March this year.

The Management Committee also noted that combined estimated catches of harp seals in Canada and Greenland are in the order of 300,000 and that these catches are near, or at, the established replacement yields. It was also noted that catches of hooded seals in the Northwest Atlantic in 1996 slightly exceeded the replacement yield, while in 1997 the total number of seals taken was much lower.

International observation of whaling and sealing

The NAMMCO International Observation Scheme, under the Joint NAMMCO Control Scheme for the Hunting of Marine Mammals adopted by the Council in 1996 has been implemented for the first time in 1998. Observation activities this year involved land-based observation of sealing and whaling in Norway and Greenland carried out by international observers appointed by NAMMCO.

It has been agreed that the scope of the Scheme will also cover other areas in 1999 and that on-board observation should also be considered.

Hunting methods

NAMMCO will arrange a workshop on hunting methods for marine mammals in NAMMCO member countries next year to provide for an exchange of information between hunters, veterinarians and other experts. The aim of the workshop will be to provide an evaluation of different methods of hunting as well as to examine possibilities for further enhancement of efficiency and safety in hunting.

Environmental matters

NAMMCO noted that high levels of PCBs and heavy metals in the blubber and meat of pilot whales in the Faroe Islands are causing concern. NAMMCO urges those states responsible to take all measures to halt production and eliminate release of these and other pollutants. Further, international bodies dealing with marine pollution were urged to intensify their work in this field, with a view to identifying the sources and eliminating emissions.

Cooperation on marine mammals in the Northwest Pacific and Eastern Caribbean

Representatives from the governments of Japan and Saint Lucia informed NAMMCO of efforts presently being made to formalize regional cooperation on marine mammal; conservation and management in the Northwest Pacific and the Eastern Caribbean. The Chairman of the Council of NAMMCO, Arnór Halldórsson, expressed the hope that these new regional initiatives could benefit from the experiences already gained by the work of NAMMCO.

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NAMMCO was established by an agreement signed in 1992 by Norway, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The objective of the Commission is to contribute through regional consultation and cooperation to the conservation management and study of marine mammals in the North Atlantic. The Secretariat is hosted by Norway and located in the city of Tromsø.