

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MARINE PROTECTED AREAS IN PORTUGAL: IMPLICATIONS TO CETACEAN CONSERVATION

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The increasing human pressure upon marine systems has created the need to develop strong marine conservation efforts. In spite of being insufficient to ensure the maintenance of marine biodiversity, the creation and management of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) has received much interest recently. Marine Protected Areas provide protection to specific areas and species, a refuge for intensely exploited species, as well as acting as buffers against management miscalculations. Two recently implemented MPAs in Portugal (mainland) may have a significant positive impact on the protection of cetacean populations. However, few management measures specifically directed towards the conservation of cetaceans have been implemented.

The establishment of the NATURA 2000 Network relies upon the development of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). In order to achieve this goal by the year 2004, EU members have accepted to prepare management or restoration plans for the adopted areas to ensure their favourable conservation status. On the mainland, the process for the creation of a marine Site of Community Importance (SCI) is underway, partially because of its role as habitat for *Phocoena phocoena*. If approved, this will be the first time in Portugal that cetacean conservation is a priority in the management of marine areas.

In the Azores, which have some of the highest diversities of cetacean species in the North Atlantic, there are 18 SCIs on marine and coastal habitats. Last year, the European Commission approved a project (LIFE98NAT/P/5275) to produce integrated management plans, instead of isolated actions, to some of the proposed Azorean SCIs.

Five coastal SCIs in different ecological and socio-economical contexts were chosen to be studied as examples for the production of management plans. The cetaceans will be the object of a wide plan of research, which includes studies of sightings and acoustic surveys, photo-identification, and land-based monitoring in some of the SCIs.