

## **Further written evidence submitted by the Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU) (MM0028)**

### **Sea Mammal Research Unit – follow up to the EFRA Committee Marine Mammals session 11.10.22**

#### **SMRU funding for statutory monitoring and research**

Using the annual 12 month average CPIH inflation figures for each year between 2018-2022, SMRU National Capability (National Public Good) funding from NERC has decreased by 20% in real terms since 2018. This has occurred during a period of increased demand from our customers and stakeholders and alongside a need for more advice and information underpinned by robust science. Secure, long term funding is critical to ensure the ability of SMRU's research and monitoring programme to provide the scientific knowledge required to manage and conserve the UK's marine mammal populations. Further erosion of funding, and uncertainty about future funding will significantly undermine the UK's ability to effectively protect marine mammal populations. For the UK to lead and influence marine mammal conservation globally, it is imperative that appropriate steps are taken to ensure that the UK's marine mammal populations are adequately monitored and protected.

#### **Additional follow up remarks**

In response to the question of whether the UK Government is doing enough to protect marine mammal populations in the UK, it is relevant to note that **the UK is not currently meeting targets on seal or cetacean conservation**. The UK grey seal population may currently be achieving 'Good Ecological Status' but targets are not being met for harbour seals, or for most species of cetacean.

#### *Cetacean status in the UK*

Out of the 12 species of cetacean that regularly occur in UK waters, we can only make a limited assessment of the conservation status of harbour porpoise and of coastal bottlenose dolphins. Harbour porpoise abundance appears to be stable in the Greater North Sea area but there has been a decline in the Irish and Celtic Seas. The Scottish east coast bottlenose dolphin populations appears to be stable and may be increasing. The bottlenose dolphin population in the Welsh wider Cardigan Bay area also appears to be stable. **All other species are considered data deficient and no robust assessment is possible.**

Overall, **more frequent and widespread monitoring is needed** for future quantitative assessment. Targeted, capture-recapture studies are also needed to obtain population size for small, localized populations. The deployment of acoustic arrays can provide effective monitoring if planned carefully and the **resource is available for the processing and analysis** of the large quantities of data that are generated. Currently acoustic arrays only cover a very small part of the area required for comprehensive monitoring of the UK's cetacean populations.

It is also critical to recognise that the collection of the data is not the only priority, investment is needed in **developing and maintaining the skills and expertise** necessary and to support the development of innovative and more cost effective means of processing, analysis and interpretation of data.

Several new marine protected areas have been designated for cetacean species in UK waters in recent years (six Special Areas of Conservation for harbour porpoise across England, Scotland, Wales

and Northern Ireland and Marine Protected Areas for Risso's dolphin and Minke whale in Scotland) but there is currently no systematic and **appropriate monitoring in place to monitor the effectiveness of these designations**. We would recommend that this is implemented as soon as possible.

#### *Global cetacean threats*

We reiterate the concerns expressed in our initial submission about the primary threats to global cetacean conservation. Fisheries bycatch and entanglement remains the biggest global threat to cetacean populations and many species are at risk of extinction as a result. River dolphins and small coastal cetaceans are the most vulnerable to human impacts. The UK must do all it can to support conservation efforts to protect the most vulnerable and threatened species.

#### **Response on Arctic countries/territories engaging in native subsistence hunting of walrus and seal species**

Subsistence harvesting of seal species and walrus occurs in the following Arctic countries/territories:

Alaska (USA), Canada, Greenland (Denmark), The Faroes (Denmark), Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Svalbard (Norway), Finland and Russia.