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HANDBOOK ON OIL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

2.0 RATIONALE

Oil spills have the potential to cause considerable environmental damage, and in the marine environment usually involve wildlife casualties, most commonly seabirds. As well as causing individual suffering, mass mortality in oil spills can impact seabirds negatively at the population level. Seabirds and marine mammals are key components of marine ecosystems, but do not respect territorial boundaries and their conservation is a shared responsibility that should be considered on a European, or even Atlantic scale, rather than on a national basis. Many species are protected in most European countries, some of which have established programmes to monitor and conserve their populations, but each country has a duty of care and legal obligation during the part of the year these common resources are in their territory.

Oil spills can happen anywhere and at any time of year, and all national and regional authorities should be prepared to respond promptly and efficiently to limit damage to the environment, including wildlife. However, zones can be identified where particularly vulnerable concentrations of seabirds occur (usually seasonally) in areas with a high risk of marine accidents and oil spillage, whether from oil tanker traffic, general shipping, or oil and gas production. In such areas, where even relatively minor spills can have a disproportionate impact on seabird populations, measures to prevent marine accidents or the illegal discharge of oil should be enforced especially rigorously, and levels of preparedness should be particularly high.

During an oil spill, the priorities and needs of the technical response may differ from wildlife responders, but it is vital that both work together on a crisis team. Rapid and authoritative biological advice can help the technical team to minimize further environmental damage, who in turn can assist the wildlife response with logistical support, liaise on clean-up strategy, and provide an interface between clean-up crews and those involved with collecting live and dead oiled wildlife. All involved should be aware that authorities in other countries will be watching the progress of the response, especially in those countries who share the wildlife resource most at risk, and who will want to know what species have been affected, and on what scale. Preparedness, and an efficient, integrated response can provide such an impact assessment.

The **Handbook on Oil Impact Assessment** provides guidelines for two key aspects of a wildlife response: the impact assessment (Chapter 4.1) to evaluate (population level) damage inflicted on marine wildlife and the provision of biological advice (Chapter 4.2) to help guide the response and minimise further damage. This handbook does not provide guidelines on the treatment of oiled wildlife (rehabilitation attempts, or euthanasia). For that, we direct readers to www.oiledwildlife.eu.

The Handbook is meant to ensure that the best practices are adopted and applied throughout Europe by presenting the state of the art in an accessible on-line format. This will enhance the use of good practices in future incidents and training.

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