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NORTH-EAST ATLANTIC: GOVERNMENTS LEAVE THREATENED WILDLIFE IN DIRE CONDITIONS

On December 18th, an extraordinary meeting of [OSPAR](#), the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic, marked a historic failure of the Convention to meet its ministerial commitments to develop protection measures for all threatened and/or declining marine species and habitats on the OSPAR List no later than by 2013. Birdlife, Oceana and WWF – observer organisations to the Convention - deeply regret the failure of the 15 Contracting Parties to fulfill their obligations derived from the North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy^[1], adopted by all environment ministers in 2010 in Bergen.

Despite this clear political mandate, progress in preparing and adopting detailed measures to protect the vulnerable marine species and habitats has been slow and unsatisfactory. By 2012, only 19 species and habitats, out of 57 listed as threatened by OSPAR had formal Recommendations, setting-out actions to be taken by Contracting Parties for furthering their protection and restoration, and addressing pressures from human activities.

“This collective failure in the face of self-commitments is a blatant illustration of how politicians are renegeing on their responsibilities. OSPAR used to be recognised among Regional Seas Conventions as one of the most advanced and pro-active body for marine conservation”, stated Xavier Pastor, executive director of Oceana in Europe, adding *“but now its reputation is being seriously challenged, and very disturbingly, by countries which are supposedly at the forefront of environmental conservation”.*

The political issue escalated throughout 2013 when a minority of Countries - led by Norway and Iceland - blocked the adoption of about 23 new Recommendations. These include for critically endangered leatherback turtle, endangered blue whale as well as deep-water sharks, seamount ecosystems and hydrothermal vents of the North-East Atlantic, which can only be protected effectively if OSPAR stipulates real conservation measures at the level of international fisheries management and/or seabed authorities. The argument for holding this process up is related to the interpretation of the founding text of OSPAR and how the Convention should collaborate with other international authorities, in particular in relation to fisheries. Concerned countries feared that OSPAR conservation work may jeopardize their fisheries management, as this activity is one of the most damaging one to marine habitats and species (e.g. physical impacts of towed gears on seabed, or by-catch of harbour porpoises or sharks).

“Reading between the lines, it is clear that big fishing nations are trying to undermine the work of this environmental convention, above all to protect their economic interests. Not only this is counterproductive to marine conservation but also to fisheries, as some of these vulnerable ecosystems in need of protection are important grounds for juvenile commercial fish”, added Stephan Lutter, WWF observer to OSPAR.

Today’s meeting nonetheless resulted in the last-minute adoption of 11 Recommendations. Even so, environmental NGOs deplore the general weakening of these measures and the serious lack of consistency with previous OSPAR agreements. Contracting Parties will now need to significantly increase their involvement and accelerate the work to adopt the 27 remaining recommendations left next year.

Online version of this press release: <http://bit.ly/JBt78z>

^[1] http://www.ospar.org/html_documents/ospar/html/10-03e_nea_environment_strategy.pdf

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Oceana is the largest international advocacy group working solely to protect the world's oceans. Oceana wins policy victories for the oceans using science-based campaigns. Since 2001, we have protected over 1.2 million square miles of ocean and innumerable sea turtles, sharks, dolphins and other sea creatures. More than 500,000 supporters have already joined Oceana. Global in scope, Oceana has offices in North, South and Central America and Europe. To learn more, please visit www.oceana.org.

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