



14 June 2019

Update on the activities of the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission – Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) – for the 2019 Report of the SG on oceans and the law of the sea

Ministerial Meeting 2018 and update of the Baltic Sea Action Plan

The HELCOM Ministerial Meeting held in Brussels in May 2018 agreed to update the [Baltic Sea Action Plan](#) (BSAP) – the concrete roadmap for restoring the ecological balance of the Baltic Sea – by 2021. The updated BSAP will include new measures that are needed to achieve the existing goals: a Baltic Sea unaffected by eutrophication, a Baltic Sea with life undisturbed by hazardous substances, maritime activities carried out in an environmentally friendly way, and favourable conservation status of the Baltic Sea biodiversity. The objectives of the BSAP haven't yet been reached, but the BSAP has shown promising results towards improving the environmental status of the Baltic Sea. The updated BSAP will take into account latest scientific knowledge about the ecosystems, and use water and ocean related SDGs as a framework. It will also be based on the analysis of the efficiency of current measures. In addition to existing commitments, the updated plan will address new issues such as underwater noise, marine litter, microplastics, pharmaceuticals, and seabed damage and disturbance, and take the foreseen climate change impacts into account.

Sixth Pollution Load Compilation (PLC-6)

Finalised in 2018, the Sixth HELCOM Pollution Load Compilation (PLC-6) aggregates data on nutrients, focusing on annual and periodic assessments of inputs of nutrients and selected hazardous substances. According to the assessment, a significant reduction of nutrient inputs has been achieved for the whole Baltic Sea in 2015. The PLC-6 assessment shows that in 2015, the normalized input of nitrogen was reduced by 12% and phosphorus by 25% since the reference period (1997-2003). The Maximum Allowable Inputs (MAI) of nitrogen in this period were fulfilled in the Kattegat, Danish Straits, Bothnian Bay and Bothnian Sea. MAI for phosphorus input is fulfilled in the Kattegat, Danish Straits and Bothnian Sea.

Nutrient recycling

According to the results of the State of the Baltic Sea report from 2018, 97 % of the Baltic Sea area suffers from eutrophication caused by nutrient loading. Agriculture remains a large source of nitrogen and phosphorus runoff to the sea. In 2018, HELCOM members therefore agreed to elaborate a Baltic Sea Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy by 2020. The aim is to reduce nutrient loading to and eutrophication of the Baltic Sea by circulating the nutrients in the food chain.

SuMaNu platform on nutrient management

To address eutrophication and reduce nutrient inputs to the Baltic Sea, a new EU co-funded project platform “Sustainable manure and nutrient management for reduction of nutrient loss in the Baltic Sea Region” (SuMaNu) in which HELCOM participates was launched. The platform will collect information from previous agriculture-related projects and share their best practices. The platform will also support the elaboration of the nutrient recycling strategy and the update of the agriculture part of the Baltic Sea Action Plan.

Thematic assessment on fish

In 2018, HELCOM released its “[Status of coastal fish communities in the Baltic Sea during 2011-2016 – the third thematic assessment](#)” report which concludes that only about half of the assessed areas are in a good state in regard to coastal fish. As highlighted in the report, fishing regulations including permanent or temporary no-take areas, gear regulations, and habitat protection and restoration are measures that have shown to have a positive effects on fish populations.

RETROUT project

The three-year (2017-2020) HELCOM-led and EU co-financed RETROUT project focuses on establishing healthy fish populations for recreational fishing, such as sea trout. As recreational fishing in the Baltic Sea has unused potential, the overall scope of RETROUT is to develop and promote the Baltic Sea Region as a coastal fishing tourism destination.

EBSA

In November 2018, nine [Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas](#) (EBSAs) in the Baltic Sea were added to the UN Biodiversity’s global repository of EBSAs. Altogether, the nine new EBSAs cover 23 percent of the Baltic Sea waters. Five are transboundary areas, spanning over waters of two or more countries. Describing these EBSAs was a commitment by HELCOM made at the UN Ocean Conference in New York in 2017, a pledge of the Baltic Sea region for advancing the [ocean-related Sustainable Development Goal](#) (SDG 14).

Maritime spatial planning

An outcome of the EU co-funded Baltic LINes project, HELCOM participated in the launch of BASEMAPS, a web-based tool to access Baltic MSP decentralized data through open standards services. MSP practitioners can now access a catalogue of transnational MSP data published by official data providers. BASEMAPS makes use of the open geospatial services standardized by the Open Geospatial Consortium (OGC).

Guidelines on transboundary MSP output data structure

During 2018, with support of the Pan Baltic Scope project, the Baltic Sea Region MSP Data Expert Subgroup focused on technical requirements to facilitate sharing of national spatial data sets of plans, resulting in the Guidelines on transboundary MSP output data structure.

HOLAS II/State of the Baltic Sea report

HELCOM published the final version of the State of the Baltic Sea report in 2018, providing a complete insight about the ecological state of the Baltic Sea and the pressures affecting it. The report shows that, despite improvements, the sea is not yet in a good state, with eutrophication causing the major stress. Approved by all HELCOM member countries, the report is based on verified scientific evidence stemming from a recently concluded HELCOM assessment – the [HELCOM Second Holistic Assessment of the Ecosystem Health of the Baltic Sea](#), or HOLAS II. It is the most comprehensive baseline currently available on the Baltic Sea.

BALEX DELTA

In 2018, the HELCOM countries held their annual BALEX DELTA maritime incident response exercise in Karlskrona, Sweden. With additional support from the European Union through its DG ECHO programme, the 2018 edition was larger than usual, dealing with both oil and chemical spills, and with response exercises held at sea and also on shore. The BALEX DELTA 2018 exercise mobilized about 500 personnel from eight countries and the EU, as well as 18 maritime vessels, one aircraft, and various clean-up tools.

OpenRisk

The EU co-founded and HELCOM-led OpenRisk project completed its work at the end of 2018 after two years working on methods for maritime risk assessments on accidental spills. One of the main outputs of the project was the "[OpenRisk Guideline for Regional Risk Management to Improve European Pollution Preparedness and Response at Sea](#)", which was published in November 2018 and provides guidelines and methods for maritime risk management.

HELCOM Maritime Assessment 2018

The HELCOM Maritime Assessment 2018 covers a wide range of human activities at sea, from commercial maritime traffic to leisure boating and from fisheries to hazardous submerged objects. It describes distribution of activities at sea, developments over time, related environmental issues as well as future perspectives and scenarios. With regard to shipping, the Assessment highlights that many types of ship-based pollution have been effectively dealt with in the Baltic Sea over the last decades, including 90% reductions in both operational oil spills and sulphur oxide (SO_x) emissions from ships exhaust gases. For other types of ship-based pollution, recent decisions will result in more reductions in the near future. Those decisions include banning of untreated sewage discharges by 2021 and a requirement of 80% reduction of nitrogen oxide (NO_x) emissions for new ships built 2021 or later.

Climate change

The challenges presented by climate change are by their nature a regional concern, covering aspects from science to high level policy. This requires a regional and inclusive working structure to allow the challenges to be tackled in an effective manner. In 2018 a proposed process for dedicated climate change work within HELCOM was elaborated. The first steps in this process was the establishment of an Expert Network on Climate Change (EN CLIME), and to start preparing a facts sheet on effects and impacts of climate change in the region.

Sturgeon Action Plan

The HELCOM Action Plan for the Protection and Recovery of Baltic sturgeon *Acipenser oxyrinchus* aims to prevent the Baltic sturgeon from full extinction, and in the mid-term, to re-establish viable populations of the Baltic sturgeon in the same areas where it was historically found. It suggests effective protection measures and can therefore guide HELCOM and the Baltic Sea States to meet their commitments arising from the BSAP, as well as under other international agreements (e.g. the Bern and Bonn Conventions, CBD targets, and for EU Member States, the Habitats Directive).

New HELCOM Recommendation on conservation of biotopes and habitats

In 2018 significant progress was made to finalize the new HELCOM Recommendation on threatened biotopes and the Recommendation was finally adopted at 40th meeting of the Helsinki Commission in early 2019. The Recommendation recognizes that the threatened Baltic Sea habitats and biotopes may not be covered by existing regulations and can therefore require protection beyond the scope of existing measures in order to achieve the Aichi Targets, the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP), and, for EU Member States, the aims of the MSFD and Water Framework Directive (WFD). It also provides guidance on concrete ways that the Baltic Sea countries can use to ensure that threatened biotopes in their area recover and thrive.

Monitoring guidelines for marine litter on beaches and continuous noise

Monitoring guidelines for marine litter on beaches and continuous noise have been adopted in 2018. Furthermore, the HELCOM countries also agreed on the monitoring sub-programme for continuous noise. Work is on-going on arrangements for hosting of indicator data for continuous noise. Countries keep on annually reporting data to the [registry](#) of impulsive licenced events. To ease the process the reporting format to the OSPAR-HELCOM registry of underwater noise was updated in 2018.

FanPLESStic-sea project

Actions on microplastics will greatly benefit from the project [FanPLESStic-sea project](#) – “Initiatives to remove microplastics before they enter the sea” where HELCOM is partner. The project was granted funding by the EU INTERREG Baltic Sea Region at the end of 2018 and will be running from January 2019 to June 2021. The project will focus on decreasing and removing microplastics in the Baltic Sea. The project will increase knowledge and understanding about dispersal pathways and sources through measurements in different flows in society, as well as cost-effective methods to reduce microplastics.

Targets for underwater noise

Effects of noise on the level of population are still very poorly understood, and good status for populations in relation to underwater noise has therefore not yet been defined. To guide further work, after a long and constructive discussion process, HELCOM agreed on the “HELCOM input to the process of establishing environmental targets for underwater noise”. The HELCOM input is to serve as regional input to other fora, including other Regional Sea Conventions as well as European processes.

HELCOM involvement in UN processes

The HELCOM Secretariat and the HELCOM countries are engaged in the **Second World Ocean Assessment (WOA II)** via providing expertise to the writing teams and pool of experts, participation in WOA II workshops and offering synthesized information for the use in the assessment. An initiative of the [UN Regular Process for Global Reporting and Assessment of the State of the Marine Environment, including Socioeconomic Aspects](#) (Regular Process), WOA II aims to support informed decision-making for sustainable management of oceans and seas, in accordance with international law, including the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#) and other applicable international instruments and initiatives. The HELCOM HOLAS II assessment and the resulting HELCOM State of the Baltic Sea report already cover the majority of the aspects foreseen in WOA II.

HELCOM also shared its experience with the **Sustainable Ocean Initiative (SOI)** of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD/UN Biodiversity) on developing and implementing policies for ocean governance at the regional level, as well as its knowledge on ecosystem-based maritime spatial planning and harmonized implementation of the [IMO MARPOL Convention](#) to limit discharges of sewage and air emissions from ships.

Furthermore, HELCOM co-partnered with UN Biodiversity to describe nine Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs) in the Baltic Sea region. EBSAs are particularly useful in maritime spatial planning, especially for transboundary areas.

BANOS CSA

Since November 2018, the BANOS CSA (Baltic and North Sea Coordination and Support Action) project advances cooperation between the Baltic and North Sea sub-basins, and is an important step towards a stronger involvement of the Baltic Sea region at a worldwide level, notably on providing solutions for global ocean management. BANOS CSA is constituted of major research and innovation funds and organizations from 12 countries, as well as of four transnational bodies – HELCOM, ICES, JPI Oceans, and OSPAR. BANOS CSA follows up on the BONUS (Baltic Organisations' Network for Funding Science - EEIG) project.

Pan Baltic Scope

The EU co-funded Pan Baltic Scope supports the development of coherent maritime spatial plans across the Baltic Sea region. HELCOM participates in actions related to advancing the use of the ecosystem approach in maritime spatial planning (MSP). It leads two activities within the project, 1) developing harmonized, cross-border approaches for cumulative impact assessments, and 2) developing methods on how to integrate social and economic analysis in MSP. HELCOM also participates in an activity on data sharing (HELCOM participating in the activity). The project that was launched in 2018 and will run through 2019.