

Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (HELCOM)

HELCOM's main goal is to protect the marine environment of the Baltic Sea from all sources of pollution, and to restore and safeguard its ecological balance. HELCOM's vision for the future is a healthy Baltic Sea environment with diverse biological components functioning in balance, resulting in a good ecological status and supporting a wide range of sustainable economic and social activities.

Building on its experience and deriving from its key position in bridging science and policy making, HELCOM today leads and coordinates various processes for improved marine environment to benefit all.

HELCOM members are all the nine Baltic coastal nations: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Sweden as well as the EU. HELCOM's co-operation is unique in bringing together actors from different institutions, sectors and interest groups.

HELCOM:



Baltic Sea Action Plan:

provides a concrete basis for HELCOM work

- **safeguards** the sea's natural ecosystems while allowing the sustainable use of its goods and services
- **improves** the quality of life and prosperity in the entire region
- **sets** specific ecological objectives and measurable targets in line with the ecosystem approach
- **is implemented** through national programmes and regional actions

Action Areas:

wide scope of sectors and themes



Creating Common Solutions to Save the Baltic Sea

Reducing Nutrient Pollution from Countryside

Nutrients entering the Baltic Sea waters from the countryside originate from agriculture. In contrast to point sources, the management of diffuse sources is much more challenging. As nutrients are a precious asset for farming, HELCOM has worked in advancing nutrient management to the routine practices of agricultural production, including in manure fertilization. Top solutions are upgrading national standards for nutrient content in manure, and also the promotion of nutrient accounting at farm level.

Greener Technologies and Cleaner Fuels for Ships

Promoting sustainable shipping and in this way reducing emissions in the Baltic, particularly from exhaust gas pollutants such as Sulphur (SOx) and Nitrogen (NOx), remains important, and as a part of the work of Maritime group.

Less Illegal Spills Observed

The flattering decreasing trend observed in illegal spills of harmful substances has continued from the 1990s, probably mainly due to regular surveillance. Would a major spill disaster occur, HELCOM countries have maintained the readiness to respond to an emergency at sea, rehearsed every single year.

Fish for Our Plates

Aquaculture is a growing commercial sector still with a good chance for achieving a balance between economical profit and environmental protection. A new Recommendation for sustainable aquaculture is in the pipeline. Fisheries in the Baltic Sea is one of the sectors having the largest environmental impact on the status of the sea, including its biodiversity.



photo: Martin Karlsson

Most Delicate Sea Areas under Protection

Baltic Sea is one of the first regional seas in the world to reach the global target on Biological Diversity, as the area of marine and coastal protected areas now cover about 12% of the sea and has increased three-fold since 2004. The ecological coherence of the network of protected areas is a key concern and is monitored e.g. with the support of the modernized HELCOM database.

Less Litter for Marine Environment

The growing concern for marine litter is not only an aesthetic problem but incurs socio-economic costs, threatens human health and safety and has impacts on marine organisms. The first regional Action Plan for tackling marine litter lists detailed measures on reducing litter, whether on land, at sea, in the form of micro particles, and about the preventative and educational solutions for the litter problem.

Phasing out Pharmaceuticals

The concentration levels of medicinal products' residues in the Baltic Sea are alarming as the full impact remains unknown. HELCOM has agreed to create preventative measures for minimizing the impacts of pharmaceuticals, with the support of a new region-wide assessment.



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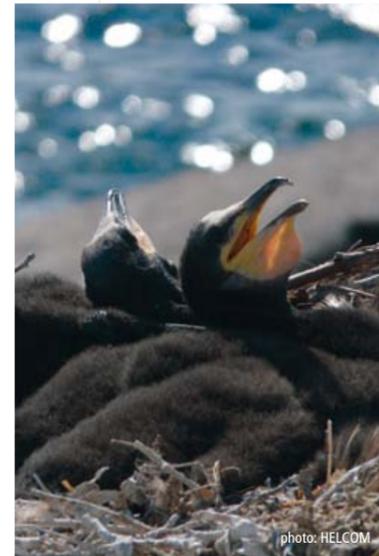


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The HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan

Baltic Sea Action Plan, first adopted in 2007, is an ambitious programme which aims to safeguard the Baltic’s natural ecosystems by reducing environmental pressures, while allowing the valuable marine ecosystem and its goods and services to be used sustainably.

The application of the Action Plan involves actors from many levels, mainly governments, but also international organisations, various sectors, scientific communities and individual citizens. The role of HELCOM is to provide coordination, plans and support for different parties involved. There is four main focus areas: eutrophication, hazardous substances, biodiversity and maritime activities. The HELCOM members have agreed to the following actions to achieve a Baltic sea in good environmental status by 2021.

Towards a Baltic Sea unaffected by EUTROPHICATION

Since the 1900s, the Baltic Sea has changed from an oligotrophic clear-water sea into a eutrophic marine environment. Eutrophication is a condition in an aquatic ecosystem where high nutrient concentrations stimulate the growth of algae which leads to imbalanced functioning of the system, such as:

- Intense algal growth: excess of filamentous algae and phytoplankton blooms;
- Production of excess organic matter;
- Increase in oxygen consumption;
- Oxygen depletion with recurrent internal loading of nutrients; and
- Death of benthic organisms, including fish.

ECOLOGICAL OBJECTIVES | HELCOM has adopted the following ecological objectives to describe the characteristics of a Baltic Sea, which is unaffected by eutrophication:

- Concentrations of nutrients close to natural levels;
- Clear water and natural level of algal blooms;
- Natural distribution and occurrence of plants and animals as well as natural oxygen levels.

Towards a Baltic Sea with life undisturbed by HAZARDOUS SUBSTANCES

Pollution caused by hazardous substances refers to a massive number of different an-

thropogenic substances ending up in the marine environment including substances that do not occur naturally in the environment and substances occurring at concentrations exceeding natural levels.

Levels of some hazardous substances in the Baltic Sea exceed concentrations in e.g. the North East Atlantic by more than 20 times. Hazardous substances cause adverse effects on the ecosystem, such as:

- Impaired general health status of animals;
- Impaired reproduction of animals, especially top predators; and
- Increased pollutant levels in fish for human food.

Some fish species caught in some parts of the Baltic Sea are not suitable for human consumption as they contain hazardous substances exceeding established concentration levels.

ECOLOGICAL OBJECTIVES | The goal is described by four ecological objectives:

- Concentrations of hazardous substances close to natural levels;
- All fish safe to eat;
- Healthy wildlife; and
- Radioactivity at pre-Chernobyl level.

Towards a Favourable Conservation Status of Baltic Sea BIODIVERSITY

The Baltic Sea has a unique combination of marine and freshwater species and habitats adapted to brackish conditions. Favourable conservation status of Baltic Sea

biodiversity is a prerequisite for the marine ecosystems to be resilient and able to adapt to changing environmental conditions.

The Baltic Sea Action Plan aims at aligning the goal “favourable conservation status of marine biodiversity” with corresponding goals and objectives of already existing regulations which also address biodiversity and nature conservation.

ECOLOGICAL OBJECTIVES | In order to reach favourable conservation status of biodiversity, HELCOM has adopted Ecological Objectives covering topics referring to:

- Natural marine and coastal landscapes;
- Thriving and balanced communities of plants and animals; and
- Viable populations of species.

Towards a Baltic Sea with MARITIME ACTIVITIES Carried Out in an Environmentally Friendly Way

The Baltic Sea is one of the most intensively trafficked areas in the world. Both the number and the size of the ships, especially oil tankers, have been growing during the last years, and this trend is expected to continue.

The main negative environmental effects of shipping and other activities at sea include pollution to the air, illegal and accidental discharge of oil, hazardous substances and other wastes, and introduction of alien organisms via ships’ ballast water and hulls. The Baltic Sea is a

difficult area to navigate and this leads to traffic junctions and an increased risk of shipping incidents.

MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES | To reach the goal the following eight management objectives, indicating areas of major importance, have been agreed upon:

- Enforcement of international regulations;
- Safe maritime traffic without accidental pollution;
- Efficient emergency and response capability;
- Minimum sewage pollution from ships;
- No introductions of alien species from ships;
- Minimum air pollution from ships;
- Zero discharges from offshore platforms; and
- Minimum threats from offshore installations.

These management objectives indicate the main areas of concern as to the human activity at sea and its possible negative impact.

Convention and Recommendations

HELCOM is the governing body of the ‘Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area’ – usually called the Helsinki Convention.

The 1974 Convention

For the first time in history, all the sources of pollution around an entire sea were made subject to a single Convention which was signed in 1974 by the then seven Baltic coastal states. The 1974 Convention entered into force on 3 May 1980.

The 1992 Convention

In light of political changes and developments in international environmental and maritime law, a new Convention was signed in 1992 by all the states bordering on the Baltic Sea and the European Community. After ratification, the Convention entered into force on 17 January 2000. The Convention covers the whole of the Baltic Sea area and includes the inland waters, the waters of the sea itself and the seabed. Measures are also taken in the whole catchment area of the Baltic Sea to reduce land-based pollution.

Recommendations

One of the most important duties of the Helsinki Commission is to make Recommendations on measures to address certain pollution sources or areas of concern. These Recommendations are to be implemented by the Contracting Parties through their national legislation. Since the beginning of the 1980s HELCOM has adopted some 260 HELCOM Recommendations for the protection of the Baltic Sea.