Baltic Marine Environment
Protection Commission

30 June 2015

Update on the activities of the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission – Helsinki Commission (HELCOM)

Contribution to the second part of the report of the Secretary-General on oceans and the law of the sea, pursuant to United Nations General Assembly resolution 69/245 of 29 December 2014, entitled "Oceans and the law of the sea", with references to the resolution (A/RES/69/245).

As 22 March 2014 marked the fortieth anniversary of the entry into force of the Helsinki Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area, Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), as the governing body of the Helsinki Convention, wishes to congratulate its peers in their respective anniversaries in the year 2014: 20 years since the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and 40th anniversary of the Regional Seas Programme of the United Nations Environment Programme.
Reference to A/RES/69/245: preamble p.1; 59; 177

The Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission, usually referred to as HELCOM, is an intergovernmental organization of the nine Baltic Sea coastal countries and the European Union working to protect the marine environment of the Baltic Sea from all sources of pollution and to ensure safety of navigation in the region. Since 1974, HELCOM has been the governing body of the 'Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area', more commonly known as the Helsinki Convention.

HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan, adopted in 2007, is an ambitious programme agreed on by all HELCOM members and applying an ecosystem approach, with goals and ecological objectives with the view to reach a Good Environmental Status for the Baltic Sea by 2021. Moreover, HELCOM applies the "polluter pays" principle which should serve as the economic basis for the control of environmentally harmful activities, emphasising the importance of responsibility by forcing polluters to pay for the true costs of their activities. Also central to HELCOM is the precautionary principle. Preventive measures must be taken whenever there are reasonable grounds to believe that substances or energy directly or indirectly introduced into the marine environment might harm human health, living resources or marine ecosystems, or damage amenities or interfere with other legitimate uses of the sea.
Ref: 173; 200 - 202

In 2014 HELCOM completed its streamlining process in order to make the regular functions and reporting system more effective and flexible. The Group for the Implementation of the Ecosystem Approach (Gear) updated its Terms of Reference in 2014. The Gear group is mandated to work towards region-wide cooperation on all elements of national marine strategies. The Group will serve as a regional instrument for the national work of the HELCOM EU Contracting States in implementing

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the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive, and will include coordination with activities under the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation.
Ref: 279; 299

Maritime safety and security & Prevention of pollution from ships

Reference to A/RES/69/245: 89 - 90; 155; 157; 185 - 188

Regional cooperation on maritime safety and security and mitigating pollution from ships have been regular HELCOM functions since the 1970s, making the Baltic Sea Area a model region for joint measures in advancing environmental protection measures and safety at sea.

The HELCOM Response Group meeting on 1-3 June 2015 divided the Baltic Sea into sub-regions for the purposes of response to pollution incidents. Such sub-divisions of the Baltic Sea will be used when defining marine pollution risks and for developing corresponding joint response capacity in areas with high risks of spills. The draft map of four Baltic response sub-regions will be further defined and form the basis for definitions of minimum sub-regional response capacity during the coming year. The same meeting (RESPONSE 20-2015) actively promoted that HELCOM Member States establish bi- or multilateral agreements with their neighbours in order to provide stronger cooperation between the neighbouring countries. At the moment, nine such local response agreements have been signed and ratified in the Baltic Sea area.

The Maritime Group of the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM Maritime) identifies and promotes actions to limit sea-based pollution and ways for safer navigation. It also works to ensure enforcement and harmonized implementation of international shipping regulations. Sub-groups under Maritime Group deal with ballast water; safety of navigation; data on ships' movements; green technologies and alternative fuels for ships and port reception facilities for sewage.

Mainstreaming sustainable shipping technology: Advancing sustainable shipping and in this way reducing atmospheric depositions to the Baltic, particularly from exhaust gas pollutants such as Sulphur (SOx) and Nitrogen (NOx), has been among key topics of HELCOM maritime cooperation in 2014, as a new sub-group was formally established under HELCOM Maritime Group (para 3.6, Outcome of HOD 47-2014). This work has run in parallel to the continuing efforts to find common ground at a political level regarding the future of the process of designating the Baltic Sea as a NOx emission control area under the MARPOL Convention, a debate which is also ongoing at the global level at International Maritime Organisation.

Aerial surveillance: HELCOM Response Group coordinates the aerial surveillance of shipping routes to provide a complete picture of sea-based pollution around the Baltic and to help identify suspected polluters. The HELCOM report on Illegal discharges observed during aerial surveillance in the Baltic Sea Area is published every year, showing a welcomed overall decreasing trend of detected polluting spills but also a decline in annual flight hours used for surveillance of the marine environment. In addition to regular surveillance by the coastal States, Coordinated Extended Pollution Control Operations (CEPCOs) take place at least once a year, the latest on 9-11 June 2015 in cooperation with the Bonn Agreement and conducted by aircraft from both Baltic and North Sea.

Joint procedures on chemical response under review: The HELCOM manual on response to chemical marine pollution in the Baltic Sea (Response Manual Vol II) is under review due to global

technological and operational developments in the field of chemical response. The review of the Volume II on response to accidents at sea involving spills of hazardous substances and loss of packaged dangerous goods' (from 2000) is currently being carried out by a dedicated task group and will be completed by the end of 2016.

Safety aids for navigation

Ref: 131 - 133; 136

HELCOM Expert Group on Safety of Navigation seeks to enhance navigational safety through regional cooperation, e.g. through investigating for ways to improve the existing and planned ships' routeing measures. In 2014, the group has advanced regional approaches for determining ships' safe under keel clearance based on the existing national and international guidance. The draft guidelines on under keel clearance aim to enhance the efficiency of other measures on safety of navigation such as International Maritime Organisation routeing measures and recent re-surveys of main ship routes by the Hydrographic agencies of the Baltic Sea coastal countries.

Since 1970s, several routeing measures in the Baltic Sea, established based on the 1974 Convention on the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), have been drafted and discussed within HELCOM, including its experts groups responsible for routeing and safety of navigation.

Regular follow-up on the efficiency of regional safety measures has been enabled by the annual HELCOM reports on shipping accidents. The inclusion of response measures, carried out as a result of such accidents, has been discussed as a new development of these important regional publications.

Further, for ten years the Baltic region has exchanged data on practically all the larger ships' movements. The system gathers signals from all the Automatic Identification System (AIS) devices on ships – the HELCOM AIS network. This network provides real-time surveillance and statistics of the movement of ships, and is administered by the HELCOM AIS Working Group, meeting annually since 2002. E-navigation uses such information to create a second generation of electronic services for enhanced safety and environmental performance. A recently started project on Maritime Spatial Planning, HELCOM being one partner, will utilize AIS data on ships on its cross-border case studies.

Hazardous submerged objects

Ref: 142 - 143

Environmental risks to the Baltic Sea of hazardous submerged objects - covering contaminated wrecks and lost or dumped dangerous goods (e.g. containers and other objects) - will be assessed in a publication expecting release by 2016. New information is needed as the risk of encountering hazardous objects under the Baltic Sea surface is growing due to the increasing use of the seafloor by, for example, offshore wind farms, sea cables and pipelines.

The work on submerged hazardous objects builds on the outcome of the completed HELCOM work on dumped chemical munitions, summarized in the 2013 report 'Chemical Munitions Dumped in the Baltic Sea'. The work will be carried out under an expert group on environmental risks of hazardous submerged objects (HELCOM Submerged), established in 2014.

Regular operational exercise on joint oil response

Ref: 144 - 147; 178; 208

The annual HELCOM Balex Delta oil spill response exercise was organized for the 25th time in a row in June 2014, when sixteen response vessels from the coastal countries and EMSA took part in a simulated response action off the coast of Ventspils, Latvia. The organizer of the Balex Delta 2014 was the Latvian Naval Flotilla Coast Guard Service (LCGS) in cooperation with the State Environmental Service (SES). The 2015 exercise will be organized by Poland in August and take place in the Gdansk Bay area. The international exercise organized within the HELCOM framework is of vital importance to maintain and improve the skills on the joint prevention of major damage from spills both in the sea and on the shores of the Baltic Sea countries.

Onshore response to oil and other harmful substances

Ref: 208

The Annex VII of the Helsinki Convention was amended on 1 July 2014 to explicitly cover response on the shore, in order to strengthen the Baltic Sea pollution response cooperation in situations where oil or other substances have reached the shore. Moreover, HELCOM 2013 Ministerial Meeting has agreed on the expansion of the operational HELCOM Response Manual with onshore response. The new Volume III of the manual focuses especially on response to pollution incidents on the shore, defining a common approach on how to plan and carry out international combating operations in the Baltic Sea region. HELCOM has targeted Expert Working Groups on response on shore and oiled wildlife working under the HELCOM Response Group.

Invasive species and International Convention for the Control and Management of Ships' Ballast Water and Sediments, 2004

Ref: 174 - 175

As inadequate management of ships' ballast water may increase introductions of alien species hence threaten the marine ecosystems, HELCOM has continued to allocate considerable resources to ballast water issues. Preparing for the entry into force of the IMO Ballast Water Management (BWM) Convention, as presently only four out of nine Baltic coastal states have ratified the Convention, the coastal countries of the Baltic and North Seas as well as the EU have further developed the jointly agreed regional procedure for applying and granting exemptions from 2013, adopted by HELCOM and OSPAR - Commission for the Oslo and Paris Conventions for the protection of the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic.

The procedure refined within a dedicated HELCOM-OSPAR working group supplements the earlier regional measures on ballast water management since 2004, including guidance on ballast water exchange.

Most of the information concerning non-indigenous species (NIS) is currently obtained through routine monitoring programmes in the Baltic Sea, both offshore and coastal, traditionally coordinated regionally within the HELCOM COMBINE monitoring programme. However, HELCOM monitoring does not specifically target NIS and thus does not cover all habitats and areas that NIS may occupy, leaving considerable gaps in the observations.

Such gaps in NIS monitoring have been the focus of recent work of BALSAM project under HELCOM. BALSAM (2013-2015) - Baltic Sea Pilot Project: Testing new concepts for integrated environmental monitoring of the Baltic Sea, was designed to enhance the capacity of the Baltic Sea member states to develop their marine environmental monitoring programmes. The project enabled the further

development and testing of the HELCOM-OSPAR port sampling protocol. With this new information, a revised version of the on-line decision support tool on alien species introductions via ballast water was released in July 2014. This improved version of the online joint HELCOM-OSPAR Risk Assessment Tool will allow administrations and ship owners to quickly identify routes that may qualify for exemptions to the application of ballast water management for ships (regulation B-3) and those that are unlikely to match with such standards.

Moreover, collaborating with experts of the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), BALSAM prepared a joint paper on global monitoring needs of NIS to fulfil the requirements of the present legal requirements. This work has revealed gaps in present monitoring programmes and produced suggestions on how to improve the monitoring in the Baltic Sea.
In 2014, HELCOM has also released a guide on regional measures on ballast water management in the Baltic; and revisited the list of target species – expecting adoption later in 2015 – which plays a key role in the jointly accepted risk assessment procedure.

Reducing discharges of sewage from passenger ships (IMO MARPOL Annex IV)
Ref: 184; 189
Adequate sewage reception in ports is needed to enable the entry into force of Annex IV of the MARPOL Convention, as Baltic Sea was decided by International Maritime Organisation (IMO) to be a Special Area for sewage from passenger ships in July 2011. The resolution was based on a joint submission by the HELCOM countries.

Since then, the Baltic Sea countries have considered within HELCOM the most suitable timing for notifying IMO on the adequacy of reception facilities in relevant ports of the Baltic Sea. According to IMO procedures such a notification is needed for the Baltic Sea Special Area under Annex IV of MARPOL to take effect. Eight out of nine Baltic Sea countries have submitted notification to IMO MEPC 68.

In early 2015, new report was released by HELCOM on cruise ships in the Baltic Sea as well as their visits to ports with sewage reception facilities. For example, the report provides estimated port-wise maximum theoretical sewage discharge needs of cruise ship calls. Such an overview is useful for assessing the needs of cruise ships in terms of sewage reception in ports, when the IMO Special Area status (MARPOL Annex IV) is enforced in the Baltic Sea region.

Marine environment and marine resources; Marine science
Ref: 162; 239

HELCOM State and Conservation group covers monitoring and assessment functions as well as issues related to nature conservation and biodiversity protection in HELCOM. The group works across the monitoring-indicators-assessment chain for the coordinated development of HELCOM thematic assessment tools, as well as coherent holistic assessment of the ecosystems health.

HELCOM Monitoring Manual
All the information on regionally coordinated monitoring of the Baltic marine environment has been collected under one online site - HELCOM Monitoring Manual - that was published in October 2014. It compiles information on what is monitored, where and when, enabling access to timely

information on the state of the Baltic Sea thus providing a basis for the informed decisions on environmental measures and policies. For the EU member states, the Manual has also served to support the reporting of monitoring programmes to the EU. Protection and preservation of the Baltic Sea marine environment is the primary goal of HELCOM that can succeed only by being built on regular joint monitoring and assessment of the marine environment.

The manual makes a link to HELCOM core indicators – and other indicators under development - that will be used to assess the progress towards Good Environmental Status. As HELCOM's mandate is to regularly assess the status of the Baltic Sea, monitoring both the state of and the pressures on the environment are all incorporated into the manual. Updated once a year, it also translates the general principles of the 2013 HELCOM Monitoring and Assessment Strategy into concrete specifications and requirements.

In 2015, HELCOM hast started the review and gradual integration of the existing technical guidelines for coordinated monitoring in the manual, including the Pollution Load Compilation guidelines (PLC-Air and PLC-Water); the COMBINE manual; the monitoring of radioactive substances (MORS); the surveillance of incidental and illegal oil spills; and guidelines for dredging and dredged material.

Seal monitoring guidelines

HELCOM Member States have also endorsed the monitoring guidelines for seals, helping to improve coordination of the monitoring activities of Baltic marine mammals. A related recent result is the HELCOM Seal database which stores information on the abundance of grey seal, harbour seal and ring seal as gathered by HELCOM SEAL Expert Group based on counted seals. As previously only the harbour porpoise has a dedicated up-to-date database, the seal databases help in following-up the population trends and status of the three Baltic seal species.

Maritime Spatial Planning

HELCOM has been closely involved with maritime spatial planning (MSP) in the Baltic Sea Region. At present, the completed activities of the joint MSP Working Group, established by HELCOM and Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea (VASAB) and meeting regularly since 2010, include the Regional Baltic maritime spatial planning roadmap 2013–2020 adopted at the 2013 HELCOM Ministerial Meeting and supported by the 2014 VASAB Ministerial Conference. The roadmap is a concrete set of next steps for MSP in the region, also finding for new ways to better include fishing and the fisheries sector to MSP.

As there are still challenges in the availability, compatibility, usability and spread of data that is useful – or necessary – for MSP, a dedicated sub-group on MSP data has been established to support the updating and creation of regional datasets for MSP.

Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-Based Activities

Ref: 190 - 191

HELCOM working group on reduction of pressures from the Baltic Sea catchment area (Pressure) focuses on nutrient and hazardous substance inputs from diffuse sources and point sources on land, including the follow-up of the implementation of the HELCOM nutrient reduction scheme. The group ensures the necessary technical underpinning as well as develops solutions to the policy-relevant questions and needs. Marine litter and underwater noise are also coordinated by this group.

As a part of the overall HELCOM efforts to compile regional pollution data, started in 1994, the project in charge of the next HELCOM Pollution Load Compilation (PLC-6, years 2012-17) will prepare a comprehensive assessment of the water and airborne inputs and their sources to the Baltic Sea during 1994-2014, with a more detailed assessment concerning 2014. Interim assessments have already been conducted, for example, in preparations for the 2013 Ministerial Meeting. The assessment will include a quantification of waterborne point, diffuse and natural sources. More precise information is already available on transboundary (riverine) inputs as well as nitrogen depositions via air.

The results will also provide valuable information for assessing progress in reaching the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan nutrient reduction targets. HELCOM has set up a scheme, based on meticulous calculations, to determine the maximum amount of nutrients per sea-basin and per coastal country that the Baltic Sea can take in order to restore the Good Environmental Status (GES) of the Baltic marine environment by 2021. The provisional figures on maximum allowable inputs per sea-basin and the country allocated reduction targets were first created in 2007 and updated in 2013 after a more in-depth scientific analysis.

As agriculture sector still has major potential for environmental gains in relation to nutrient losses and thus the status of the Baltic marine environment, HELCOM continues efforts to make the use of nutrients more effective mainly through the Group on Sustainable Agricultural Practices (Agri). To this end, a few key measures have been identified such as the development of standards for nutrient content in manure and the application of a nutrient accounting system at the farm level. Another key action is the recycling of nitrogen and phosphorus generated at farms, i.e. for fertilization, instead of nutrient input from external sources.

Marine litter, plastics and microplastics

Ref: 163 - 164; 181 - 184

The Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter for the Baltic Sea was adopted in March 2015 as HELCOM Recommendation 36/1 by the 36th HELCOM Annual Meeting. Ongoing considerations on concrete regional actions and voluntary national actions to reduce the input and presence of marine litter in the Baltic Sea as part of the Regional Action Plan have recently concluded through their endorsement by the 48th Meeting of HELCOM Heads of Delegation on 10-11 June 2015 (Annex 1). The implementation of such actions, which are part of the Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter, will now be led within HELCOM by the Pressure group, who will also coordinate it with relevant subsidiary bodies to enable their substantial contribution (Terms of Reference of the Pressure group as adopted by HOD 46-2014).

The 2013 HELCOM Copenhagen Ministerial Declaration included a commitment to develop a Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter by 2015 at the latest with the aim of achieving a significant quantitative reduction of marine litter by 2025, compared to 2015, and to prevent harm to the coastal and marine environment. It further specifies that such a plan ought to enable inter alia concrete measures for prevention and reduction of marine litter from its main sources, develop common indicators and associated targets related to quantities, composition, sources and pathways of marine litter and to identify the socio-economic and biological impacts of marine litter.

Following decisions taken during the Annual Meeting in 2014 (HELCOM 35/2014), two regional expert workshops and one meeting at a governmental level were conducted enabling the development of successively improved drafts of the Action Plan, following a similar approach as in OSPAR - Commission for the Oslo and Paris Conventions for the protection of the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic.

Moreover, cooperation with other Regional Seas Conventions, e.g. OSPAR, Barcelona Convention and Bucharest Convention, has already been initiated on joint implementation of common actions. Thus, a meeting to discuss strategic possibilities for cooperation on actions to combat marine litter is envisaged in the autumn 2015 in France. Additionally the implementation of the Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter will benefit from the joint efforts conducted through the Global Partnership on Marine Litter, specifically in the fields of microplastics and abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear.

HELCOM core indicators

Ref: 200 d)

HELCOM core indicators, most recent ones to be launched in the summer of 2015, are a main contributor to the HELCOM task of implementing the ecosystem approach and particularly the Baltic Sea Action Plan by defining the targets to clarify what measures are needed most. The HELCOM Monitoring and Assessment Strategy, adopted in 2013, is also based on an assessment system with commonly agreed core indicators. Complementing the initial set of core indicators from 2013 for biodiversity and eutrophication, the new core indicators are also under development for eutrophication and to evaluate emerging pressures on the environment such as marine litter and underwater noise. They will be pivotal to the implementation of HELCOM Second Holistic Assessment of the Ecosystem Health of the Baltic Sea, scheduled to be released mid-2017.

At the Indicator workshop of the United Nations Environment Programme organized in Geneva, Switzerland 30 June–2 July 2014 to support the development of environmental indicators in the regional sea context on a global scale, the HELCOM indicator based assessment system was considered as being a good example. In a global context, the relevance of the indicator to the spatial scale where it is applied was highlighted an important issue to be solved in order to develop relevant assessments. Another crucial issue relates to the regional acceptance of the indicators, their concrete targets and the data, which the indicator assessment is based on. The HELCOM core indicators and the planned work for the period running up to June 2015 during which the two indicator development projects CORESET II and EUTRO-OPER in HELCOM are running, provide examples of how the issues can be resolved.

The HELCOM core indicators are built on the foundation of joint monitoring documented in the HELCOM on-line Monitoring Manual, providing the regional acceptance of the data, which the indicator assessments are based on. The Monitoring Manual was published in October 2014, allowing a closer linkage between the assessment tools and the joint documentation of the data.

During the period between mid-2014 and mid-2015 HELCOM has progressed significantly in establishing the indicator specific targets, a requirement for objective assessment of the progress made to achieve the goal of Good Environmental Status (GES) defined in the Baltic Sea Action Plan. At the HELCOM Heads of Delegation 48-2015 meeting, 19 new GES boundaries were agreed for core

indicators of the status of biodiversity and hazardous substances. In further complementing the set of core indicators for status and pressure assessments, the aim is to link regionally applied joint measures more closely to the indicator based status assessment in the future. Developing global indicators for the measures (the response) was also an agreement reached at the UNEP workshop in Geneva.

Second Holistic Assessment of the Ecosystem Health of the Baltic Sea

Ref: 176; 200 - 202; 253

The preparations have started for the Second Holistic Assessment of the Ecosystem Health of the Baltic Sea (HOLAS II), with its release set for mid-2017 and update for mid-2018. The project will assess the state of and the pressures on the entire sea area, including the associated social and economic impacts of a deteriorating environment as well as the benefits of a Baltic Sea in good environmental status. The large-scale assessment, which is a follow-up the first one in 2010, will depict how the Baltic Sea is affected by individual and cumulative pressures, and how far and how fast we need to go to reach the common management goals set out in the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan.

The assessment will be developed so that it can be used in reporting other international frameworks such as the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive. Comprehensive assessments will be conducted every six years to ensure up-to-date information and a solid basis for decisions on policies and measures.

Marine biodiversity

Ref: 211; 223 - 228; 237

Nature conservation and biodiversity protection are long-term HELCOM working areas and presently dealt under State and Conservation group. In 2014, as a part of the free HELCOM data and map service, a thematic biodiversity map service was launched. Moreover, as fisheries in the Baltic Sea is one of the sectors having the largest environmental impact on the status of the marine environment and its biodiversity, sustainable fishing is one key area for HELCOM. The new HELCOM group on ecosystem-based sustainable fisheries, replacing Fisheries Forum, will respond to the need to find solutions how the sector could further contribute to reaching Good Environmental Status of the Baltic Sea by 2021. This includes the work on aquaculture [draft Recommendation].

Coastal and marine protected areas

The first 62 coastal and marine Baltic Sea protected areas (HELCOM MPAs) were established in 1994; today there are a total of 163. The aim of establishing these areas is to protect valuable marine and coastal habitats in the Baltic Sea. This is done by designating sites with particular nature values as protected areas, and by managing human activities within those areas. Each designation is planned to have its unique management plan.

HELCOM Recommendation on coastal and marine Baltic Sea protected areas (Rec 35-1) was adopted in 2014. The new recommendation addresses e.g. the selection criteria of HELCOM MPAs, as countries are also encouraged to provide specific protection to Red-listed species and biotopes, based on the outcome of the HELCOM Red List project that completed in 2013. Another essential feature of the Recommendation is that the network of HELCOM MPAs should be ecologically coherent, in other words the collection of sites protects the full range of biodiversity in the region.

The area of HELCOM marine protected areas has increased threefold since 2004 and now covers about 12% of the marine area of the Baltic Sea. This exceeds the target of 10% spatial coverage set by the Convention on Biological Diversity. The Baltic Sea was one of the first regional seas in the world to reach this target. The next goal is to reach 10% protection in each sub-basin of the Baltic Sea.

Attention will now be placed on including more off-shore areas under the protection regime; on increasing ecological coherence; and on finalising management plans for the already established HELCOM MPAs.

Further, reporting on the Baltic Sea sites under protection will become easier once the modernization of the HELCOM database on HELCOM MPAs is completed by the end of 2015. Receiving regular information and data is essential for following up the related HELCOM agreements and assessing the ecological coherence of these areas. The aim is to create an approachable database via restructuring the existing information and to harmonize the new HELCOM database as much as possible with similar ones on North-Atlantic (OSPAR) MPAs and EU's Natura 2000 sites.

Underwater noise

Ref: 237 - 238

In 2013, the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting agreed that the level of ambient and the distribution of impulsive sounds in the Baltic Sea should not have negative impact on marine life; and that human activities that are assessed to result in negative impacts on marine life should be carried out only if relevant mitigation measures are in place.

Accordingly, the 2013 Ministerial Meeting agreed, among others, to establish a set of indicators for monitoring ambient and impulsive underwater noise in the Baltic Sea; encourage research on the cause and effects of underwater noise on biota; map the levels of ambient underwater noise; set up a register of the occurrence of impulsive sounds; as well as consider regular monitoring as well as possible options for mitigation measures related to noise taking into account the ongoing work in International Maritime Organisation on non-mandatory draft guidelines for reducing underwater noise from commercial ships and in the context of Convention on Biological Diversity.

Presently, piling (impulsive noise) and shipping (continuous noise) are considered to constitute the two major sources of underwater noise in the Baltic Sea, the latter of which presently has more mature plans in place for operationalizing relevant draft indicators on low and mid frequency anthropogenic sounds.

In June 2015, HELCOM Heads of Delegation have agreed on a work plan (doc. 3-6 HOD 48-2015) on preparing a roadmap to building a knowledge base on underwater noise. The roadmap will guide the short-term actions (2015-17) and first focus on the review of existing knowledge, investigating the significance of difference sources of noise as well as finalizing the relevant HELCOM indicators. Moreover, the work on mitigation options and environmental targets should be started by preparing an overview of measures in International Maritime Organisation, OSPAR (Commission for the Oslo and Paris Conventions for the protection of the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic) and other relevant forums. Pressure group, within HELCOM, is to lead the work on underwater noise,

including evaluating inputs of noise to the marine environment with the view to developing regional action plan on underwater noise as far as necessary, in coordination with relevant subsidiary bodies (Terms of Reference of the Pressure group as adopted by HOD 46-2014).

The already ongoing work in OSPAR in the North-East Atlantic will be taken into account, with the aim to propose, as part of the Roadmap on underwater noise, how to mutually benefit from expertise, knowledge and technical solutions existing or proposed in the HELCOM area and OSPAR area, including possible common reporting formats and joint database.

Several HELCOM Member States are currently initiating monitoring and planning future activities on underwater noise. Additionally, HELCOM Contracting Parties aim to contribute to the compilation of information relating to measures to avoid, minimize and mitigate the potential significant adverse impacts of anthropogenic underwater noise on marine and coastal biodiversity to be made available to the forthcoming twentieth meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice of the Convention on Biological Diversity.