



22 January 2016

Contribution from the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (HELCOM) to the Part I of the report of the Secretary-General on oceans and the law of the sea, pursuant to General Assembly draft resolution A/70/L.22, entitled "Oceans and the law of the sea"

Challenges posed by marine debris, plastics and microplastics

Talking about challenges posed by marine debris is talking about challenges of plastics since it is the main component (>75%) of marine litter. Moreover, there are two types of microplastics that can be found in the marine environment: primary and secondary microplastics. The first category represents those particles manufactured either for direct use, such as for industrial abrasives or cosmetics (toothpaste) or for indirect use, such as pre-production pellets or nurdles.

A recent study by GESAMP (The Joint Group of Experts on Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection) concludes the following about the effects of microplastics:

- "Microplastics have been found inside the bodies of a wide variety of marine organisms including invertebrates, fish, birds and mammals;
- Plastics often contain chemicals added during manufacture and can absorb and concentrate contaminants such as pesticides from the surrounding seawater. There is emerging evidence of transfer of chemicals from ingested plastics into tissues;
- Very small (nano-size) microplastics have been shown to cross cell membranes, under laboratory conditions, causing tissue damage;
- Ingested microplastics can affect the physiology of the host organism and potentially compromise its fitness."

Monitoring of marine litter can be pointed out as one of the challenges faced worldwide. Different institutions and campaigns have been able to gather data of marine litter in different compartments of the ecosystems. However, there is still a need to standardized protocols to guarantee that data collected are comparable and representative of the parameter measured. In order for preventive and removal actions to be effective such knowledge is required.

As per the Baltic Sea, studies consider consumer behaviour as the most important reason for marine litter (MARLIN Project, 2013, ARCADIS report, 2012). In addition, 48% of marine litter in the Baltic Sea has been estimated to originate from household-related waste, including sanitary waste, while waste generated by recreational or tourism activities would add up to 33% (MARLIN Project, 2013).

As per beach litter, one study found that the amounts of litter collected ranged from 75,5 items/100m at rural beaches to 236,6 items/100m at urban beaches. The study covered different beach types from Estonia, Latvia, Finland and Sweden which were monitored for two years (2012 and 2013) in spring, summer and autumn (7 urban beaches, 6 rural beaches and 10 peri-urban beaches) (MARLIN Project, 2013).

Discarded fishing nets have also been researched in the region. It has been estimated that in the seabed of the Polish territorial sea and Polish exclusive economic zone, there are 150-450 tons of lost netting, depending on the assumed number of shipwrecks (WWF Poland, 2011).

Actions and activities that have been undertaken by HELCOM with regard to the provision of General Assembly resolutions on oceans and the law of the sea and resolutions on sustainable fisheries that relate to marine debris, plastics and microplastics

While the issue of marine debris has been recognized and addressed by HELCOM for long, the 2013 HELCOM Copenhagen Ministerial [Declaration](#) included a more clear commitment: to develop a Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter by 2015 at the latest. The Plan should have the aim of achieving a significant quantitative reduction of marine litter by 2025, compared to 2015, and of preventing harm to the coastal and marine environment. The 2013 Declaration 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.

The Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter for the Baltic Sea was adopted on 4 March 2015 as HELCOM Recommendation [36/1](#). 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 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 conducted by Lead Countries, facilitated by the HELCOM Experts Network on Marine Litter (EN-Marine Litter) ([Terms of Reference](#) for the period 2015-2018 agreed in November 2015), under the umbrella of the HELCOM 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 current state of HELCOM members offering to lead and co-lead actions within the Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter is summarised in the table below.

Status of implementation of HELCOM Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter

No. of actions	Deadline	State of play
1	By 2015	On-going (2015 initial information uploaded – simplified BSAP follow-up system)

7	By 2016	2 leads, 1 co-lead, 5 no lead
10	By 2017	5 leads, 2 co-leads, 3 no lead
5	By 2018	2 leads, 1 co-lead, 2 no lead
6	No deadline specified	2 leads, 4 no lead
1	Action by 2020	1 lead

It is to be pointed out that the Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter identifies two specific actions to tackle the issue of micro particles, including micro plastics:

- establish an overview of the importance of the different sources of primary and secondary microplastics in the Baltic Sea. Evaluate products and processes that include both primary and secondary micro plastics, such as fibres from clothing, assess if they are covered or not by legislation, and act, if appropriate, to influence the legal framework, or identify other necessary measures; and
- Investigate and promote best available techniques as well as research and develop additional techniques in waste water treatment plants to prevent micro particles entering the marine environment.

The implementation of such actions will contribute to dimension the problem of micro particles in the whole Baltic Sea.

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 took place in September 2015 in France. The next meeting between the Regional Seas Conventions on this topic is envisaged for spring 2016.

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.

The HELCOM [HOLAS II project](#) (project for The Development of the Second Holistic Assessment of the Baltic Sea) aims to provide an update on the overall environmental status of the Baltic Sea. The assessment will follow up on the goals of the Baltic Sea Action Plan and support the 2018 reporting under the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) by those HELCOM members that are also EU member states.

The HOLAS II project includes developing common tools and concepts for status assessment and performing assessments at regional scale. HELCOM core indicators form the basis for the assessment of environmental status. Aggregated results are produced using assessment tools, which are developed and tested as part of HOLAS II and supporting projects.

The assessment will address the eleven MSFD descriptors for good environmental status as well as human activities and pressures in line with its proposed revised Annex III. Work on descriptor 10, marine litter, is currently ongoing on both the pre-core beach litter and candidate microlitter in the watercolumn and litter on the seafloor indicators. The development work is to be taken forward by the Lead and co-Lead Countries and communicated to and reviewed by the Contracting Parties through the HELCOM Expert Network on Marine Litter (EN-Marine Litter).

Overall coordination of the work to be carried out on marine litter indicators takes place by the HELCOM State and Conservation Working Group.

Any suggestions for further action to prevent and significantly reduce marine debris, plastics and microplastics

The identification of the actions to be conducted has already been completed through the HELCOM Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter. It is now time to implement such actions, and the steps required for this to happen are ongoing (*see Chapter, Actions and activities that have been undertaken by HELCOM*).

Moreover, pushing into action the thirty agreed regional tasks in the Action Plan on Marine Litter is the key focus of the [HELCOM Stakeholder Conference on Marine Litter](#) to take place 9 March 2016, which aims at gathering a wide array of stakeholders to announce – or reiterate – their commitment to combating marine litter in the Baltic Sea. HELCOM is calling for the broadest possible participation representing businesses, governments, industry, non-governmental organizations and private citizens to search for solutions and leadership to tackle the litter problem. As the involvement of other regions and entities are indispensable for the success in reducing marine litter, by arranging the Stakeholder Conference HELCOM welcomes the involvement of G7, United Nations, European Union and HELCOM sister entities such as OSPAR and Mediterranean Action Plan, among others, for support and input.