

Recent HELCOM activities related to Small Cetaceans of the Baltic

Revision of HELCOM harbour porpoise recommendation

HELCOM Recommendation 17/2 'Protection of harbor porpoise in the Baltic Sea area' is under revision. The process was initiated, when HELCOM SEAL 11-2017 meeting identified that an update to the Recommendation is needed in order to distinguish between the Baltic Proper and gap area harbor porpoise populations and to make any other necessary updates. Poland was invited to submit a proposal for revision which was presented to the 14th ASCOBANS JASTARNIA group meeting and to the STATE & CONSERVATION 8-2018 meeting.

In SEAL 12-2018 meeting, a drafting group further updated the Recommendation. The meeting agreed that with the exception of technical changes, the recommendation part of the document should remain as it is in the actual valid version of the Rec. from 1996 (revised 2012), because the task given to the group was to update the Recommendation, not to revise it. The changes to the preamble were agreed to remain. State and Conservation 9-2018 meeting made further technical amendments to the text. The amendments of the updated recommendation were in principle endorsed with study reservations from Denmark, Germany and Sweden. HOD 55-2018 meeting took note of the technical amendments to HELCOM Recommendation 17/2 on protection of harbor porpoise, and noted that Sweden can lift their study reservation on the proposal.

State and Conservation 9-2018 meeting noted that Denmark cannot fully endorse point a. of the current Recommendation, which sets targets for bycatch (aiming to bycatch rates close to zero) without differentiating between the two populations of harbour porpoise in the HELCOM area. Denmark finds this distinction important, as the state of the two populations differ. Denmark agrees that bycatch levels should be as low as possible and should be close to zero for Baltic Proper population. However, Denmark cannot aim at a bycatch rate close to 0 for the large and stable Belt Sea population, as this target could potentially require closure of fisheries.

State and Conservation 9-2018 meeting considered that a proper revision of the Recommendation 17/2 is needed, recognizing the two sub-populations of the harbour porpoises in the Baltic Sea and further work on the indicators concerning Baltic harbour porpoise. The new developments, such as the ASCOBANS Conservation Plan for the Harbour Porpoise Population in the Western Baltic, the Belt Sea and the Kattegat and the MSFD for those Contracting Parties that are also EU Member States, should be recognized also in the recommendation part. HOD 55-2018 meeting agreed to initiate a process to revise the Recommendation, whereby State and Conservation 10-2019 will provide initial revisions to the document, to be submitted to EG MAMA 13-2019 meeting for further revision and to State and Conservation 11-2019 for endorsement and submission to HOD 57-2019 for approval, aiming at adoption by HELCOM 41-2020.

ACTION project WP on bycatch risk areas

The HELCOM ACTION project, co-funded by the EU, will run in 2019 – 2020, aiming to carry out analyses on sufficiency of measures to reach HELCOM goals and objectives, supporting the selection of new and strengthened HELCOM actions for the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP).

The ACTION project will address the effectiveness of measures to reduce bycatch of mammals and birds. WP1 of the ACTION project will identify high-risk areas for by-catch of marine mammals and birds in the southwestern Baltic Sea. The possibility to expand the coverage area to other parts of the Baltic Sea will be considered, pending data availability.

The density data of harbour porpoises together with gillnet fishing effort data will be used to model areas of porpoise by-catch risk. The model will be verified by the use of CCTV video footage on actual porpoise by-catches from commercial gillnet vessels. The high-risk maps will be developed for the southwestern Baltic Sea, including the sound, Bay of Kiel, Bay of Mecklenburg, and the Kattegat. In other areas such as the eastern Baltic Sea the project will explore the possibility to create high-risk maps based on available fishing effort data and harbour porpoise abundance data. Furthermore, total by-catch estimates of harbour porpoises will be provided. Also, the cost-effectiveness for implementing pingers (acoustic deterrent devices, the main method to reduce cetacean bycatch) and fisheries closures will be evaluated.

Partners in WP1: National Institute for Aquatic Resources (DTU Aqua, Denmark – Lead partner), Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU, Sweden), Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management (SwaM, Sweden), Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE, Finland), HELCOM.

For more information, see: document 3-2 of FISH 9-2019 Meeting: [Analysis of sufficiency of measures to support the BSAP update](#)

Change of the name of the SEAL Expert Group

HELCOM SEAL Expert Group (SEAL EG) has changed its name to Expert Group on Marine Mammals (EG MAMA), as suggested by SEAL 12-2018 meeting and agreed by STATE & CONSERVATION 9-2018 meeting.

Further work on HELCOM bycatch indicator, including the joint HELCOM-OSPAR bycatch indicator WS in September

A joint HELCOM-OSPAR workshop to examine possibilities for developing indicators for incidental by-catch of birds and marine mammals will take place 3 - 5 September 2019. The objective of the workshop is to develop methods to assess, for conservation purposes, the pressure of incidental by-catch of birds and marine mammals. The focus is on the identification of cost-effective assessment- and data collection approaches.

SEAL 12-2018 and State & Conservation 9-2018 meetings considered that the synergies of the workshop with ACCOBAMS and ASCOBANS bycatch working group should be examined. SEAL 12-2018 also took up the possibility of cooperation with the ASCOBANS and ACCOBANS.

Both HELCOM and OSPAR Secretariats have contacted ASCOBANS and ACCOBAMS on the matter.

Further work on harbour porpoise indicator

SEAL12-2018 meeting welcomed the suggestion and justification for splitting the harbor porpoise distribution and abundance indicator into two, one on abundance and trends in abundance, and a second on distribution.

SEAL 12-2018 meeting agreed to form a Harbour Porpoise Team subgroup consisting of Sacha Viquerat, Michael Dähne, Germany, Julia Carlström, Signe Sveegaard, Iwona Pawliczka, Olli Loisa and Ida Carlén.

The subgroup will continue the work on developing the indicator on 'Harbour porpoise distribution and abundance', splitting the indicator into two separate indicators, and report back to EG MAMA 13-2019 meeting.

SEAL 12-2018 meeting discussed the need to coordinate and cooperate the national harbor porpoise monitoring in order to achieve the sufficient data quality for the indicators to provide regional results. The Meeting agreed that the need to harmonize national work on a regional scale and that clear structures for this needs to be developed, with the EG MAMA harbor porpoise subgroup functioning as the coordinating platform and the indicator leads as contact persons on the topic.