Agenda Item 4.5   Reports

Reports from Observer Organizations

Information Document 4.5c   **Reports from Observer Organizations: HELCOM**

Action Requested   Take note

Submitted by   HELCOM

HELCOM work on harbour porpoise 2019-2020
9th Meeting of the Parties (MOP9) to ASCOBANS

Overview:

As a top predator and one of the most iconic species in the Baltic Sea, as well as a species threatened with extinction in the Baltic Proper, the harbour porpoise has long played a role in the work of HELCOM and various HELCOM activities relate directly or indirectly to the conservation of *Phocoena phocoena*. Related activities in the 2019-2020 period comprise the following:

- *Amended HELCOM Recommendation 17/2 on the protection of harbour porpoise*
- *Baltic Sea Action Plan update: several actions related to the harbour porpoise*
  - *HELCOM ACTION Project WP1*
  - *New actions to be considered for inclusion to the updated BSAP*
  - *Existing measures to be transferred from the current to the updated BSAP*
- *HELCOM OSPAR WS on bycatch indicators*
- *HELCOM core indicators*
- *Marine mammal Key messages to Baltic Sea Climate Change Fact Sheet 2021*
- *EN Noise activities*

These points are outlined in greater detail below.

Amended HELCOM Recommendation 17/2 on the protection of harbour porpoise

The 2020 amendment of the HELCOM [Recommendation 17/2 on the protection of harbour porpoise](#) addresses overall clarity of the text, for instance by organizing some of the content under now separate points such as data collection on pressures, distribution, abundance, or stock identities.

Furthermore, the amended Recommendation now includes a clearer distinction between the two Baltic Sea populations, the one in the western Baltic Sea encompassing the Kattegat, the Belt Sea, the Sound and the German Baltic, and the one in the Baltic Sea proper.

Initially adopted in 1996, the recommendation was amended on 4 March 2020 by the 41st Meeting of the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM 41-2020).

Baltic Sea Action Plan update: several actions related to the harbour porpoise

During the past year, the update of the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) continued to feature prominently on the HELCOM agenda. Initially adopted in 2007, the BSAP, HELCOM's strategic programme of measures and actions towards good environmental status (GES) of the Baltic Sea, is due to be updated in 2021. The harbour porpoise is addressed by both the current version and the update and related processes.

ACTION project, WP1 on by-catch

In the ACTION project, the harbour porpoise is addressed under the work package *WP1 By-catch: identifying high-risk areas for by-catch of mammals and birds, evaluating technical measures to reduce by-catch of harbour porpoise, estimating the effect and cost of these mitigation measures.*

Led by Denmark and Sweden, the work package mainly focusses on the southern Baltic Sea harbour porpoise population, with other areas included wherever data are available. It also addresses a number of bird species. Expected outputs are the development of maps showing high risk areas for by-catch of harbour porpoises and birds.

The ACTION project, coordinated by HELCOM and co-financed by the EU, is designed to contribute to the update of the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan by 2021 and to notably evaluate the effectiveness of existing measures in place for the achievement of GES in the Baltic Sea region, including on by-catch of mammals.

Updating the Baltic Sea Action Plan: new measures and actions

As part of the BSAP update process, HELCOM launched a call for the proposal of new measures and actions to be included in the update. On harbour porpoises, three proposals for new actions were received. The proposals are now being further examined by the relevant HELCOM bodies for possible inclusion in the updated version of the BSAP.

The three proposals on harbour porpoises:

- Mandatory use of acoustic deterrent devices (ADD) or other effective mitigation measures to minimize bycatch of the Baltic Sea harbour porpoise, submitted by CCB (see the proposal).
- Collect representative data on by-catch of birds, mammals and non- target fish species at the species level, submitted by BirdLife International and HELCOM-OSPAR-ICES Joint Working Group on seabirds (JWG Bird) (see the proposal).
- Guidelines and regulation of the design and use of acoustic deterrent devices, submitted by HELCOM EN Noise (see the proposal).

Updating the Baltic Sea Action Plan: old measures and actions

Following a decision by the Ministerial Meeting of 2018, all relevant measures contained in the existing BSAP are to be retained in the update, and, if needed, adapted to be fit-for-purpose.
Harbour porpoise related measures to be transferred from the current to the updated BSAP, and adapted and rephrased wherever needed:

Protection of species
- By [2022] at the latest, identify knowledge gaps and identify and determine high-risk areas for by-catch of harbour porpoise.
- An extensive action including the following aspects: Update the Red List Assessments by [2024], develop and implement ecologically relevant conservation plans, enforce compliance with the plans and regularly assess the effectiveness of other conservation measures.

Impacts of fishing gears on threatened species
- To update and harmonize the 2016 BALTFIMPA decision-support tool approach with ongoing initiatives e.g. in ICES on a seafloor assessment framework for the Baltic Sea. This tool should also provide options on how to reduce the possible negative impact of fisheries on conservation values in the most cost-effective way, including in marine protected areas.

By-catch
- Invite the competent authorities, such as BALTFISH, to immediately, but no later than 2022, implement mitigation measures in the Baltic proper, in order for by-catch of harbour porpoise to be significantly reduced with the aim to reach by-catch rates close to zero.
- Continually test new by-catch mitigation measures, with evaluation of measures every 5 years starting in [2022], continually introduce new technical and operational by-catch mitigation measures, in cooperation with competent authorities and regularly update HELCOM questionnaire on trials of alternative fishing gears and fishing techniques.
- At the latest by [2023] enhance monitoring efforts for more reliable data on fishing effort, number of by-caught individuals and by-catch rates, as stipulated in the HELCOM Roadmap on collection of fisheries data in order to assess incidental bycatches and fisheries impact on benthic biotopes in the Baltic Sea and for the status of populations by [2025].
- Invite the competent authorities to implement operational conservation measures for the Western Baltic population by [2024] such as permanent and/or spatial-temporal closures for relevant fishing metiers in risk areas where technical mitigation measures are insufficient to reach conservation goals.
- Reduce the negative impacts of fishing activities on the marine ecosystem and to this end, support the development of fisheries management including technical measures to minimize unwanted by-catch of fish, birds and marine mammals and

achieve the close to zero target for by-catch rates of relevant species, e.g. harbour porpoise.

- Development and implementation of effective data collection for by-caught birds and mammals in line with the needs identified by ICES and the identified data-gaps outlined in the HELCOM Roadmap on fisheries data.

Marine protected areas (MPAs)
- Ensure that by [2030] the HELCOM MPA network inter alia provides specific protection to species and biotopes listed as regionally threatened or near threatened in the HELCOM Red Lists.

Core indicators related to the harbour porpoise

The HELCOM core indicators are an integral part of HELCOM work, providing the scientific basis for assessments of the state of and pressures affecting the marine environment of the Baltic Sea. Several core indicators on the harbour porpoise are currently under development or are scheduled to be developed.

The indicator *Bycatch: Number of drowned mammals and waterbirds in fishing gear* is being developed in collaboration with OSPAR and is based on the outcomes of the joint OSPAR-HELCOM incidental bycatch workshop held in September 2019. Development of this indicator follows the workplan for future indicator on bycatch. The joint HELCOM-OSPAR indicator is based on the existing HELCOM pre-core indicator on bycatch – Number of drowned mammals and waterbirds in fishing gear – which currently makes a descriptive evaluation of whether the number of drowned marine mammals and seabirds are below the level considered to reflect sustainable levels.

Indicators on harbour porpoise abundance and distribution are also being developed.

Furthermore, indicators on the condition of harbour porpoises and their reproductive rate may be available for the Third Holistic Assessment of the Baltic Sea (HOLAS III), as outlined in the Work plan for future work on HELCOM indicators – marine mammals, notably designating resources needed for the porpoise indicators to be included in HOLAS III.

Bycatch indicator workshop, topics

To better understand incidental bycatch of marine mammals and seabirds due to fishing, HELCOM and OSPAR, held a joint workshop in Copenhagen, Denmark from 3 to 5 September 2019.

Bycatch has been identified as a serious pressure on several species in both the North and Baltic Seas. According to estimates published in the [HELCOM State of the Baltic Sea report](#), up to 200,000 seabirds drown annually in both seas, trapped in fishing gear.

The workshop paved the way towards a proposal for joint conservation objectives on incidental bycatch between the two sister seas, which may further lead to the development of a common regional indicator on bycatch applicable in both areas (see above).

The workshop notably addressed the following topics:

- Data requirements, sources and monitoring related to bycatch
- Identifying areas of increased risk or low risk of incidental bycatch. Some conclusions: fisheries data, in particular from small vessels and recreational fisheries need to be enhanced to a level that can support identification of high-risk areas; encourage utilisation of all data sources for reported dead animals to support identification of high-risk areas and overall status and occurrence of species
- Methodologies for indicator assessment, including threshold setting
- Marine mammals. Some conclusions: fisheries effort from smaller vessels is critical to assess by-catch effectively, population parameters need to be improved to enable a full assessment of bycatch, trust building between fisheries and bycatch monitoring is important to gain good data
- Seabirds

More conclusions are contained in the [outcome document](#) of the workshop.

Harbour porpoise work by EG MAMA

The [HELCOM Expert Group on Marine Mammals](#) (EG MAMA), formerly the SEAL expert group, has been dealing with marine mammals in the Baltic Sea since 2006. Besides the three seal species (ringed, grey and harbour seals), EG MAMA also focuses on harbour porpoise.

EG MAMA last met in September 2019 (EG MAMA 13-2019). On harbour porpoises, the following topics were discussed:

- Presentation of the intersessional activities by the Harbour porpoise team
- Core indicators (distribution and abundance) '
- Monitoring, data collection and reporting (HELCOM-ASCOBANS database)
- Management of harbour porpoise and human induced pressures (national management plans, BSAP actions)
- Recommendation 17/2

Further information is contained in the [outcome of EG MAMA 13-2019](#). The next meeting of EG MAMA is scheduled for 22-24 September 2020.

EN CLIME key messages on marine mammals

The Expert Network on Climate Change (EN-CLIME), a joint expert network by HELCOM and Baltic Earth, functions as a coordinating framework and a platform to harness the expertise of leading scientists on both direct and indirect effects of climate change on the Baltic Sea environment, and to make this expertise available to, and open up for closer dialogue with, policy makers.

EN CLIME is currently developing a fact sheet on climate change and its effects on the Baltic Sea, compiling the latest science and knowledge on the issue.

The harbour porpoise is addressed in the fact sheet, notably examining distribution, quality and quantity of prey as well as temperature and stratification, and how changes may affect marine mammals including harbour porpoise.

EN-Noise

The HELCOM Expert Network on Underwater Noise (EN-Noise) was established in order to implement HELCOM commitments related to underwater noise. The goal of EN-Noise is to prepare and facilitate the implementation of a roadmap to building a knowledge base on underwater noise.

This year, EN-Noise notably worked on improving the draft HELCOM Regional Action Plan on Underwater Noise which contains actions related to harbour porpoise. As such, *ACTION 9: Improve protection of areas, which have already been defined as important or critical habitats for noise sensitive species, by obligating the adoption of adequate operational and technical noise mitigation measures* was being addressed.

Furthermore, EN-Noise focussed on the establishment of threshold values for underwater noise, taking into consideration harbour porpoise in the Baltic Proper and impulsive noise.