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Meeting outcomes – EN BENTHIC 3a-2020

The Meeting was attended by representatives of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Poland, Sweden and the HELCOM Secretariat.

The Meeting was chaired by Ms. Antonia Nyström Sandman and Ms. Laura Hoikkala, HELCOM Secretariat acted as the secretary of the Meeting.

The list of participants is provided at the end of this document (**Annex 1**).

Agenda Item 1 Adoption of the Agenda

E.1 The Meeting adopted the agenda.

Agenda Item 2 Work plan for 2019-2021

2.1 The Meeting took note that the purpose of the Meeting is to follow up on the terms of reference for the network (document 2-2).

Habitat mapping (workplan item 1)

2.2 The Meeting took note that the HELCOM workshop for habitat mapping, looking into the methods of mapping and monitoring, took place back-to-back to the EN BENTHIC 3-2019 meeting in November in Helsinki. The Meeting took note that information in existing methods and techniques for habitat mapping were collated in advance to and during the habitat mapping workshop (document 2-4).

2.3 The Meeting took note that a second HELCOM habitat mapping workshop, focusing on the modelling and use of the data, has been planned to take place in 2020. The Meeting discussed whether the workshop should be organized back to back with the next EN BENTHIC meeting or separate from it. The Meeting supported the back to back option in order to minimize travelling. The Meeting agreed that the chair will bring the view of the group to the organizing committee of the mapping workshop.

2.4 The Meeting took note that any comments and input from the experts of EN BENTHIC on the format and content of the modelling workshop are welcome in order to have as fruitful workshop as possible. Comments can be sent to the chair of the network to be forwarded to the organizing committee of the workshop.

2.5 The Meeting discussed that it would be valuable to consider pressure related variables as explanatory variables in modelling in addition to natural environmental variables in the workshop. The Meeting

agreed that the chair will take this point to the organizing committee of the workshop. The Meeting took note that the workshop will look into the biotope context in addition to the substrate.

- 2.6 The Meeting took note of the collated information on national priority habitats (document 2-1). The Meeting took note that information on the priority habitats has been received from Estonia, Germany and Poland.
- 2.7 The Meeting took note that the Contracting Parties that have not yet provided the information are invited to send the responses to the Secretariat. The Meeting took note that there are ongoing national processes on the evaluation of different biotopes and habitats in Finland and Sweden, and that Finland and Sweden will fill in the information after the national processes have been finished in spring 2020.
- 2.8 The Meeting took note that Poland has filled the information only for habitats directive habitats, and considered that it would be valuable to get a more comprehensive list of priority habitats from Poland, including also habitats defined under HUB/ HELCOM biotope complexes.
- 2.9 The Meeting highlighted that the information on priority habitats needs to present the national view. The Meeting agreed that names and institutes of the national contact persons who filled the information should be included to the excel document in order to be able to come back to the experts if needed. The Meeting took note that the Secretariat will contact the Contracting Parties that have already filled the template in order to fill in the information on national contacts.
- 2.10 The Meeting discussed the challenges in using the different habitat lists in estimating the status of the broad habitat types.
- 2.11 The Meeting discussed that in prioritization of habitats, both technical difficulties related to e.g. definitions as well as political uncertainty on how much can be protected are to be expected and may influence the usability of the outcome.
- 2.12 The Meeting discussed that in some countries the priority habitats currently only include eelgrass (and other soft substrate vegetation), hard substrate macroalgae, soft substrate fauna and reefs (hard substrate fauna), and that these cover only few broad scale habitat types. The Meeting discussed how to proceed with the rest of the broad habitat types, and whether some of them will not be included in the assessment due to lack of information.
- 2.13 The Meeting agreed to continue the discussion at EN BENTHIC 4-2020, when more Contracting Parties have filled in the information on national priority habitats.
- 2.14 The Meeting took note of the document by SPICE project on practical guidance how different hierarchical levels of habitats (e.g. broader and more-detailed HELCOM underwater biotopes) can be tackled within the same assessment (document 2-3).
- 2.15 The Meeting took note that the document contains information on how to relate and aggregate the habitats to the MSFD broad habitat types. The Meeting further took note that the document contains translation matrices for different habitat classification systems (MSFD Broad habitats, HUB, habitats directive) and information on how to use the aggregated information in BEAT tool.
- 2.16 The Meeting discussed that also TG Seabed is discussing these topics and that HELCOM should closely follow this work and also aim to influence the activities on the European level.

Habitat maps (workplan item 2)

- 2.17 The Meeting took note that there are no proceedings with the template for metadata overview. The Meeting further took note that Germany aims to draft the template in spring to be distributed to the expert network.
- 2.18 The Meeting took note of the information on how the current habitat maps (including relevant additional ecosystem components) have been prepared as presented by the Secretariat (document 2-6). The Meeting took note that there are no plans to update the maps regularly, as there are currently no available resources. The Meeting took note that there is not yet any formal decision made on updating the habitat maps, but at least “low hanging fruits” will probably be updated within HOLAS 3 process. The extent of the updates will depend on the funding.
- 2.19 The Meeting took note that in the Baltic Sea Impact Index (BSII) maps, the resolution is much higher for the human activities than for the ecosystem map layers, and there is hence room for improvement for the ecosystem map layers.
- 2.20 The Meeting discussed that BSII only considers present habitats, and does not take lost habitats into account, which results in high impacts for marine protected areas and very low impacts for industrial harbours. The Meeting took note that Baltic Sea Pressure Index (BSPI) only takes pressures into account, showing the high pressures in harbours.
- 2.21 The Meeting discussed that it would be valuable to have a separate BSII product also for potential distribution of habitats, based on modelling exercise. The Meeting discussed that the same problem for lost habitats applies for the cumulative impacts indicator, and will be addressed in the upcoming indicator workshop.
- 2.22 The Meeting discussed that both model results on potential habitat and species distributions as well as their present distribution are needed, as the application of both scenarios has different aims. The management decisions are based on the current distribution. The Meeting discussed that the task for the network is to ensure that information on both the model results on potential habitats and species distributions and their present distributions will be available for the whole Baltic Sea region for the purposes of the future assessments, protection, developing and analysing the MPA network, as well as analysing the impacts. The Meeting agreed to continue the discussion in the next meeting of EN BENTHIC.
- 2.23 The Meeting took note of the following national information on the process of identification of conservation values:
- MOSAIC framework is being finalized by SWAM in Sweden, and will soon be public in Swedish, and similar work is ongoing in Finland.

Habitat monitoring (workplan item 3)

- 2.24 The Meeting took note that national information on benthic habitat monitoring methods and programmes was collated for the habitat mapping workshop and is available in document 2-4. The Meeting took note of the following information on planned or recently started national benthic habitat monitoring projects and adapted programmes:
- Estonia has ongoing projects on benthic habitat mapping, related mostly to off-shore wind park development and marine spatial planning (MSP). Project on designation of MPAs in EEZ, including extensive mapping component will end in 2020. Benthic habitat mapping program is in place, and the methodology is published.

- Sweden: SWAM has sent out 47 different national monitoring programs for public consultation¹, one of them on monitoring of benthic habitats. The program includes new ideas on how to conduct benthic monitoring. The program is focusing on monitoring of shallow areas with satellite, and deeper areas with acoustic methods. The methods will be tested during 2020-2021. The aim is to start a new monitoring program for at least shallow habitats already in 2022.
- Finland has sent national monitoring program out for public consultation. The program has some new components for benthic monitoring, including giving more focus on sandy bottoms, and also one program on biotope monitoring.

- 2.25 The Meeting took note of the progress and output of BONUS SEAM project, as presented by Henrik Nygård, Finland (presentation 1).
- 2.26 The Meeting discussed that it would be good to include to the conclusions that only part of the benthic system was covered, since the work covered only some of the habitat directive (HD) habitats. The project did not aim to cover the HD habitats but was more closely related to MSFD broad habitat types.
- 2.27 The Meeting discussed that improving and optimizing the open-sea monitoring on a regional scale would need a common decision on a higher level.
- 2.28 The Meeting highlighted that many monitoring programs are used for several purposes, and also economical and practical questions need to be taken into account, when considering the monitoring sites. The Meeting discussed that the Swedish benthic monitoring program for Bothnian Sea has been optimized over many decades, and reorganizing the monitoring sites would be problematic.
- 2.29 The Meeting took note that the aim of the project was not to come up with suggestions that are impossible to implement, and the comments from EN BENTHIC will be considered when making the final recommendations by the project. The Meeting took note that the results will likely be presented to State & Conservation in spring 2020.
- 2.30 The Meeting discussed the meaningfulness of presenting average conditions for the whole Bothnian Sea and assessing the status of benthic habitats on sub-basin scale. The Meeting took note that scale 2 (17 sub-basins) is not utilizable for local pressures.
- 2.31 The Meeting took note that in TG Seabed, article 8 guidance update is ongoing. The Meeting took note that the TG Seabed processes will be discussed more in the indicator workshop.
- 2.32 The Meeting discussed the representativity and gaps in the current monitoring. The Meeting took note that Sweden has ongoing projects testing new methods for delineating habitats and habitat condition, and that Sweden asked if other Contracting Parties see any possibilities to participate the work.
- 2.33 The Meeting took note of the document on recommendations and guidelines for Benthic Habitat monitoring in the Baltic Sea, produced by Baltic Sea Pilot Project (BALSAM) (document 2-5). The Meeting agreed to postpone the discussion on the guidelines to the next EN BENTHIC meeting.

¹ Description in Swedish <https://www.havochvatten.se/hav/samordning--fakta/miljoovervakning/miljoovervakning-i-kust-och-hav.html>

2.34 The Meeting took note that the report on OSPAR survey on soft-bottom sampling and regional harmonization of approaches has been finalized. The Meeting took note that the document has been added to the [related information](#) on the [Meeting site](#).

Assessments (Workplan item 4)

2.35 The Meeting discussed that the development of methods and techniques for assessing the extent and status of the habitats is an iterative process between HELCOM, OSPAR, ICES, national level and TG SEABED.

2.36 (WP 4.2) The Meeting took note that the list of habitats of regional interest was discussed under Workplan item 2.

2.37 The Meeting took note that there are not yet conclusions from TG Seabed discussions, and TG Seabed is open for suggestions. The Meeting considered it important to closely follow the developments in TG Seabed, keep the work in HELCOM aligned with the TG Seabed decisions, and to actively contribute by forwarding the HELCOM view to TG Seabed.

2.38 The Meeting discussed that there are close contacts between HELCOM and TG Seabed representatives, which eases the information exchange. The Meeting discussed that there is now a possibility for HELCOM to feed into the process and bring contribution to TG Seabed. The Meeting agreed that an online meeting dedicated to the topic should be organized after the indicator workshop to look at the current outcomes from TG Seabed and to agree on the suggestions from EN BENTHIC to TG Seabed.

2.39 The Meeting discussed the national development of thresholds and approaches. The Meeting took note that Sweden has tested the cumulative impact indicator protocol for coastal areas, and that the results will be shown in the indicator workshop. The Meeting further took note that Germany has made updated calculation for the cumulative impact indicator for the whole Baltic Sea, and the work will be soon forwarded to EN BENTHIC and can be presented at the next meeting of the network.

2.40 The Meeting discussed how to organize the collecting of information on national thresholds and approaches. The Meeting discussed that the information should be collected, analysed and conclusions should be made and agreed on within the group. The Meeting discussed that in order to be able to feed in the information to TG Seabed as a document, the work should be started already in spring, as the TG seabed meeting in November 2020 will discuss the thresholds.

2.41 The Meeting agreed on the following procedure for collecting the information on the whole assessment approach related to benthic issues including indicators and thresholds, and strengths and weaknesses related to descriptor 6: The Secretariat will draft a template and distribute it to EN BENTHIC for commenting by the end of March, after which the Contracting Parties are invited to provide comments to the Secretariat by 7 April, and the final template will be sent out 15 April. The Contracting Parties are to fill in the information by May 29.

2.42 The Meeting agreed that the experiences on assessing the extent of adversely affected area and identifying issues, challenges and possible solutions will be discussed after the information on thresholds and approaches has been collected.

2.43 The Meeting agreed to consider the indicator related issues (WP 4.4, WP 4.5) in the [Indicator workshop of HELCOM Expert Network on Benthic Habitats](#), taking place 16 March 2020 in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Agenda Item 3 Any other business

3.1 The Meeting took note that the next physical meeting of the network will take place in Uppsala. The Meeting agreed to postpone the decision of the time for the meeting to the benthic indicator workshop.

Agenda Item 4 Outcome of the Meeting

4.1 The Meeting took note that the draft outcome will be sent to the Meeting Participants for commenting and approval. The final Outcome, together with documents and presentations considered at the Meeting, will be made available on the [EN BENTHIC 3a-2020 Meeting Site](#) under [Meeting Documents](#) on the [HELCOM Meeting Portal](#).

Annex 1.

List of participants

Name	CP	Name of organization	E-mail address
Alexander Darr	DE	Leibniz Institute for Baltic Sea Research IOW	alexander.darr@io-warnemuende.de
Antonia Nyström Sandman	SE	Aquabiota	antonia.sandman@aquabiota.se
Georg Martin	EE	Estonian Marine Institute, University of Tartu	georg.martin@ut.ee
Grete Elisabeth Dinesen	DK	National Institute of Aquatic Resources, Technical University of Denmark (DTU Aqua)	gdi@aqua.dtu.dk
Henrik Nygård	FI	Finnish Environment Institute	henrik.nygard@ymparisto.fi
Kaire Torn	EE	Estonian Marine Institute, University of Tartu	kaire.torn@ut.ee
Mats Blomqvist	SE	Hafok AB	mb@hafok.se
Torsten Berg	DE	MariLim aquatic research GmbH	berg@marilim.de
Wojciech Kraśniewski	PL	Institute of Meteorology and Water Management, National Research Institute	wojciech.krasniewski@imgw.pl
Laura Hoikkala	HELCOM		laura.hoikkala@helcom.fi
Joni Kaitaranta	HELCOM		joni.kaitaranta@helcom.fi