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<b>Document title</b>	Input from State and Conservation on condition of benthic habitats indicator
<b>Code</b>	4-1
<b>Category</b>	CMNT
<b>Agenda Item</b>	4– Progress on other indicator and assessment work
<b>Submission date</b>	1.6.2021
<b>Submitted by</b>	Secretariat
<b>Reference</b>	STATE&CONSERVATION 14-2021, Outcomes paragraphs 4J.82-4J.87

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## Background

To support the preparatory phase of the HOLAS III assessment, the status of indicators included in the assessment of benthic habitats was presented to STATE&CONSERVATION 14-2021 for review.

Regarding the *Condition of benthic habitats* indicator, the meeting noted the clarification regarding the link between the indicator and the work of EU TG Seabed, primarily that TG Seabed addresses all of MSFD Descriptor 6, and not only methodology and threshold values under D6C5 (e.g. related to overall condition). Therefore, it is important to include any relevant outcome of the work within EU TG Seabed, in the development of the indicator. Further comments from Sweden on the document were received by the Secretariat after the State and Conservation meeting.

This document contains the comments received from State&Conservation on the overview of progress made on *Condition of benthic habitats* indicator and planned work towards HOLAS II as submitted to STATE&CONSERVATION 14-2021. The original document (inclusive of comments by Sweden) is included as Annex 1.

## Action requested

The Meeting is invited to take note of the information and to use it as appropriate to support discussions on indicators to be included in for HOLAS III.

## STATE&CONSERVATION 14-2021

The following comments were provided as feedback to document 4J-32 at STATE&CONSERVATION 14-2021 ([Outcomes paragraphs 4J.82-7](#)). The document (inclusive of comments by Sweden) is included as Annex 1.

### **Indicator: Condition of benthic habitats**

4J.82 The Meeting took note of the Condition of benthic habitats indicator (document 4J-32, Presentation 6), as presented by the Secretariat.

4J.83 The Meeting noted the clarification that, while it has been initially discussed as an option in the long term, the state of soft bottom macrofauna indicator has so far not been included in the condition of benthic habitats indicator as there is a separate, dedicated indicator and document to address this topic.

4J.84 The Meeting noted the clarification regarding the link between the indicator and the work of EU TG Seabed, primarily that TG Seabed addresses all of MSFD Descriptor 6, and not only methodology and threshold values under D6C5 (e.g. related to overall condition). Therefore, it is important to include any relevant outcome of the work within EU TG Seabed, in the development of the indicator.

4J.85 The Meeting noted the comment by Denmark that the content of the progress report could be improved to better present what is to be expected from the planned work by HOLAS III.

4J.86 The Meeting noted the view by Sweden and Denmark that further development work should focus on the long-term to have a ready assessment in HOLAS IV, and the comment by Sweden that the indicator should be seen as more of an assessment framework addressing D6C5.

4J.87 The Meeting supported that, for HOLAS III, the focus should be on preparing pilot/test cases for inclusion in the assessment, rather than aim for a full-scale indicator evaluation.

## Indicator name: Condition of benthic habitats

Indicator 'status', including planned change by HOLAS III – if applicable:

Pre-core indicator

Contact name(s):

- Lead – Estonia - Georg Martin, Kristjan Herkul
- Co-Leads: Samuli Korpinen (Finland), Alexander Darr (Germany), Juris Aigars (Latvia), Darius Daunys (Lithuania), Antonia Nyström Sandman, Mats Blomqvist, Anna Westling (Sweden).

Currently being developed under the auspice of:

- EN Benthic
- EN BENTHIC sub-group
- Work of direct relevance is also ongoing under EU TG Seabed

Overview of planned development areas:

Area of development	Threshold value(s)	Methodology	Spatial extent and coverage	Assessment unit changes and/or new assessment Scale proposals (especially for new indicators)
	X*	X**	X (new)	X (new)

\*The process of setting threshold values for the condition of benthic habitats as an overall overview assessment of the habitat is directly tied to work ongoing in EU TG Seabed.

\*\*A proposed methodology may be possible to develop that could subsequently be aligned with work under TG Seabed, should that process also achieve a conclusion prior to HOLAS III.

## 1. Workplan

### 1.1 Aim by HOLAS III:

-  propose a suitable methodology that can be applied broadly across the Baltic Sea region and may be adapted to meet threshold value proposals under the MSFD (i.e. work ongoing in TG Seabed)
-  as a minimum, a series of test cases spatially spread across the region could be developed. Possibility to use the test cases as supporting information under the relevant HOLAS III thematic assessment.

### 1.2 Brief summary of longer-term plans, if relevant:

 longer term plans include: implementation of appropriate threshold values, harmonisation with agreements under EU TG Seabed, and full spatial coverage.

### 1.3 Progress achieved since HOLAS II:

- Plans made for relevant sub-group to meet and consider further possible developments and agreement on application (EN BENTHIC 5-2021, [Outcomes agenda item 4](#)).
-  as part of CARAMBHA project, and also associated with work under TG Seabed (a proposal from Finland), a proposal with some similarities to the Condition of Benthic Habitats indicator was presented to EN Benthic 4-2020 ([document 6-2](#)).
- The EN BENTHIC sub-group aims to explore commonalities and ways ahead between the two.

### 1.4 Alterations from existing work plan (if planned):

NA

### 1.5 Further work planned in 2021:

- Meeting of EN Benthic sub-group consisting of leads (Sweden, Finland, and Estonia), (EN BENTHIC 5-2021, [Outcomes agenda item 4](#)). This group covers the leads of the two processes (Condition of Benthic Habitats indicator and the Finnish/CARAMBHA project approach).
- Focus will be on finding commonalities or best ways forward with the
- Discussion planned will include the following considerations:
  - Agree on commonalities and a methodology that is viable
  - Identification of test cases (spatial spread and data richness)
  - Application of methodology to test cases
  - Evaluate potential to apply method to broader area (e.g. full Baltic Sea scale) and relevant assessment scale if such an assessment is possible
  - Implementation of appropriate threshold values for existing assessment units and/or divided assessment units.
- The EN BENTHIC sub-group will explore the possibility to apply the methodology developed in a series of case studies that are spatially distributed across the Baltic Sea region to test the applicability across the area (and gradients) but also to evaluate how different data richness across the area impacts on the methodology.

### 1.6 Barrier to progress work:

- The alignment of times for decisions under EU TG Seabed and for HOLAS III (e.g. on methods and threshold values) are not fully matched (September 2021 vs end of 2021 for example).
- Data availability and quality varies greatly across the Baltic Sea region and may influence the methodology and its potential to apply in a harmonised way across the region.

### 1.7 Cooperation:

Cooperation with EU TG Seabed will be critical if this indicator is to also be applied under the MSFD (i.e. to address D6C5).

## 2. Provision of data for indicator

### 2.1 Data process for HOLAS III:

- Data is not addressed under the HOLAS III data call.
- Current discussion on the application of the indicator would likely utilise existing data flows/assessments and compile these to evaluate the habitat thus at this point no specific data requirement has been identified.

### 2.2 Data related issues, if relevant:

In the longer term a clear data summary and data flows would need to be defined, i.e. once the indicator was operational or fully developed.

### 2.3 Monitoring guidelines:

In the longer term a relevant Monitoring and Assessment Guideline may need to be developed, i.e. once the indicator was operational or fully developed.

### 2.4 Expected assessment scale of indicator evaluation results – if proposed change from HOLAS II or new indicator:

NA

## 3. Guidance and approval:

3.1 Specific issues for which guidance is requested from State and Conservation:  
None currently identified.

3.2 Specific requests for action at the STATE&CONSERVATION 14-2021:  
None currently identified.

3.3 Specific requests for action expected at the next meeting of *State and Conservation*:

- Progress on the work outlined above will be presented.
- Dependent on the level of outcome achieved a proposal on threshold values, methodology and scale, or a proposal on developing test cases to act as supplementary supporting information in the appropriate HOLAS III thematic assessment, will be presented for approval.

### Annex(es):

- As part of CARAMBHA project, and also associated with work under TG Seabed (a proposal from Finland), a schematic for the assessment of benthic habitats (under MSFD D6C5) was presented to EN Benthic 4-2020 ([document 6-2](#)).