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Background

Under Rule 11.4 of the Rules of Procedure of the Helsinki Commission, the Commission is to report on its main activities of the last calendar year.

The HELCOM Activities Report 2020 presents all major HELCOM activities that took place in 2020, along the lines of the HELCOM Action Areas.

Action requested

The Meeting is invited to

- approve in principle the publication of the HELCOM Activities Report 2020, pending further editing (non-substantial) and layout work;
- approve the publication of the Report under the Baltic Sea Environment Proceedings (BSEP) series.

HELCOM Activities Report 2020

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1. Foreword by Rüdiger Strempel

2020 was different. Different than any year anyone alive today has experienced, and certainly different than expected. Hailed as a biodiversity and ocean “super year”, with a packed agenda of crucial meetings such as the 2020 UN Ocean Conference, the IUCN World Conservation Congress or the Fifteenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP 15), 2020 will instead be remembered primarily as the year when COVID-19 struck, tragically taking or forever changing the lives of millions of people. Around the globe, entire countries shut down, organizations and businesses struggled to remain operational and conferences and meetings (including those mentioned above) were cancelled or postponed. And the Baltic Sea region was no exception.

Against this sombre background, I am gratified to note that, despite the numerous technical as well as personal challenges faced by all concerned, in 2020 HELCOM has largely remained on track in implementing the organization’s program for the 2018 - 2021 period, as laid down in the 2018 HELCOM Ministerial Declaration.

Throughout the year, work in all HELCOM action areas progressed, with meetings of the various HELCOM main groups, working groups and expert groups, as well as other events conducted online in order to ensure the uninterrupted continuation of activities. We have nearly reached the home stretch in updating the all-important Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP). Following intense deliberations in a variety of fora, such as the 2020 HELCOM Stakeholder Conference, a series of dedicated workshops and the meetings of the competent HELCOM bodies, we have now advanced to the drafting stage and a first full draft of the updated plan was presented to the 59th Meeting of the HELCOM Heads of Delegation (HOD 59-2020) in December 2020. Much remains to be done, but the updated plan is rapidly moving from concept to tangible reality. Preparations for the 2021 HELCOM Ministerial Meeting, at which the updated BSAP is due to be adopted, are now in full swing. Finally, 2020 also saw a change of HELCOM chairmanship, as Finland concluded its successful term at the helm of the organization and passed the baton to Germany, which will chair the Commission through June 2022, based on an ambitious work programme.

As documented in the present report, 2020 was, therefore, not only a year of unprecedented challenges but also a year of intense activity, in which HELCOM kept up the momentum in working to fulfil its mandate and achieve our common goal of good environmental status for the Baltic Sea.

2. About the Baltic Sea and HELCOM

2.1. About the Baltic Sea

The Baltic Sea is a semi-enclosed sea in the north of Europe. Overall, the sea is relatively shallow, with brackish and oxygen-low waters. Surface water temperatures vary greatly depending on the season and the geography, with sea ice in the north during winter and warmer waters around 20°C in the south during summer.

Due to its peculiar biochemical properties, the Baltic Sea contains a unique mix of marine and freshwater species adapted to the brackish conditions, as well as a few true brackish-water species. Where salinity levels are low in the Baltic Sea's northern and eastern waters, fewer marine species thrive, and the communities of organisms are dominated by those adapted to freshwater, especially in estuaries and coastal waters.

The limited number of about 3,000 macroscopic species only implies that each individual species has an exceptionally high importance within the food web. The disappearance of a single key species could have dire consequences on the entire ecosystem, possibly leading to its collapse. For this reason, the Baltic Sea is considered particularly vulnerable to external disturbances.

The catchment area, which hosts about 85 million people, is four times larger than the sea itself. Human activities therefore abound in this busy region, and so do anthropogenic pressures. Agriculture, industry and urban development have taken a serious toll on the marine environment in the past. Despite considerable efforts by all HELCOM countries, the Baltic Sea has not fully recovered and is not showing good environmental status yet.

2.2. About HELCOM and the Helsinki Convention

The Helsinki Convention

The Helsinki Convention is a regional sea convention signed in 1974 by the Baltic Sea coastal countries to address the increasing environmental challenges from industrialisation and other human activities that were having a severe impact on the marine environment. The Helsinki Convention aims to protect the Baltic Sea from all sources of pollution from land, air and sea. It also commits the signatories to taking measures to conserve habitats and biological diversity and to ensuring the sustainable use of marine resources. In 1992, the Helsinki Convention was updated to take into account the geopolitical changes and emerging environmental challenges in the region. The current version was ratified in 2000.

About HELCOM

The Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission – also known as the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) – is an intergovernmental organization (IGO) in the Baltic Sea area, consisting of ten Contracting Parties: the nine Baltic Sea countries Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Sweden, plus the European Union. A platform for environmental policy making at the regional level, HELCOM works for a healthy Baltic Sea. Its mandate stems from the Helsinki Convention, whose implementation it oversees. It maintains a Secretariat, which is located in Helsinki, Finland.

The HELCOM Area

The Helsinki Convention defines the “Baltic Sea Area” – the HELCOM area – as the Baltic Sea and the entrance to the Baltic Sea bounded by the parallel of the Skaw in the Skagerrak at 57° 44.43’N. The Baltic Sea Area also includes the internal waters.

3. Change of HELCOM Chairmanship

On 1 July 2020, Germany took over the chairmanship of HELCOM from Finland for a period of two years, setting goals and priorities for combating the threats and pressures impacting the Baltic Sea. Now customary for the chairing Party, Germany has identified several strategic directions for its chairmanship of HELCOM, focussing on strengthening marine biodiversity and addressing pressing challenges such as climate change, munitions on the seafloor and underwater noise.

Germany will also lead the finalization of the update of the Baltic Seas Action Plan (BSAP) and its implementation, as well as devote attention to strengthening regional cooperation and ocean governance.

The priorities for Germany’s chairmanship of HELCOM are:

- Working together for our sea – the Baltic Sea;
- Strengthening ocean governance;
- Updating and implementing the BSAP – making progress on specific requirements;
- Trying new solutions for well-known, pressing challenges;
- Strengthening marine biodiversity; and
- Understanding and responding to climate change and the Baltic Sea.

Germany will furthermore host the next Ministerial Meeting in October 2021.

A particularity of its chairmanship is that in addition to the Chairperson, Germany has two Vice-Chairs hailing from the two German federal states bordering the Baltic Sea, Schleswig-Holstein and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

Prior to Germany, Finland chaired HELCOM from 2018 to 2020 and had set its own priorities on advancing the BSAP update process, the reduction of nutrient inputs, the effects of climate change, and the links between HELCOM and the UN Agenda 2030, especially the integration of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 in HELCOM processes.

Under the Finnish chairmanship led by the Chair Saara Bäck from the Finnish Ministry of Environment, HELCOM notably agreed on the vision and objectives of its Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy, crucial for closing nutrient loops, reducing nutrient surpluses and avoiding nutrient runoff to the sea – the main cause of eutrophication.

- [Press release on the German chairmanship of HELCOM](#)

4. HELCOM activities in 2020 by action area

4.1. Agriculture

Agriculture remains a major source of nutrient loading to the Baltic Sea, leading to eutrophication – an excess of nutrients in the sea stimulating primary production and leading to harmful algal blooms. In recent years, HELCOM has focused on promoting more efficient manure management and nutrient recycling. The aim is to close the nutrient loops and to reduce nutrient surpluses on the farm and regional level, to avoid nutrient runoff to the sea. HELCOM is currently developing a Baltic Sea Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy to enhance nutrient recycling in the Baltic Sea region.

In 2020, HELCOM adopted Recommendation 41-3 on the use of national manure standards. The Recommendation aims to ensure efficient manure use on the farms to reduce nutrient losses from the agricultural sector to the Baltic Sea. Creating the Recommendation was a commitment made by the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting 2013.

The work to elaborate the Baltic Sea Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy continued by scoping possible measures to meet the agreed vision and objectives of the Strategy.

The Sustainable manure and nutrient management for reduction of nutrient loss in the Baltic Sea Region (SuMaNu) project platform supported the elaboration of the Baltic Sea Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy. In 2020, the project produced policy recommendations for promoting nutrient recycling and gathered and

synthesized information on best practices and recommendations on sustainable nutrient management.

The culmination of a three-year long process initiated in 2017, proposals for the revision of Part 2 of Annex III of the Helsinki Convention “Prevention of Pollution from Agriculture” were forwarded in 2020 to the higher decision-making instances of HELCOM. The revision was already committed to by the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting of 2013 in order to better serve the purposes of reaching good environmental status, and, without weakening the text, to update it taking into account the recent scientific developments on good agricultural practices. The concrete proposals contain the revision of three regulations as well as the addition of a new paragraph on nutrient recycling and a glossary of terms.

- HELCOM Recommendation 41-3 on the use of national manure standards: <https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Rec-41-3.pdf>
- SuMaNu reports: <https://balticsumanu.eu/about-the-project/reports/>

4.2. Marine Protected Areas

The aim of the coastal and marine Baltic Sea protected areas (HELCOM MPAs) is to protect valuable marine and coastal habitats in the Baltic Sea. This is done by designating sites with particular nature values as protected areas, and by managing human activities within those areas.

As of December 2020, there were 178 HELCOM MPAs, covering about 13% of the Baltic Sea.

Although the Baltic Sea region has an extensive network and coverage of marine protected areas (MPAs), MPA management and management effectiveness has been identified as an area where significant progress is needed.

To ensure the effectiveness of MPAs and the network as a whole, HELCOM has, in 2020, worked to map the gaps, needs and existing knowledge in the Baltic Sea region pertaining to the entire MPA process, from planning where new areas or extensions might bring added value to designation, management and continuous monitoring and assessment.

The rationale behind HELCOM work on the issue is to consider conservation from the perspective of a network of MPAs, as opposed to fragmented individual areas.

The ultimate aim of the scoping process that took place in 2020 was to identify where the particular focus of future efforts should rest, and to get a systematic overview of how improvements in the different parts of the MPA process can be mutually supportive and thus yield added value.

- [HELCOM MPA map](#)
- [HELCOM MPA metadata catalogue](#)

4.3. Species and biotopes

The Baltic Sea is renowned for its unique biodiversity, featuring both freshwater and marine species that have adapted to the brackish environment. Compared to other sea areas, the diversity in terms of number of species is relatively low. The prevalence of species and communities is largely governed by strong gradients in salinity from north-to-south, coastal-to-offshore, and surface-to-bottom. In addition, seasonal changes in temperature as well as temporary and permanent oxygen deficits influence the occurrence and composition of species.

Benthic habitats and biotopes are also influenced by substrate composition, morphology, exposure, water exchange and depth. When combining these factors in the comparatively small geographic area of the Baltic Sea the result is a mosaic of varied biotopes exhibiting great diversity in function and structure. Baltic Sea biodiversity is thus dynamic in time and variable in space which also influences the management of human activities.

In 2020, HELCOM has been working on identifying and concretizing species and habitat related measures and actions for inclusion in the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP). Dedicated sessions on biodiversity were included in the HELCOM Stakeholder Conference 2020 and were part of the BSAP Update workshops held throughout the year.

The revised Recommendation on protection of harbour porpoise was also adopted in 2020 at HELCOM 41-2020.

As part of the effort to monitor the level of implementation of actions relating to improving the status of species and habitats, dedicated reporting templates for Recommendations 37/2 and 40/1 were established, on threatened species and habitats/biotopes respectively. In addition, a reporting frequency and intervals have been laid down, and reporting started in 2020.

At the working group level, HELCOM started the planning for the next regional Red List assessment.

- Biodiversity database <https://maps.helcom.fi/website/biodiversity/>
- Previous Checklist: <https://www.helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/BSEP130-1.pdf>
- The Balticheck report (link to be added when available)
- Revised Recommendation on protection of harbour porpoise (link to be added)

4.4. Climate change

Climate change is adding more pressure to a fragile ecosystem already affected by a wide variety of anthropogenic impacts, such as eutrophication, pollution, overfishing and habitat loss. In order to adequately take climate change into account when developing and implementing policies in the Baltic Sea, information on what changes have already occurred and what can be expected for the future is urgently needed, especially in an accessible and easily digestible format specifically taking into account the Baltic Sea.

The aim of HELCOM work on climate change is to increase the capacity of the Baltic Sea ecosystem to recover from stress and disturbance resulting from climate change impacts – increasing the resilience of the Baltic Sea.

HELCOM strives to make climate change increasingly visible in marine policy making as well as to incorporate it into the day-to-day work of the Commission. This has been apparent in the Baltic Sea Action Plan update process, where questions on how to account for climate change in the context of HELCOM activities have been frequently raised.

In 2020, the joint HELCOM/Baltic Earth Climate Change expert network, currently consisting of over 100 experts from the region, worked intently to prepare a Baltic Sea climate change fact sheet. Climate change has a multitude of effects so it needs to be approached accordingly, not looking at independent topics, but from every angle which could be important for the sea. The fact sheet being prepared is intended to cover a large number of topics – 32 topics are preliminary considered –, ranging from how much it might rain to what we can expect for seabirds and to possible impacts on maritime traffic.

The key messages provided in the factsheet are now close to being finalized. This regional information can then form the basis for decision-making in the Baltic Sea countries on climate change-related policies.

4.5. Underwater noise

Underwater noise can be problematic to species such as marine mammals (like the harbour porpoise) or fish that rely on sound for some or most parts of their life cycle. Noise may disrupt behaviours, mask important signals and can temporarily or permanently reduce the hearing sensitivity of marine species. The effects of noise have the potential to decrease fitness which may lead to reduced recruitment to the next generation and thereby affect an entire population.

Despite a global slow-down in shipping activities due to the impacts of COVID-19 in 2020, the Baltic Sea still holds some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world as well as some of

the largest coastal cities in Northern Europe. There is, furthermore, a large range of offshore construction work and other human activities currently ongoing in the Baltic Sea area, as indicated by the now concluded [Baltic SCOPE project](#).

Following earlier commitments on underwater noise, HELCOM had agreed to develop an action plan tackling the issue by 2021 at the latest. Consequently, active development of an HELCOM Action Plan on Underwater Noise took place throughout 2020, an effort led by HELCOM EN-Noise and supported by both Pressure and Maritime Working Groups. A draft of the plan was approved in 2020, now awaiting final adoption.

The plan contains regional and national actions aiming, in the long-term, at addressing adverse effects of underwater noise on marine species identified as sensitive to noise, whilst safeguarding the potential of the Baltic Sea for sustainable human activities. Both type of actions focus on the reduction of pressures and impacts from underwater noise sources of various types.

With regard to monitoring, the two underwater noise monitoring programmes on continuous and impulsive noise respectively, were updated as part of the update process of the [HELCOM Monitoring Manual](#), enabling the compilation of the most updated information on underwater noise monitoring efforts in the region.

Moreover, a HELCOM continuous noise database and soundscape tool was set up. Hosted by ICES, the data structure of the database has been designed on the data structures used by BIAS and the [Joint Monitoring Programme for Ambient Noise North Sea \(JOMOPANS\)](#). Monitoring data supplied to the database will be available for downloading. In addition, statistical maps from the BIAS project (2014) are available. The system provides the possibility to adapt the standard format to include additional metadata for statistical maps deriving from other sources, such as the JOMOPANS project.

- [\[HELCOM Action Plan on Underwater Noise\]](#). (link to be added after HOD 59-2020)
- [HELCOM Continuous Noise data portal](#)

4.6. Marine litter

Beyond being an aesthetic problem, marine litter also has socio-economic costs, affects human health and safety, and has impacts on marine organisms. Moreover, entanglement in or ingestion of marine litter are concrete threats to marine animals and may, in some cases, lead to their death. Consumption of tiny particles – so-called microplastics – is also of concern as it may provide a pathway for transport of harmful chemicals into the food web. Additionally, marine litter is known to damage and degrade habitats – for instance through smothering – and to be a possible vector for the transfer of alien species.

Main outputs in 2020 on measures addressing marine litter were the production of (i) the Best Practices to reduce marine litter from net cutting nets, (ii) the updated HELCOM

Recommendation 23-5 on storm water management, now awaiting adoption by HELCOM 42-2021, and (iii) the HELCOM policy message on End of Life Boats (ELB).

With regard to monitoring, the five litter monitoring programmes were updated as part of the update process of the [HELCOM Monitoring Manual](#), enabling the compilation of the most updated information on marine litter monitoring efforts in the region.

In 2020, the revision of the HELCOM Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter (RAP ML) has started. Initially adopted in 2015, the plan has already led to significant progress on marine litter, including the development of a knowledge base and various HELCOM commitments to address marine litter in the Baltic Sea. As a first step, a thorough evaluation of the implementation of each of the regional and voluntary national actions has been initiated. The revision of the Action Plan is to be conducted simultaneously and in connection with the revision of the BSAP, the RAP ML being one of the key supplementary documents of the updated BSAP.

New measures may also be added to the updated RAP ML in view of the newly acquired knowledge, availability of novel technologies and latest regulations in force such as on discarded fishing gear and single use plastic items.

- [Best Practices to reduce marine litter from net cutting nets](#)
- [Update of the HELCOM Recommendation 23-5 on storm water management] [\(link to be added\)](#)
- [Policy brief on disposal of End of Life Boats (ELB)] [\(link to be added\)](#)

4.7. Dredging/loss and disturbance of seabed

Dredging and depositing of dredged material are human activities damaging the sea floor and causing losses and disturbances of benthic habitats. Dredged material being deposited at sea might also release contaminants buried in sediments to the water column.

As stipulated in the Helsinki Convention, dredged material is the only exemption to the general prohibition of dumping of any kinds of waste to the Baltic Sea. Annually, an estimated seven to 25 million tonnes of dredged material are deposited in the Baltic Sea.

The HELCOM Contracting Parties are obliged to regulate dredging and depositing operations at sea and report on the material that has been deposited.

In accordance with HELCOM Recommendation 36/2, the data on depositing of dredged material are to be reported annually by the end of September of the year following the year when the relevant activities took place. The reported data are used for annual publication of the HELCOM environmental factsheet on dredge/depositing operations in the Baltic Sea.

In 2020, to streamline the dataflow and avoid double reporting, the Contracting Parties decided to utilize the reporting under this HELCOM Recommendation to provide

consolidated information on dumping dredged material at sea to the London Convention and Protocol (LC/LP). The Guidelines for Management of Dredged Material at Sea were complemented by the procedure for compilation of the consolidated report to the LC/LP, including data validation. The updates to the Recommendation 36/2 and the Guideline were adopted by HELCOM 41-2020. The first report prepared in accordance with the procedure was submitted to the LC/LP in June 2020.

- BS Environmental factsheet [“Depositing of dredged material in the Baltic Sea”](#);
- [Recommendation 36/2](#);
- [Guideline for Management of Dredged Material at Sea](#).

4.8. Industrial and municipal releases

Human activities on land are the biggest source of contamination of the marine ecosystem, such as the input of nutrients stemming from agriculture, the wastewater management sector or air emissions, as well as municipal and industrial releases containing hazardous substances and micro litter.

Despite multiple measures in place to reduce the input of nutrients, the regional environmental targets agreed on by HELCOM and expressed as maximum allowable inputs (MAI) of nutrients to the Baltic Sea sub-basins have not been achieved yet. Likewise, regarding hazardous substances and marine litter, the situation is not satisfactory yet either.

In 2020, a number of projects were conducted to identify the effectiveness of measures to reduce input of nutrients and reach the agreed targets. The year 2020 showed a reduction of nitrogen (N) deposition, resulting from the implementation of the Gothenburg Protocol and EU National Emissions Ceilings (EU NEC) Directive. The reduction potential for the remaining inputs of nutrients from point sources was also estimated. The sufficiency of nutrient-related targets set for individual river basins to achieve the BSAP goals was assessed under one of the work packages of the HELCOM ACTION project.

The results of one of the major PLC-7 projects – Assessment of progress towards nutrient input ceilings for HELCOM countries – were also published in 2020, providing the basis for the revision of the nutrient input ceilings in the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP), and for the proposed input ceilings for transboundary rivers.

Four overviews of hazardous substances of high concern were published in 2020, covering diclofenac, PFAS, PBDE and dioxins. Also, a draft report on micropollutants in the effluents of wastewater treatment plants (WWTP), prepared with the support of the INTERREG projects BSR-Water and CW-PHARMA, was presented to the HELCOM Contracting Parties for review, laying the groundwork for the start of the development of a regional policy document on hazardous substances.

Furthermore, in 2020 the update of the HELCOM Recommendation on urban storm water management was launched, addressing crucial environmental aspects such as contaminants, microlitter and resilience to the effects of climate change.

- [Input of nutrients: potential to reduce input from point sources](#);
- [HELCOM ENIRED II project](#) (Estimation of Nitrogen Deposition reduction by 2030);
- [Progress towards national targets for input of nutrients](#): How much is left to reach the HELCOM nutrient input targets set for a clean Baltic Sea?
- [Perfluorooctane sulfonate \(PFOS\) and other perfluorinated alkyl substances \(PFASs\) in the Baltic Sea – Sources, transport routes and trends](#);
- [Polybrominated diphenyl ethers \(PBDEs\) in the Baltic Sea – Sources, transport routes and trends](#);
- [Dioxins and PCBs in the Baltic Sea](#);
- [Diclofenac in the Baltic Sea – Sources, transport routes and trends](#);

4.9. Maritime Spatial Planning

The Baltic Sea region is global frontrunner on maritime spatial planning (MSP), especially with regard to international cooperation on that subject. All HELCOM countries have either already developed national maritime spatial plans or are currently in the process of doing so.

The MSP Roadmap 2013-2020 is the major regional document coordinating MSP-related activities at the Baltic-wide level. A major milestone of the roadmap, the regional guidelines for transboundary consultations and application of ecosystem-based approach in MSP were adopted in 2020.

The implementation of the roadmap was evaluated as part of the now completed Pan Baltic Scope project, concluding that its ultimate goal – drawing up and applying maritime spatial plans throughout the Baltic Sea region by 2020 which are coherent across borders and apply the ecosystem approach – has been achieved.

With the expiration of the MSP Roadmap, the joint HELCOM-VASAB MSP Working group has agreed to prepare a new regional MSP roadmap, which is expected to be interlinked with the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan and which will also reflect the role of MSP in the achievement of the environmental goals for the Baltic Sea.

The goal of the new roadmap will be to:

- strengthen the joint effort and coherence throughout the region to implement Maritime Spatial Plans;
- aim for sustainable development of the Baltic Sea region; and
- build a sound basis for an adaptive Maritime Spatial Planning process applying the ecosystem-based approach.

Provisionally, the Roadmap will be designed for the period 2021-2030, in line with the new BSAP and foreseen updating period of national MSP plans. The new roadmap is expected to be adopted in October 2021, together with the updated BSAP.

4.10. Fisheries

Fisheries contribute substantially to the economy and are central to the cultural heritage of the Baltic Sea. However, Baltic fisheries are not yet entirely environmentally sustainable, and some fish stocks are declining.

HELCOM deals with fisheries in relation to the implementation of the ecosystem-based approach through its Group on ecosystem-based sustainable fisheries (Fish Group). In particular, the Fish Group works to finding solutions on how the sector could further contribute to reaching the overall HELCOM objective of a Baltic Sea achieving good environmental status.

The Roadmap on collection of fisheries data in order to assess incidental bycatches and fisheries impact on benthic biotopes in the Baltic Sea was adopted by HELCOM 41-2020.

In 2020, work also continued inter alia on the development of BAT/BEP for sustainable aquaculture in the Baltic Sea, and further steps were taken to strengthen cooperation and coordination between HELCOM and the regional fisheries bodies Baltic Sea Fisheries Forum (BALTFISH) and Baltic Sea Advisory Council (BSAC). This contributes to fulfilling the agreement in the 2018 HELCOM Ministerial Declaration to increase cooperation with fisheries bodies active within the Baltic Sea, ultimately aiming to ensure coherence between marine and fisheries management measures

This year, HELCOM also continued its efforts in the RETROUT Project (Development, promotion and sustainable management of the Baltic Sea Region as a coastal fishing tourism destination), co-funded by Interreg. HELCOM is a project partner leading a work package on assessment of the status and management of sea trout rivers and stocks, with focus on river restoration activities and assessment of sea trout river and stock status. The project has been prolonged until the end of March 2021.

4.11. Response to spills

HELCOM has a longstanding cooperation and coordination role in relation to pollution incidents involving oil and hazardous or noxious substances (HNS) as per Annex VII of the Helsinki Convention.

The cooperation framework is further detailed in the HELCOM Response Manual volumes 1-3 and a number of HELCOM Recommendations. It involves inter alia joint assistance in response operations where vessels and equipment are deployed by other Contracting

Parties (this includes reimbursement procedures), notification of suspected incidents, information sharing, aerial surveillance and regular exercises (including the annual BALEX DELTA exercises, which is one of the largest response exercises in the world).

In order to ensure the best possible joint response capacities in the Baltic Sea, the Response Manual is continuously being kept up-to-date by the HELCOM Response Working Group, in which all Contracting Parties are represented.

The full revision of the HELCOM Response Manual aiming to make them more user friendly and up to date was completed by the Response Working Group in 2020. HELCOM 42-2020 is expected to adopt the revised Response Manual (combining previous volumes 1 and 3), as well as the Joint Inter-Regional Marine HNS Response Manual developed jointly with the Bonn Agreement and the Regional Marine Pollution Emergency Response Centre for the Mediterranean Sea (REMPEC) under the EU-funded Western Mediterranean Region Marine Oil and HNS Pollution Cooperation (West MOPoCo) project.

The HELCOM Response Working Group, at its 28th Meeting approved the revised HELCOM Recommendation 31E/6 on *Integrated wildlife response planning in the Baltic Sea Area*, with a view to its adoption by HELCOM 42-2021. RESPONSE 28-2020 also agreed, for consideration by HOD 59-2020, that HELCOM Recommendation 17/12 on *Measures to abate pollution by oil and other harmful substances in cases of grounding, collision, sinking of a ship or other maritime casualty* should be withdrawn.

In 2020, the annual BALEX DELTA exercise was held in Estonia off the coast of Tallinn on 26 August. An alarm exercise (BALEX Bravo) was held on 11 August 2020. Both exercises were successfully executed despite significant challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other activities in 2020 related to response to spills include *inter alia* the approval of the HELCOM Annual report on discharges observed during aerial surveillance in the Baltic Sea 2019, and finalization of the HELCOM Response Exercise Plan (HREP).

HELCOM engagement in the West MOPoCo project on updating regional response manuals on chemical spills continued in 2020 in partnership with, e.g. the Mediterranean (REMPEC) and North Sea (Bonn Agreement). Through this project, the Joint Inter-Regional Marine HNS Response Manual was finalized and eventually agreed by RESPONSE 28-2020.

- 2019 annual report on aerial surveillance [\(link to be added\)](#)

4.12. Shipping

The HELCOM Contracting Parties work together in the implementation of commitments made under global sectoral bodies dealing with maritime affairs, thereby contributing to progress on maritime transport issues, which are of considerable significance for the Baltic Sea with its heavily used shipping lanes.

In accordance with the provisions of Annex IV of the Helsinki Convention, the Contracting Parties cooperate within the International Maritime Organization (IMO), in particular in promoting the development of international rules, and regionally to promote the harmonized implementation of such rules.

HELCOM 41-2020 adopted HELCOM Recommendation 41/1 on *Deep-Sea Pilotage to enhance safety of navigation and protection of the marine environment in the Baltic Sea region* as well as Recommendation 41/2 on *Enhancing the use of pilots in route T and the Sound*, superseding Recommendation 23/3.

At its 20th Meeting, the Maritime Working Group, agreed on the revised Joint Harmonised Procedure for the Contracting Parties of OSPAR and HELCOM on the granting of exemptions under the IMO Ballast Water Management Convention. The Meeting further agreed in principle to a Draft Regional Baltic Biofouling Management Roadmap, with a view to its adoption by HELCOM 42-2021.

HELCOM continued its efforts in the COMPLETE project, which is an EU INTERREG Baltic Sea Region project aimed at minimizing the introduction and spread of harmful aquatic organisms and pathogens by shipping through the development of consistent and adaptive management strategies and tools for the Baltic Sea region by addressing both major vectors, (ballast water and biofouling).

Work also continued in the CSHIPP project platform which brings together projects and organisations focused on enhancing clean shipping in the Baltic Sea region. The objective of CSHIPP is to increase the impact of and connect the dots between the several projects working for clean shipping. As the projects involved in the platform look at the shared topic of clean shipping from different angles, CSHIPP synthesises the projects' results to provide a more holistic perspective in a concise and easily comprehensible format.

In 2020, HELCOM also joined the EMERGE project on shipping emissions in EU marine waters. Coordinated by the Finnish Meteorological Institute, the 4-year-long EMERGE project will quantify and evaluate the effects of potential emission reduction solutions for shipping in Europe, and develop effective strategies and measures to reduce the environmental impacts of shipping.

4.13. [Baltic Sea Action Plan](#)

The Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) is HELCOM's strategic programme of actions for achieving good environmental status of the Baltic Sea. Since its inception in 2007, it has resulted in a number of environmental improvements such as a reduction in nutrient inputs to the sea, an improved state of biodiversity and a reduction in maritime incidents and spills.

Despite extensive efforts to reduce pressures and improve the state of the marine environment, the objective of the BSAP – to reach good environmental status for the Baltic

Sea area by 2021 – will not be reached. Nevertheless, due to the tangible results attributed to the BSAP, the HELCOM Contracting Parties reaffirmed their strong support for the BSAP and, during the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting 2018 in Brussels, decided on its update.

The update is meant to strengthen the current plan, while also considering new issues currently not addressed within HELCOM. The update will carry over already agreed actions of the current BSAP as well as include new actions and measures to respond to previously unaddressed environmental challenges such as underwater noise, seabed integrity, pharmaceuticals and climate change.

In 2020, HELCOM agreed on the on goals and ecological and management objectives for the updated BSAP as well as on the actions from the current BSAP that will be transferred to the updated BSAP.

Proposals for new actions made by the HELCOM Contracting Parties, Working Groups, stakeholders and international projects were evaluated by the HELCOM Working Groups and expert workshops. To support the selection of new actions, the assessment of the sufficiency of existing measures, carried out by the Ad hoc HELCOM Platform on Sufficiency of Measures (SOM Platform) and the EU co-financed HELCOM ACTION project, was finalized.

The revision of the HELCOM Explorer, a database displaying the progress by the HELCOM Contracting Parties made on actions agreed on in the BSAP, was completed, and additional information on the implementation of HELCOM Recommendations was added to the database.

HELCOM ACTION project (Actions to evaluate and identify effective measures to reach GES in the Baltic Sea marine region)

Co-financed by the EU and coordinated by HELCOM, the ACTION project was designed to contribute to the update of the [HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan](#) by 2021 and can also be used by HELCOM Contracting Parties that are also EU Member States in updating and implementing their MSFD Programme of Measures. Running from January 2019 to December 2020, ACTION evaluates the effectiveness of existing measures, focussing on several pertinent topics, such as: by-catch of mammals and birds, impacts on the seabed, marine protected areas, and eutrophication. In addition, the project analyses the natural conditions that influence the achievement of Good Environmental Status (GES) in the Baltic Sea region, including impacts of projected changes in climate. Furthermore, the project sought to develop an approach for regional sufficiency of measures (SOM) analysis to identify potential gaps in achieving GES, and estimate cost-effectiveness of tentative new measures to fill these gaps.

- HELCOM Explorer: <http://maps.helcom.fi/website/HELCOMexplorer/>

4.14. Monitoring and assessment

Providing an understanding of the health of the Baltic Sea's biodiversity components and the pressures affecting the marine environment, monitoring is key to all HELCOM work. HELCOM assessments are therefore carried out at regular intervals and are the main instrument for understanding progress towards achieving good environmental status in the Baltic Sea.

The HELCOM core indicators, with their quantitative threshold values measuring the state of a variety of ecosystem components and pressures affecting the sea, constitute the main source for the assessments. The HELCOM indicators are designed and developed to suitably assess the status of the Baltic Sea.

In 2020, HELCOM finalized the review and update of HELCOM's 40 monitoring programmes as well as of the HELCOM Monitoring Manual.

Furthermore, as part of the preparations for the next HELCOM Holistic Assessment (HOLAS III), which will start in 2022, efforts were initiated in 2020 for improving the HELCOM core indicators as well as for the development of new ones.

To facilitate future work with the growing number of core indicators, HELCOM, in 2020, prepared its Indicator Manual, which outlines the process of identifying, developing, approving and managing indicators in HELCOM.

The indicators are dependent on the data needed to run them, largely provisioned through the HELCOM monitoring programmes, and dedicated work has been taking place to improve and establish data flows, i.e. how data are presented and reported.

HELCOM Baltic DataFlow

In a bid to harmonize, harvest and share data about the Baltic marine environment at a regional level, HELCOM launched the Baltic Data Flows project in October 2020. Baltic Data Flows will enhance the existing harmonization and sharing of data on the marine environment originating from existing sea monitoring programmes. Extending a previous pilot system by project partners ICES and SMHI, it will do so by harvesting national data on the marine environment in order to produce harmonized, regional datasets in a more automated and efficient way. Improved dataflows are also expected to result in easier data reporting for the next HELCOM Holistic Assessment of the Baltic Sea (HOLAS III).

Co-financed by the Connecting Europe Facility of the European Union's Innovation And Networks Executive Agency (INEA) and led by HELCOM, the project will run for three years through September 2023. Further partners are ICES, LHEI, SMHI, Spatineo, Stockholm University, and SYKE.

- [Baltic Data Flow](#)

Plan for Future work on HELCOM Indicators

Approved in late 2019, the plan initiates the work for the development of new indicators and the adjustment of existing indicators by activating the respective expert groups and indicator leads/co-leads. It seeks to review and adjust the structure, presentation and causal framework suggested for the indicators, in line with the endorsed suggestions from the Second Indicator Workshop and State and Conservation 11-2019. This step, as well as indicator maintenance will be led by the State and Conservation Working Group. The aim of the plan is to ensure that indicator development takes place well in advance of the assessment and reporting phases under the HELCOM Holistic Assessment (HOLAS III).

- <http://stateofthebalticsea.helcom.fi/>
- HELCOM Indicator manual (pending HOD approval) (link to be added)
- [Plan for Future work on HELCOM Indicators](#)

4.15. International processes

Global frameworks and international processes such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Aichi targets have long been important factors in HELCOM work to conserve the global marine environment.

Voluntary Commitments

In support of advancing the global implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 on oceans and seas, HELCOM has pledged to submit five Voluntary Commitments to be submitted to the 2020 UN Ocean Conference (postponed):

1. Updating of the Baltic Sea Action Plan by 2021 ([link to the commitment](#)),
2. The development of a HELCOM Science Agenda to contribute to the UN Decade of Ocean Science ([link to the commitment](#)),
3. Strengthening cooperation with other Regional Seas Organisations ([link to the commitment](#)),
4. Offering strong support for global efforts to address the marine litter problem on a global level ([link to the commitment](#)), and
5. Organizing a workshop on ecosystem-based management in support of the UN Decade of Ocean Science ([link to the commitment](#)),

EU4Ocean Platform

In 2020, HELCOM joined the EU4Ocean Platform as a founding member. The platform is a focal point for organizations and initiatives to connect, collaborate and mobilize efforts on ocean literacy.

Consolidating existing ocean literacy initiatives and stakeholders in a larger network, EU4Ocean seeks to promote opportunities in ocean literacy that can be scaled up to larger campaigns in order to raise awareness on matters related to oceans and seas within the wider society. The platform further supports the preparatory planning for the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, and in particular its ocean literacy components.

- Website: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/maritimeforum/en/node/4508>

Other global and international processes

In 2020, HELCOM continued its involvement in various other global and international processes, as outlined in the respective sections above.

In a meeting in November 2020, HELCOM and OSPAR discussed further enhancing cooperation and synergies between the two Commissions, in addition to the ongoing joint work on the development of a joint indicator on bycatch of marine mammals and birds, and the exchange between experts of the two organizations on underwater noise.

Maintaining its active cooperation with the UN Regional Seas Programme (UN RSC) throughout 2020, HELCOM notably attended a joint EU/UN RSC event, the UNEP-EC Virtual Workshop on Regional Seas Programmes and the post 2020 Global Biodiversity Framework held on 27 and 28 October 2020, presenting its policy alignments with the SDGs and Aichi Biodiversity Targets and integration with other global and regional frameworks.

HELCOM also attended the Workshop on Other effective area-based conservation measures (OECM) in Northern Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, organized by the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas in Tunis, Tunisia, from 10 to 11 February 2020. OECMs seek to promote conservation beyond protected areas by providing guidance on identifying, recognising, supporting and reporting OECMs.