



## Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission

*Ad hoc* Seal Expert Group

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### Background

STATE & CONSERVATION 3-2015 agreed on using a common template for harmonization of HELCOM monitoring guidelines. SEAL 9-2015 agreed that the new and existing monitoring guidelines for seals will be prepared/edited to be in line with the template.

This document includes the monitoring guidelines for seal distribution in the HELCOM area, transferred to the template format by Mr. Anders Galatius, Denmark and Mr. Tero Härkönen, Sweden.

### Action requested

The Meeting is invited to take note of the new format of the monitoring guidelines for seal abundance.

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## Guidelines for seal distribution monitoring in the HELCOM area

### 1. Background

The three regularly occurring seal species in the Baltic Sea, harbour seal (*Phoca vitulina*), ringed seal (*Pusa hispida*) and grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) are monitored at their haulouts on land or ice during their annual moulting and pupping seasons, with the aim of estimating the distribution and distribution trends. Where possible, the monitoring is performed using aerial surveys, where the seal haul-outs are photographed during the relevant periods in areas where there is a significant occurrence of seals. Line transect methodology is used for ringed seals.

#### 1.1 Introduction

##### 1.1.1 Harbour seals

In the Baltic (HELCOM area), harbour seals are distributed in four units, which are monitored separately, namely the Limfjord, Kattegat, southwestern Baltic and Kalmarsund. The Limfjord and southwestern Baltic are monitored by scientists from the Department of Bioscience, Aarhus University, Kalmarsund is monitored by scientists from the Swedish Museum of Natural History. Monitoring of the seals in Kattegat is coordinated between these institutions with synchronized surveys in the Swedish and Danish parts of the area.

##### 1.1.2 Grey seals

In the Baltic Sea, grey seals are surveyed as one unit, the distribution of which covers most of the Baltic Sea area (see HELCOM Red List entry). Moulting surveys take place during the peak moulting season over two weeks in late May – early June, which is agreed and scheduled among the international partners: Natural Resources Institute Finland, the Swedish Museum of Natural History, Estonian Environmental Board, the St. Petersburg State University/BFN, Department of Bioscience, Aarhus University and Hel Marine Station, University of Gdańsk. Grey seals are hauling out in herds on small islets and skerries. All the locations where grey seals have been observed to haul out during previous years in Finland, Denmark, Sweden Estonia, Russia) and in Poland are surveyed two to three times during the agreed two-week period.

*Note: In Denmark, localities are only surveyed once in the period. In Finland, grey seal pup surveys are carried out in the southern edge of the Archipelago Sea in February and March. In Denmark, where the grey seal is currently establishing itself as a breeding species, all localities are surveyed in late February and early March. In Estonia main breeding islands (2-4) are surveyed according to presence of seals. In Sweden, Poland and Russia, pup surveys are not a part of the monitoring program.*

##### 1.1.3 Ringed seals

In the Baltic (HELCOM area), ringed seals are distributed in four units, which are monitored separately, namely the Bay of Bothnia, the Archipelago Sea, the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Riga. The Archipelago Sea is monitored by Natural Resources Institute Finland, the Bay of Bothnia by the Swedish Museum of Natural History, the Gulf of Finland by the Natural Resources Institute Finland, the Estonian Environmental Board and the St. Petersburg State University/BFN in coordination. The Gulf of Riga is monitored by the Estonian Environmental Board.

*Notes: The Gulf of Riga is also surveyed in the Latvian part if the ice cover extends across the national border. As the Gulf of Riga area is on the southern limit of formation of sea ice in average ice winters, the monitoring success is extremely sensitive to severity of winter. In past two decades (since 1994, when the systematic surveys were introduced) only the 2005/2006 winter was severe enough to form stable sea ice during the ringed seal moulting period in mid-April. In other years aerial, ship-based or land-based surveys have been carried out to explore haul out distribution and abundance of seals and get point estimates of the seal population in various ice conditions. In the Gulf of Finland and the Archipelago Sea monitoring also depends on ice conditions.*

## 1.2 Purpose and aims

As top predators of the Baltic Sea, seals are important sentinels for the state of the ecosystem. Furthermore, all three species have been severely depleted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and still face anthropogenic pressures such as bycatch, pollution, disturbance and prey depletion. Distribution of seals reflects combined effects of such pressures on the populations as well as more local effects such as local disturbance and habitat degradation. These monitoring data are used to assess the status of the populations under the HELCOM core indicator 'Distribution of Baltic seals'.

## 2. Monitoring methods

### 2.1 Monitoring features

Grey seals and harbour seals are monitored at their haul-out localities. Ringed seals are monitored on sea ice.

In the Baltic (HELCOM area), harbour seals are distributed in four units, which are monitored separately, namely the Limfjord, Kattegat, southwestern Baltic and Kalmar Sound. The Limfjord and southwestern Baltic are monitored by scientists from the Department of Bioscience, Aarhus University, Kalmar Sound is monitored by scientists from the Swedish Museum of Natural History. Monitoring of the seals in Kattegat is coordinated between these institutions with synchronized surveys in the Swedish and Danish parts of the area.

In the Baltic Sea, grey seals are surveyed as one unit, the distribution of which covers most of the Baltic Sea area (see HELCOM Red List entry). Moulting surveys take place during the peak moulting season over two weeks in late May – early June, which is agreed and scheduled among the international partners: Natural Resources Institute Finland, the Swedish Museum of Natural History, Estonian Environmental Board, the St. Petersburg State University/BFN, Department of Bioscience, Aarhus University and Hel Marine Station, University of Gdańsk. Grey seals are hauling out in herds on small islets and skerries. All the locations where grey seals have been observed to haul out during previous years (>270 + a few new sites per year found from the observed area in Finland, 7 sites in Denmark, 30 sites in Sweden (containing groups of haul-outs), 15 sites in Estonia, 8 + few new sites in Russia) and 1 new site in Poland are surveyed two to three times during the agreed two-week period.

*Notes on grey seals: In Denmark, localities are only surveyed once in the period. In Finland, grey seal pup counts are carried out in a sample area of 44 small islands in the Southern edge of the Archipelago Sea in February and March. In Denmark, where the grey seal is currently establishing itself as a breeding species, all localities are surveyed in late February and early March. In Estonia main breeding islands (2-4) are surveyed according to presence of seals. In Sweden, Poland and Russia, pup counts are not a part of the monitoring program.*

In the Baltic (HELCOM area), ringed seals are distributed in four units, which are monitored separately, namely the Bay of Bothnia, the Archipelago Sea, the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Riga. The Archipelago Sea is monitored by Natural Resources Institute Finland, the Bay of Bothnia by the Swedish Museum of Natural History, the Gulf of Finland by the Natural Resources Institute Finland, the Estonian Environmental Board and the St. Petersburg State University/BFN in coordination. The Gulf of Riga is monitored by the Estonian Environmental Board.

*Notes on ringed seals: The Gulf of Riga is also surveyed in the Latvian part if the ice cover extends across the national border. As the Gulf of Riga area is on the southern limit of formation of sea ice in average ice winters, the monitoring success is extremely sensitive to severity of winter. In past two decades (since 1994, when the systematic surveys were introduced) only the 2005/2006 winter was severe enough to form stable sea ice during the ringed seal moulting period in mid-April. In other years aerial, ship-based or land-based surveys have been carried out to explore haul out distribution and abundance of seals and get point estimates of the seal population in various ice conditions. In the Gulf of Finland and the Archipelago Sea monitoring also depends on ice conditions.*

## 2.2 Time and area

### 2.2.1 Harbour seals

- a. Two aerial surveys of breeding harbour seals in June in the Danish part of the Kattegat area.
- b. Three aerial surveys of moulting harbour seals at all significant haul-outs in all areas during the peak moulting season in August (Teilmann et al 2010). In Kattegat, these surveys are coordinated and synchronized between Denmark and Sweden.

### 2.2.2 Grey seals

- a. Every year, the following aerial and/or land based surveys are performed: 1. Grey seal pups: 2 aerial surveys at selected grey seal pupping areas (Finland: southern edge of the Archipelago Sea; Denmark: all grey seal localities in the Danish HELCOM area; Estonia: major breeding islands (2-4) in Estonian western Archipelago and the Gulf of Riga; Sweden, Poland and Russia: no surveys are carried out during the pupping season) in the end of February / early March and in mid to late March.
- b. Grey seal moult: In Finland, 3 aerial surveys of moulting grey seals at all known haul-outs in SW Archipelago (the core area of moulting distribution) and 2 aerial counts in the Gulf of Bothnia and the Gulf of Finland during late May – early June. In Denmark 1 survey covering the Danish HELCOM area is performed. In Sweden 3 aerial surveys are carried out at haul-outs in the key areas, in other areas 3 surveys are carried out from land or boat. In Estonian Gulf of Finland and Estonian W archipelago including Gulf of Riga are surveyed in separate flights. Minimum 3 surveys are carried out in Gulf of Finland and 3 in W Archipelago. In Russia, the eastern part of the Gulf of Finland is surveyed from ships or boats 1-2 times depending on weather. In Poland on-line camera monitoring and visual surveys in the Gulf of Gdańsk, Vistula mouth, are performed in the period.

### 2.2.3 Ringed seals

- a. Archipelago Sea: 2 aerial line transect surveys of moulting ringed seals in mid-April in the Archipelago Sea and on the Finnish side of the Gulf of Finland east of Helsinki (the main series of transect lines located east of the Kotka longitude).
- b. Bay of Bothnia: Line transect surveys between the 20th of April to the 1st of May
- c. Gulf of Riga: aerial line transect survey 15th of April and 1st of May

d. Gulf of Finland: aerial line transect survey between 15th of April and 1st of May

## 2.4 Monitoring procedure

### 2.4.1 Monitoring strategy

Seals are surveyed on land during key stages of their life cycle, namely breeding and moulting. During these key stages seals are in particular need of land sites throughout their distribution.

### 2.4.2 Sampling method(s) and equipment

#### 2.4.2.1 Harbour seals

Aerial surveys follow a standard protocol, which has been in use since 1979. There are two observers on each survey. As seals tend to have a higher haul out rate in dry weather, surveys are not carried out if there has been rain at a haul-out within 6 hours prior to the survey. To ensure photographic quality, surveys are only carried out at wind velocities below 10 m/s. The haul-outs are photographed from an altitude of 500-700 feet. Each observer takes a series of overlapping photographs of seal groups at the haul-out through the open window. Occurrence of seals outside the photographs is noted. At a few localities, seals haul out on individual rocks covering a large area. At these sites, overlapping photographs are not possible and the seals are counted independently by each observer and the mean of these counts is used.

Equipment:

- High-wing fixed wing aircraft with opening windows
- 2 digital cameras with zoom lenses including 200mm in their range and image stabiliser. The cameras should have a resolution and lenses of high optical quality to facilitate species recognition.
- GPS-log
- Binoculars
- Intercom headsets
- Immersion suits and life vests

#### 2.4.2.2 Grey seals

Aerial surveys with fixed wing aircraft (float plane) or helicopter follow a standard protocol. As seals tend to have a higher haul out rate in dry weather, surveys are not carried out if it has rained at a haul-out within 6 hours prior to the survey. To ensure photographic quality, and high haul-out rate, surveys are only carried out at wind velocities below 8-10 m/s. A pilot and one or two observers are required for each survey. The pilot is making sure that the flight route allows the photographing observer to take pictures of all the grey seal herds. The observer at the opening window takes a series of overlapping photographs of seal groups at each haul-out while both the pilot and the other observer, if present, are helping observing seals outside the photographs (in practice those swimming outside of the hauled out group or hauling out separately).

All data are secured in databases at the Swedish Museum of Natural History in Sweden, the Natural Resources Institute Finland, Estonian Environment Agency and Hel Marine Station and University of

Gdansk. Raw data are partially treated before being entered into the databases. After initial processing, all data are publicly available.

*Note: in Denmark, surveys are performed at mean wind velocities up to 10 m/s, in Estonia and Finland at wind speeds up to 8 m/s.*

*Note: in Estonia, only one observer is used.*

*Note: in Finland, grey seal pups are counted on small islands is flown around with a helicopter at the altitude of 100-200 meters and overlapping photographs covering the entire islands are taken by one observer while the other is keeping notes. From the photographs, numbers of pups (when possible assigned to two age classes), number of females and males are counted, as well as number of white-tailed sea eagles, which visit the sites for eating the afterbirths as well as pups.*

*Note: in Russia, the main haul-outs are located in a no-fly zone, and photographs are taken from boats at the distance of 100-400 meters.*

*Note: in Poland a small new haul out site is established on the remote island close to the mainland and on-line camera together with land based visual surveys are used.*

#### Equipment

- High-wing fixed wing aircraft with opening windows
- Helicopter with large opening side door (grey seal pup counts in Finland and grey seal moult counts in Sweden)
- Digital cameras with zoom lenses including 200 - 300mm in their range and image stabiliser. The cameras should have a resolution and lenses of high optical quality to facilitate species recognition  
GPS-log (not used in Denmark)
- Binoculars
- Intercom headsets
- Immersion suits and life vests
- Boats (in Russia and some areas in Sweden)
- on-line video camera (in Poland)

#### 2.4.2.3 Ringed seals

Line transect methodology (Härkönen & Lunneryd 1992, Härkönen et al. 1998) is employed since ringed seals haul out on the ice to moult. Surveys are flown at an altitude of 90m and the surveyed strips are 800m wide. The transects are evenly spaced over the ice area in a manner so that a minimum of 13% of the entire ice covered sea area is surveyed. A greater survey fraction only marginally reduces variances of survey results (Härkönen & Lunneryd 1992). In the Archipelago Sea and Finnish side of the Gulf of Finland transect lines are set ca. 4 km from each other over the ice area. The flight altitude is 170-180m and the whole area between the transect lines is observed. In the Archipelago Sea, ringed seals in area without ice-cover may haul out on land instead of moving to the ice-covered area. Thus, no proper estimates of unseen fraction of hauling out individuals are produced.

*Notes: In the Gulf of Riga, Gulf of Finland and the Archipelago Sea, poor ice conditions in most years have suggested that seal distribution on ice has not resembled that of a “normal” winter, the observation results can then only be used to describe distribution rather than calculate or compare abundance estimates.*

#### Equipment

- High-wing fixed wing aircraft with opening windows
- 2 digital cameras with zoom lenses including 200mm in their range and image stabiliser. The cameras should have a resolution and lenses of high optical quality to facilitate species recognition
- GPS-log
- Binoculars
- Intercom headsets
- Immersion suits and life vests
- Inclinator to mark width of transect strip
- Dictaphones

#### 2.4.3 Sample handling and analysis

##### 2.4.3.1 Harbour seals

Counting from photographs is performed by examination of the series using a computer. Two persons perform individual counts of each locality. In cases of discrepancies exceeding 5% of the two counts, a third independent count is performed.

##### 2.4.3.2 Grey seals

Numbers of grey seals are counted from the pictures. Numbers of observed seals are summed up by sea area and the highest number obtained over the flights or the boat and land surveys in each area is used as the counted population size.

##### 2.4.3.3 Ringed seals

The location data of observations are retrieved from EXIF of aerial photographs, the photos are visually scanned for all seals, and overlapping areas of series of photographs are visually excluded. The data is tabulated, flight transects are segmented into smaller units (5 km segments of observation strip or specially defined spatial grid, e.g. squares of 5 sq.km each) using data treatment software (R-package or GIS tools). Seal densities per square kilometer in each unit, abundance estimate, based on the mean densities and coverage of the ice area together with 95% confidence interval of the estimate are calculated using the standard statistical procedures (Härkönen and Lunneryd 1992).

### 3. Data reporting and storage

All data are secured in databases of the National Center for Environment and Energy, Aarhus University (DCE), the Danish Nature Agency, the Swedish Museum of Natural History in Stockholm, Natural Resources Institute Finland, and the Estonian Environment Agency. Raw data are partially treated before being entered into the databases. After initial processing, all data are publicly available. Data are also reported to the HELCOM Seal Abundance Database.

### 4. Quality control

#### 4.1 Quality control of methods

The development of methods has been done in cooperation among the participating institutions and international partners and represents state of the art in seal monitoring.

#### 4.2 Quality control of data and reporting

For harbour and grey seals, two persons perform individual counts of each locality. In cases of discrepancies exceeding 5% of the two counts, a third independent count is performed. Reporting of data is done in peer-reviewed reports from the relevant institutions.

### 5. Contacts and references

#### 5.1 Contact persons

Denmark, harbour and grey seals, Anders Galatius, [agi@bios.au.dk](mailto:agi@bios.au.dk)

Estonia, grey and ringed seals, Mart Jüssi, [mart.jussi@gmail.com](mailto:mart.jussi@gmail.com)

Finland, grey and ringed seals, Mervi Kunnasranta, [mervi.kunnasranta@luke.fi](mailto:mervi.kunnasranta@luke.fi)

Poland, grey seals, Monika Kosecka, [m.kosecka@dhigroup.com](mailto:m.kosecka@dhigroup.com)

Russia, grey and ringed seals, Mikhail Verevkin, [vermiv@yandex.ru](mailto:vermiv@yandex.ru)

Sweden, grey seals: Olle Karlsson, [olle.karlsson@nrm.se](mailto:olle.karlsson@nrm.se)

Sweden, harbour and ringed seals, Tero Härkönen, [tero.harkonen@nrm.se](mailto:tero.harkonen@nrm.se)

#### 5.2 References

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