



Outcome of the Eleventh meeting of HELCOM Ad hoc Seal Expert Group (SEAL 11-2017)

Table of contents

Agenda Item 1	Adoption of the Agenda	2
Agenda Item 2	Information by the Chair, HELCOM Secretariat and Contracting Parties.....	2
Agenda Item 3	Progress with National Management Plans	3
Agenda Item 4	Monitoring and data collection	3
Agenda Item 5	Work on Baltic Sea harbour porpoise	6
Agenda Item 6	Human induced pressures and management of marine mammals.....	8
Agenda Item 7	Core indicators and other activities under the Seal Expert Group teams.....	9
Agenda Item 8	Evaluation of Recommendation 27/28-2	11
Agenda Item 9	Any other business	11
Agenda Item 10	Outcome of the Meeting.....	12
Annex 1	List of Participants	13
Annex 2	Input from SEAL 11-2017 to the evaluation of accomplishment of HELCOM actions related to marine mammals	15
Annex 3	List of contacts and observers of Seal	16
Annex 4	Terms of Reference for SEAL 12-2018.....	18

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Introduction

0.1 In accordance with the decision of SEAL 10-2016 (Outcome paragraph 11.3), the eleventh Meeting of the HELCOM *ad hoc* Seal Expert Group (SEAL 11-2017), was held on 4–6 October 2017 in Gothenburg, Sweden, at the premises of Sankt Jörgen Park Hotel, Spa and Conference.

0.2 The Meeting was attended by delegations from all Contracting Parties except the EU. The Meeting was also attended by observers from CCB, Nordic Hunter's Alliance and WWF as well as Invited Guests from the Baltic Ringed Seal Foundation. The List of Participants is attached as **Annex 1**.

0.3 The Meeting was chaired by Mr. Anders Galatius, Denmark, Chair of the Seal expert group. Ms. Minna Pyhälä, Associate Professional Secretary and Ms. Jannica Haldin, Professional Secretary, acted as secretaries of the Meeting.

0.4 Ms. Susanne Viker, Sweden, welcomed the participants to Gothenburg on behalf of the host Swedish Agency of Water and Marine Management.

Agenda Item 1 Adoption of the Agenda

Documents: 1-1, 1-2

1.1 The Meeting adopted the Agenda as contained in document 1-1 and 1-2.

Agenda Item 2 Information by the Chair, HELCOM Secretariat and Contracting Parties

Documents: 2-1, 2-2, 2-3, 2-4, 2-5, 2-6

2.1 The Meeting took note of the Terms of Reference for the meeting, adopted by STATE & CONSERVATION 5-2017 (document 2-1).

2.2 The Meeting took note of extracts from recent HELCOM meetings of relevance for Seal (document 2-2).

2.3 The Meeting took note of the final report of the Pilot study on aligning the assessments of Good Environmental Status in the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) / HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) with assessments of favourable Conservation Status in the Habitats Directive regarding status for seal populations in the HELCOM area (document 2-3).

2.4 The Meeting took note of information on the CBD Regional Workshop to Facilitate the Description of Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSA) in the Baltic Sea (document 2-4).

2.5 The Meeting took note of the ongoing work and schedule for HOLAS II to finalize the 2018 'State of the Baltic Sea report' as presented by the Secretariat (**Presentation 1**).

2.6 The Meeting took note of information about aerial estimating of abundance of ringed seals in the Russian part of the Gulf of Finland in April 2017 as presented by Mr. Mikhail Verevkin, Russia (document 2-6, **Presentation 2**).

2.7 The Meeting took note of the following information from the Contracting Parties:

- Denmark: a feeding study has been carried out in cooperation with Sweden, which provided some interesting results on the diets of gray seals in the Western Baltic. An assessment of marine mammal tourism has been carried out.
- Finland has sent an application to LIFE + for a project on southern ringed seals.
- Germany: A project to monitor harbor porpoise for the next 4 years starting in August 2017 has been funded by the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (Aerial visual and digital surveys and acoustic monitoring). A second project was funded for grey seal photo-id to establish a baseline whether the grey seals observed on the German coast show patterns of residency. In the waters of Schleswig-Holstein 1,600 PAL (Porpoise Alert) are handed out to fishermen to be deployed on fishing gear with the aim of reducing harbor porpoise by-catches in bottom set gill net fisheries co-funded through European Maritime and Fisheries Funds (EMFF) and the Ministry of Energy, Agriculture, the Environment, Nature and Digitalisation of Schleswig-Holstein (MELUND).
- Sweden: An international consortium has launched a BONUS project (BaltHEALTH) to look into the status of the Baltic Sea, which will provide relevant information on health status of top predators and food webs. A large new Natura2000 area has been established for the protection of harbor porpoise.

Agenda Item 3 Progress with National Management Plans

Documents: 3-1, 3-1-Rev.1, 3-1-Rev.2

3.1 The Meeting took note of Lithuanian management plans for seals as presented by Ms. Vaida Surviliene (**Presentation 3**), including monitoring activities, rehabilitation activities, compensation plans for fishermen suffering damage caused by seals, as well as development of alternative fishing gears. The Meeting noted that there is currently no operational system for reporting bycaught seals in Lithuania.

3.2 The Meeting took note of the status of national management plans for marine mammals (document 3-1 and 3-1-Rev.1) and updated the information as included in document 3-1-Rev.2.

3.3 The Meeting acknowledged that increasing seal populations inevitably produce more interactions with fishery and increased requests for hunting of seals. The Meeting noted that several countries are in the process of revising their management plans. Some countries are also considering adopting hunting quotas. In order to not over-exploit the populations due to lack of coordination among countries, it would be beneficial to annually report to the HELCOM SEAL meetings hunting quotas and annual hunting figures to a common HELCOM database/ spreadsheet. If data on age and sex structure (or a proxy of age, such as length and weight) is available, this could also be reported.

3.4 The Meeting noted that data on the total hunt and the age and sex structure of the hunt can be used as input for population models comparing the harvest to the annual production. This will provide an estimate of the population effect of the hunt and allow countries to coordinate and adjust the hunting pressure to safeguard viable populations.

3.5 The Meeting requested the Secretariat to add a column entitled “hunting and regulation quotas” to the table in document 3-1 so that the data can be collected starting from next year.

Agenda Item 4 Monitoring and data collection

Documents: 4-1, 4-2, 4-3, 4-4

Database for seals

4.1 The Meeting took note of information on the status of the HELCOM seal database (documents 4-4, **Presentation 4**). The Meeting noted that it is possible to report data at a variety of geographic resolutions and invited Contracting Parties to report data at as high a resolution as possible.

4.2 The Meeting took note of information about the latest data call which is compiling data for the indicator assessments to be included in the update of the State of the Baltic Sea report under the HOLAS II project (document 4-1) and took note of the status of data reported so far (**Presentation 5**).

4.3 The Meeting recalled the HELCOM data policy and its stance on making data publically available (cf. [HELCOM Monitoring and Assessment Strategy](#)), and that, when warranted, it is possible to flag data as restricted. The Meeting noted that public availability of data serves to ensure the transparency of HELCOM assessments.

4.4 The Meeting noted that all government-funded data should, in theory, be made publicly available, and that many EU funded projects require open access to project results and data – although the requirements may differ on a case-by-case basis.

4.5 The Meeting noted that for Finland, there is a need to sign an agreement between HELCOM and LUKE before data can be submitted. The Meeting invited Finland to forward their data agreement template to the Secretariat (joni.kaitaranta@helcom.fi) and requested LUKE and the Secretariat to prepare the agreement so that the data reporting issue can be resolved as soon as possible.

4.6 The Meeting took note of the information on the updated HELCOM Assessment units for the 2018 update of HOLAS II (document 2-5, **Presentation 6**).

Distribution maps for marine mammals for HOLAS II

4.7 The Meeting reviewed the latest version of the distribution maps for marine mammals for HOLAS II, which provide best available information on marine mammal distribution to be used in the 2018 version of the Baltic Sea Impact Index (BSII) (document 4-2, **Presentation 7**).

4.8 The Meeting considered the grey seal distribution map and pointed out that for grey seals, the Bothnian Sea should be corrected so that it reflects “common occurrence and reproduction occurs”. The Meeting noted that there is a need to check the status of Falsterbo with regard to grey seal breeding, and welcomed the offer of Sweden to check the result with Mr. Olle Karlsson, Sweden. Denmark invited Sweden to use their survey data of this area if needed.

4.9 The Meeting considered the harbour seal distribution map and requested that the top third part of the Western Gotland Basin should be cut off. The Meeting also pointed out that the Kiel Bay assessment unit has regular occurrence and should therefore be the same color as the Arkona Basin. The Meeting agreed that the Eastern Gotland Basin area should be reduced since there is no occurrence of the species in the Estonian, Latvia, Lithuanian and Polish waters.

4.10 The Meeting considered the ringed seal distribution seal map and noted that there seems to be an error in the results of Gulf of Finland. The Meeting noted that the status should be very rare in the Baltic Proper.

4.11 Meeting noted that the harbor porpoise map is made according to the SAMBAH results and welcomed the offer of Sweden and CCB to provide comments.

4.12 The Meeting noted that the maps are drawn differently for the different species, but noted that this should not be an issue in terms of the method used to aggregate data for the BSII assessment.

4.13 The Meeting suggested that the definitions of the categories used in the distribution maps should be explained in connection with the maps. The Meeting requested the Secretariat to forward information about the definitions of the categorization to the Contracting Parties.

4.14 The Meeting requested that areas with no (or very rare) occurrence should be indicated on the maps.

4.15 The Meeting requested that the maps should be amended with more easily distinguishable colours.

4.16 The Meeting noted that Limfjorden is part of the HELCOM Kattegat assessment unit and is therefore included in the maps.

4.17 The Meeting invited Contracting Parties to provide any additional comments or amendments concerning the distribution maps to the Secretariat. For this purpose, the Secretariat will produce an online Participatory-GIS (PGIS) survey using the [eHarava survey tool](#). In the survey, distribution for each species are drawn on a map using the web-based map tool. The distribution will be classified in the four classes used in the current maps (very rare occurrence, rare occurrence with no regular reproduction, etc.) with definitions for the classes provided. The survey will be online from **16 October 2017** and Contracting Parties/experts are kindly asked to respond by **23 October 2017** to allow for processing of the data. The Secretariat will provide assistance for filling in the survey, if needed.

Monitoring guidelines

4.18 The Meeting took note that the monitoring guidelines for reproduction status of seals have been published, and are available via the [HELCOM website](#).

4.19 The Meeting considered and discussed the revised monitoring guidelines on distribution and abundance of seals (document 4-3).

4.20 The Meeting noted the information that in Finland the monitoring of grey seals is planned to be reduced to surveys carried out only every other year. The Meeting expressed concern about this, since reduced monitoring has implications to the regional monitoring and data quality, which is the basis for the joint assessments (i.e. the confidence of the assessment results of the core indicator on seal abundance are likely to be reduced). There will also be indirect effects on the quality of the other seal indicators.

4.21 The Meeting noted the concerns of especially Sweden, Estonia and Russia, since such a decision by Finland would undermine the ongoing joint monitoring work to make estimates of population size and trends for grey seals. This will also lead to less reliable estimates of population size and trends, leading to uncertainties in determining sustainable hunting quotas and reporting to Habitats Directive and MSFD.

4.22 The Meeting was of the view that this issue should be discussed at the meeting of State and Conservation 7-2017, and requested the Chair of SEAL EG to forward this concern, on behalf of SEAL EG, to State & Conservation 7-2017 for consideration.

4.23 The Meeting noted the concern of Finland regarding the method used for evaluating abundance (i.e. excluding data from extremely mild winters) and welcomed the offer of Sweden to update the guidelines to reflect the comments by Finland.

4.24 The Meeting noted information about a Polish pilot project that has carried out aerial surveillance of abundance, distribution and pupping seals, using the HELCOM guidelines.

4.25 The Meeting agreed that Sweden, with the support of Finland, will update the guidelines on abundance and distribution of seals to reflect comments from Sweden and the concerns of Finland regarding the methods used for ringed seal in the indicator on abundance and trends **by 13 October 2017**. Finland will provide any comments and/or amendments **by 1 December 2017**. Once agreement has been reached, the amended section of the guidelines will be sent to the SEAL EG contacts for comment **until 7 January 2018** and the amended guidelines will subsequently be submitted to State & Conservation 8-2018 for endorsement.

4.26 The Meeting took note of information by Germany and Sweden that there has been no intersessional progress in updating the guidelines on monitoring reproductive and nutritional status of marine mammals. The Meeting noted that Germany and Sweden plan to arrange an intersessional bilateral expert meeting in the beginning of 2018.

4.27 The Meeting discussed development of a format for submitting telemetry data to the Secretariat pointing out that there is a mistake in the algorithm, which has resulted in data being available via the HELCOM Map and Data Service, which should not be made publically available. The Meeting agreed that telemetry data should continue to be submitted to HELCOM as gridded data (5x5 km), but that the algorithm will be modified to present only aggregated data in the underlying dataset. The Meeting requested Mr. Mart Jussi to submit an updated algorithm for SEAL 12-2018.

Agenda Item 5 Work on Baltic Sea harbour porpoise

Documents 5-1, 5-2, 5-2-Rev.1, 5-3, 5-4, 5-5

5.1 The Meeting considered the list of national contacts for updating the HELCOM/ASCOBANS harbour porpoise database (document 5-2) and updated it as contained in document 5-2-Rev.1.

5.2 The Meeting noted that the last updates to the HELCOM-ASCOBANS harbour porpoise database were received from Sweden in the end of 2016. The Meeting noted also the following information from the Contracting Parties:

- Finland will attempt to update their sightings from 2000-2017 by the end of 2017.
- Sweden has noted a bug in one of their reporting forms and will review previously reported data as well as report new data in the near future.
- Germany will report data from 2012 onwards once the issue of the east-west border (cf. paragraph 5.4) has been resolved.

5.3 The Meeting encouraged the Contracting Parties to report updated information for the database to the Secretariat (minna.pyhala@helcom.fi (before 1 November) or petra.kaaria@helcom.fi (after 1 November)) by using the online [reporting form](#).

5.4 The Meeting recalled the support of the SEAL 10-2016 to the suggestion by Germany on an east-west border for the high and low-density areas of harbour porpoises for collection of incidental sightings for the harbour porpoise database. The Meeting considered the updated proposal contained in document 5-4 and agreed to forward the proposal to State & Conservation 7-2017 for endorsement.

5.5 The Meeting recalled that Germany presented at SEAL 10-2016 a data format for a meta-database on acoustic monitoring. The Meeting noted that reporting format has been updated with the received comments and agreed on the format contained in document 5-5.

5.6 The Meeting considered the draft guidelines for reporting on the implementation of HELCOM Recommendation 17/2 for countries being also ASCOBANS parties (document 5-1), as presented by Poland and endorsed the updated Recommendation 17/2, including the addition of the Guidelines as an attachment.

5.7 The Meeting noted that the current Recommendation covers the entire Baltic Sea and does not reflect the recent information concerning the western Baltic population ICES 21-23. Therefore, the Meeting acknowledged the relevance of updating the Recommendation to better reflect the situation of the Baltic harbour porpoise populations and welcomed the offer of Poland to propose revisions to the Recommendation to the meeting of SEAL 12-2018.

5.8 The Meeting took note of information by Finland that work is ongoing within ASCOBANS to adjust to the reporting format since there is need to define some of the parameters to be reported once the data use has been clarified regarding reporting of 2016 items.

5.9 The Meeting took note of the following information related to Baltic Sea harbour porpoises under ASCOBANS and the Jastarnia Plan as presented by Ms. Penina Blankett, Finland and Ms. Ida Carlén, CCB:

The main topics discussed at the ASCOBANS AC 23 meeting were related to new information on threats to small cetaceans, namely underwater noise, ocean energy, unexploded ordnance, management of cumulative impacts and Marine Spatial Planning.

Regarding the by-catch issue, the meeting noted the open letter on the Regulation on the Conservation of Fishery Resources and the Protection of the Marine Ecosystems through Technical Measures sent from the ASCOBANS AC23. This letter addressed points of special concern, including the proposal to reintroduce drift nets in the Baltic Sea, and called for dedicated, independent and scientifically robust bycatch monitoring and reporting.

The meeting commended the decision by ASCOBANS AC23 to fund a coordinator for the harbour porpoise conservation plans for the Baltic Sea, the Western Baltic and Belt Sea and the North Sea, respectively, and noted that this position will be stationed at the SeaWatch Foundation in the UK.

The meeting encouraged contracting parties to act on the Jastarnia plan action point, and the ASCOBANS AC23 endorsement of this action point, to initiate SAMBAH II to start in 2021.

5.10 The Meeting welcomed the information that Ms. Ida Carlen, CCB, has been elected as the new chair of the Jastarnia Group.

5.11 The Meeting took note of the letter sent to the Chair of the Jastarnia Group of ASCOBANS regarding cooperation for future development of the core indicator on harbor porpoise (document 7-2). The Meeting discussed possible steps to enhance the cooperation with the Jastarnia Group for further development of the core indicator and proposed that it would be useful to have a joint session between HELCOM SEAL and Jastarnia Group members (perhaps back-to-back with the next meeting of the Jastarnia Group to be held on 12-14 March 2018). The Meeting also recommended that the outcomes of the SEAL group discussions related to harbor porpoise should be forwarded to the Jastarnia Group.

5.12 The Meeting took note of information on intersessional work to further develop the candidate indicator 'Harbour porpoise distribution and abundance' as presented by Sweden (**Presentation 8**).

5.13 The Meeting also took note of the following national activities concerning harbour porpoise:

- Denmark: There is a plan for a Danish-Swedish-German project to conduct another mini SCANS survey for harbor porpoise in Kattegat, Belt Sea and the western Baltic in 2019
- Finland: During 2016-2017, data have been collected use C-PODs in the southern parts of the Archipelago Sea and Åland Sea. Also, some sightings have been made during 2017. The results will be reported once the data have been evaluated.
- Germany: In Schleswig Holstein, 1,600 porpoise alert (PAL) systems will be introduced in fishing gear to reduce bycatch, however there are concerns about the impacts on porpoises. They will also have implications on monitoring results, since the devices are likely to be registered as porpoises since they emit similar sounds as porpoises. A project to monitor harbor porpoise for the next 4 years starting in August 2017 has been funded by the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (Aerial visual and digital surveys and acoustic monitoring). A second project was funded for grey seal photo-id to establish a baseline whether the grey seals observed on the German coast show patterns of residency.
- Sweden: A large Natura 2000 site has been established to protect harbour porpoises, and responsible county administrative boards are working on creating a management plan for the area with support from CCB. There are plans for starting a continuous monitoring programme in Sweden. Data collection started in spring 2017. Blekinge county has also initiated coastal monitoring of porpoises. There are also plans to monitor health status.

- Poland: Harbour porpoise hydroacoustic monitoring is being carried out in two Natura 2000 sites. In the Puck's Bay data collection starting in October 2017 and will be continued for one year. In addition, two sites with 10 C-PODs are maintained (24 month period 2016-2018) within "Pilot project on monitoring of marine species and habitats".

Agenda Item 6 Human induced pressures and management of marine mammals

Documents: 6-1, 6-1-Rev.1, 6-2, 6-3

6.1 The Meeting took note of the information on registered mortality of seals during 2008-2016 (document 6-1) and updated the figures as contained in document 6-1-Rev.1.

6.2 The Meeting noted that Denmark will report on mortality data from 2015 and 2016 at the latest at the meeting of SEAL 12-2018.

6.3 The Meeting noted that it seems that when reporting the mortality data, different countries are using different marine areas and was of the view that to make the data more useful, it may in the future be worth discussing harmonizing of the units used by countries for reporting.

6.4 The Meeting discussed how to deal with the current situation where Contracting Parties need to report harbour porpoise mortalities in several places (in the HELCOM/ASCOBANS database and document 6-1). The Meeting noted that the mortality table provides information on bycatch that provides valuable data for the HELCOM pre-core indicator on by-caught birds and mammals whereas the database provides more detailed data on porpoises, which can be used also for other purposes.

6.5 The Meeting was of the view that it would be valuable to collect more detailed geographical data on harbor porpoise mortality and took note of information about activities in ASCOBANS on developing a database for the North Sea area, which collect more detailed autopsy data. The Meeting agreed that multiple reportings of the same data should be avoided, and supported the idea to explore possibilities to harmonize the OSPAR, ASCOBANS and HELCOM data collection.

6.6 The Meeting welcomed the offer of Germany to coordinate work to harmonize the data collection of mortality of harbor porpoises. The Meeting suggested that a proposal should be submitted to the March 2018 meeting of the Jastarnia Group.

6.7 The Meeting welcomed the presentation by Mr. Sven Koschinski, Lead Country representative (Germany) on the pre-core indicator '[Number of drowned mammals and waterbirds in fishing gear](#)' (document 6-2, **Presentation 9**), noting that the indicator was published on the HELCOM website in July 2017.

6.8 The Meeting pointed out that relevant data on marine mammals can be requested from Ivar Jussi (for seals) and Sacha Viquerat (harbor porpoises).

6.9 The Meeting noted that the indicator will not be updated for the HOLAS II 2018 version due to lack of data, but that there are plans to collect more data and add more species to the indicator as data becomes available.

6.10 The Meeting took note of on-going work within the HELCOM FISH group to elaborate an inventory document on HELCOM data needs to assess incidental by-catches and fisheries impact on Baltic Sea biodiversity (document 6-3, **Presentation 9**) and welcomed the initiative.

6.11 The Meeting considered and discussed tables 1 and 2 and felt that in general the proposed information to be collected is relevant and would be needed in order to conduct indicator assessments and fulfill MSFD commitments. The Meeting noted that in order to enable the prioritization of species to be monitored table 2 will be updated based on information on threats to HELCOM Red listed species, which were considered by the recent meeting of FISH Data Interests 1-2017. The Meeting pointed out that it would be important to specify which species are relevant to monitor in which parts of the Baltic Sea.

6.12 The Meeting was of the view that monitoring of bycatch would be most relevant for harbour porpoise but that monitoring of bycatch of seals would also support management of seals in the management units. However, the Meeting noted that several countries considered it unrealistic to collect data on bycaught seals due to e.g. lack of cooperation from fishermen and lack of resources. The Meeting noted that legislation and lack of cooperation by fishermen also make it difficult to deliver bycaught specimens for scientific investigation.

6.13 The Meeting noted that coastal fisheries logbooks could provide relevant information, but noted that currently the EU requirements do not require reporting of bycatch.

Agenda Item 7 Core indicators and other activities under the Seal Expert Group teams

Documents: 7-1, 7-2, 7-3, 7-4, 7-5, 7-6, 7-7, 7-8, 7-8-Rev.1

Marine mammal core indicators

7.1 The Meeting took note of information about the indicator update deadlines during 2017-2018 (document 7-1), defining the **1 December 2017** deadline for indicator evaluations to be complete, and noted that the questions presented in the document have mostly been resolved already.

7.2 The Meeting noted that the HELCOM core indicator '[Distribution of Baltic Seals](#)' was published on the HELCOM website in July 2017, and took note of the main results presented by the lead author, Mr. Tero Härkönen, Sweden (**Presentation 10**).

7.3 The Meeting discussed the process for updating of the core indicator with 2016 data and welcomed the information that Mr. Tero Härkönen is available to work on the update until the end of 2017, and that Mr. Markus Ahola, Sweden, will continue the work in 2018, with support from Denmark.

7.4 The Meeting considered the latest version of the core indicator on '**Population trends and abundance**' as presented by Mr. Tero Härkönen, Sweden (document 7-6, **Presentation 10**).

7.5 The Meeting took note of the concern of Finland that not all ringed seal data are included in the assessment (i.e. data from weak ice years have been excluded) and requested Sweden to clarify the methodology in the core indicator report.

7.6 The Meeting welcomed that Denmark can lift their study reservation if their comments are taken into account and welcomed the willingness of Sweden to update the core indicator accordingly.

7.7 The Meeting agreed on the following procedure for updating the core indicator:

- **By 7 January 2018:** Finland will provide text and figures for the indicator report to the indicator lead (tero.harkonen@nrm.se and markus.ahola@nrm.se) and the Secretariat (owen.rowe@helcom.fi)
- The amendments provided by Finland will then be incorporated in the general update of the indicator reports running from the 2 December 2017 to the 6 April 2018 (cf. paragraph 7.18).

7.8 The Meeting took note of the introduction to the core indicators on **reproductive and nutritional status of seals** as presented by Ms. Karin Hårding, Sweden (**Presentation 11**).

7.9 The Meeting took note of the presentation on impact of food quality, nutritional status, birth rate and hunting pressure on Baltic grey seals as presented by Ms. Kaarina Kauhala, Finland (**Presentation 12**).

7.10 The Meeting took note that experts from Sweden and Germany could unfortunately not secure the aimed progress to further develop health indicators for marine mammals as announced at the HELCOM SEAL 10-2016 meeting. Progress has been made to introduce available data from different areas in a common database and data analyses have been conducted in some areas.

7.11 The Meeting recalled that Sweden is the lead for the health indicators and Germany leads the health team of the Seal group and noted that further cooperation between the countries is needed. They intend to organize an intersessional bilateral expert meeting in the beginning of 2018 and to conduct data analyses and discussion with all countries involved (namely Sweden, Finland, Germany, Poland and Denmark).

7.12 The Meeting took note of the latest version of the core indicator on '**Reproductive status of seals**' (document 7-5). The Meeting set up a drafting group that amended the report according to the requests of State & Conservation 6-2017 (document 7-5-Rev.1).

7.13 The Meeting discussed the results of the core indicator on 'Reproductive status of seals' and noted that the reproductive status for grey seals is currently indicated as not achieving threshold value (red) even though average birth rate is currently more than 90% for the latest four year period. The Meeting was of the view that the indicator should be updated with a shorter assessment period (three years instead of six years) since currently the results provide misleading information that could have consequences for national decisions related to monitoring and management.

7.14 The Meeting discussed the results presented in the core indicator on '**Nutritional status of seals**' (document 7-4) and was of the view that there is a need to further develop the analytical methods used in the indicator to allow for use of all available data.

7.15 The Meeting took note of German concerns with the core indicators on reproductive and nutritional status of seals that they will discuss with their national State & Conservation representatives after the meeting.

7.16 The Meeting took note of the study reservation by Finland on the core indicators on reproductive and nutritional status of seals due to the use of very limited data in the assessment (low confidence) and that they will clarify their position at State & Conservation 7-2017.

7.17 The Meeting discussed the procedure for updating the core indicators and noted that for the current updating round (linked to the update of the State of the Baltic Sea report in June 2018), only the updating of 2016 data and editorial changes can be carried out. The Meeting noted that significant methodological changes and development of indicator methodologies are important but due to lack of time cannot be considered as part of the current update procedure.

7.18 The Meeting agreed that the core indicators should be updated according to the following schedule:

- **by 1 December 2017:** lead authors to update the core indicator assessments (figures and graph based on the latest compiled data) with 2016 results
- **by 23 February 2018:** Lead authors and teams to update the indicator report text to reflect the updated assessment results
- **by 1 March 2018:** Secretariat to submit the updated core indicator reports to SEAL EG contacts for review
- **by 26 March 2018:** Contracting Parties to provide comments to the updated core indicator reports
- **by 6 April 2018:** lead authors to update the core indicator reports based on comments provided by the CPs and final draft to be submitted to the Secretariat in preparation for State & Conservation 8-2017 for endorsement
- **May-June 2018:** publication of the final core indicators in connection with publication of the HOLAS II report.

7.19 The Meeting considered the request for input to the evaluation of accomplishment of HELCOM actions related to mammals (document 7-3) and provided input as contained in **Annex 2** ([Excel file](#) available in the [Meeting document library](#)).

7.20 The Meeting concluded that for harbour seal, grey seal, the northern population of ringed seal and harbor porpoise there is no reason to believe that the populations would not achieve good status should all current measures be implemented. However, the Meeting also concluded that this is not the case for southern ringed seal, as the status of this population is dependent on the availability

of sea ice, which is projected to diminish in the foreseeable future or the Baltic Proper harbor porpoise population, which due to its low abundance is vulnerable even if all measures are implemented.

7.21 The Meeting invited Contracting Parties to provide possible additional information to the Secretariat (jannica.haldin@helcom.fi) by **13 October 2017**.

Activities under the intersessional teams

7.22 The Meeting reviewed the list of contacts of the intersessional work team members and Lead Country representatives (document 7-7) and updated it as contained in document 7-7-Rev.1. The Meeting noted that for changes in the names of core indicator author team members, it may be necessary to request that State & Conservation contacts inform of their national contacts as official nominations.

7.23 The Meeting took note of the report on the activities of the health team as included in meeting document 7-8 and 7-8-Rev.1, presented by the team leader Ms. Ursula Siebert, Germany.

7.24 The Meeting took note of the report on the activities of the population team, including a report on grey seal censuses, presented by the team leader Mr. Ivar Jussi. During the year 2016, the total census number of Baltic grey seals was around 30,000 seals.

Agenda Item 8 Evaluation of Recommendation 27/28-2

Document: 8-1, 8-1-Rev.1

8.1 The Meeting considered the evaluation of effectiveness of a HELCOM Recommendation 27/28-2 'Conservation of seals in the Baltic Sea area' (document 8-1 and 8-1-Rev.1), and discussed work still needed in order to support the full implementation of the Recommendation. The Meeting updated the document as contained in document 8-1-Rev.2.

Agenda Item 9 Any other business

Documents: 9-1, 9-2, 9-3

9.1 The Meeting took note of information by BSAC concerning recent meetings of the new BSAC sub-group on ecosystem-based management (document 9-2).

9.2 The Meeting considered the request of BSAC to inform about known non-lethal mitigation measures for seals and the development of efficient mitigation measures and pointed out that the SEAL expert group's task is not to exclusively work on protection of seals, but rather that the group can provide discussions and information about seal abundance, distribution and health. The Meeting pointed out that alternative gears are being used in various countries around the Baltic Sea and noted that the results compiled via a HELCOM questionnaire on alternative fishing gears was presented at the latest BSAC meeting.

9.3 The Meeting supported the idea of further cooperation between HELCOM SEAL EG and BSAC.

9.4 The Meeting took note of the concern of Estonia and Russia about the lack of information on the reproductive success of ringed seals in the Archipelago Sea, Gulf of Finland and Estonian coastal waters, where they show declining or stable numbers. Seals in the Gulf of Finland are on the brink of extirpation. The scientists in the region see it as important to launch a study to fill this gap of knowledge and the Meeting strongly support such an initiative.

9.5 The Meeting reviewed the list of contacts and observers of SEAL EG (document 9-1) and updated it as contained in **Annex 3**.

9.6 The Meeting considered the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the next meeting of the Group (c.f. sixth bullet point under point 3 [in the Recommendation 27/28-2](#)) and agreed on the draft ToR for

SEAL 11-2017 as contained in **Annex 4**. The Meeting requested the Secretariat to submit the ToR for endorsement by STATE & CONSERVATION 7-2017.

9.7 The Meeting took note of the recent meeting hosts of HELCOM Seal (document 9-3) and welcomed the offer of Estonia to investigate the possibility to host the meeting of SEAL 12-2018. The Meeting requested Estonia to inform on their position at State & Conservation 7-2017.

9.8 The Meeting agreed to organize the next meeting of HELCOM ad hoc Seal expert group, SEAL 12-2018, on 10-12 October 2018.

9.9 The Meeting thanked Mr. Tero Härkönen for his dedicated work with the HELCOM SEAL group over many years and wished him well for his retirement.

9.10 The Meeting thanked Sweden for the excellent arrangements and generous hospitality of the Meeting.

Agenda Item 10 Outcome of the Meeting

10.1 The Meeting adopted the draft outcome of the Meeting. The Outcome of the Meeting, together with the documents and presentations considered by the Meeting are available in the [HELCOM Meeting Portal](#).

Annex 1 List of Participants

Name	Representing	Organization	Email address
Chair			
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Annex 2 Input from SEAL 11-2017 to the evaluation of accomplishment of HELCOM actions related to marine mammals

Document 7-3 requested SEAL 11-2017 to provide input and updates to the evaluation of accomplishment of HELCOM actions related to mammals and incidental by-catch of mammals, which will serve as background information for the 2018 HELCOM Ministerial Meeting.

The 2018 HELCOM Ministerial Meeting will be held on 6 March in Brussels, Belgium. To support the planning of the Ministerial Meeting, a background report is being prepared that summarizes the status of the Baltic Sea and the accomplishment of actions agreed in HELCOM. The report is primarily based on the results of the 'State of the Baltic Sea report, first version 2017' and the national reporting of implementation of HELCOM actions that was carried out in 2016. The national reporting is available in the [HELCOM Explorer](#), a web-based platform that provides information on the implementation of agreements under the Baltic Sea Action Plan and Ministerial Declarations in 2010 and 2013.

The background report for the Ministerial Meeting will include dedicated sections on 'Mammals' and 'Incidental by-catch'.

The input from the SEAL group is contained in an [Excel file](#) in the [Meeting Document Library](#).

Annex 3 List of contacts and observers of Seal

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Annex 4 Terms of Reference for SEAL 12-2018

The Seal expert group will during its 12th meeting, and in the intersessional period leading up to the meeting, do the following:

1. Indicators:
 - a. Mr. Tero Härkönen and Mr. Markus Ahola, Sweden, in collaboration with Mr. Anders Galatius, Denmark, will carry out the updated data calculations for the indicators 'Population trends and abundance of seals' and 'Distribution of Baltic seals' **by 1 December 2017**.
 - b. Sweden, with the support of Finland, will update the core indicator on abundance to reflect the concerns of Finland regarding the methods used for ringed seal **by 13 October 2017**. Finland will provide any comments and/or amendments **by 13 November 2017**.
 - c. Ms. Karin Hårdin, Sweden, in collaboration with the health team, will carry out the data calculations and updated the data for the indicators on Nutritional and Reproductive status of marine mammals **by 1 December 2017**.
 - d. **By 23 February 2018**, lead authors and teams to update the indicator report texts to reflect the updated assessment results.
 - e. **By 1 March 2018**, the Secretariat to submit the updated core indicator reports to SEAL EG contacts for review.
 - f. **By 26 March 2018**, SEAL EG national contacts to provide comments to the updated core indicator reports to the lead authors.
 - g. **By 6 April 2018**, lead authors to update the core indicator reports based on comments received from SEAL EG national contacts and submit the final drafts to the Secretariat for submission to State & Conservation 8-2018 for endorsement.
 - h. The health team will further develop existing, and start developing new, indicators for the health status of seals and porpoises.
 - i. Mr. Sacha Viquerat, Germany, and Ms. Julia Carlström, Sweden, in cooperation with Denmark, Finland, Poland and Sweden, will continue the work on developing the indicator on 'Harbour porpoise distribution and abundance' and report to **SEAL 12-2018**.
 - j. Mr. Sven Koschinski, Germany, in collaboration with Poland and Sweden and supported by the bycatch subgroup, will continue the work on the development of the indicator 'Number of drowned mammals and waterbirds in fishing gears' and report to **SEAL 12-2018**.
 - k. **SEAL 12-2018** is requested to plan the future development of the core indicators.
2. Management plans:
 - a. Review current national management plans and their implementation in light of the Recommendation 27-28/2 as well as the management plan guidelines developed by SEAL 8-2014.
 - b. Review new and updated national management plans, to be circulated for discussion at **SEAL 12-2018**.
3. Database for abundance and distribution data on seals:
 - a. Report data and review the status of the Seal database at **SEAL 12-2018**.
4. Monitoring guidelines:
 - a. Sweden, with the support of Finland, will update the guidelines on abundance and distribution of seals to reflect the concerns of Finland regarding the methods used for ringed seal in the indicator on abundance and trends **by 13 October 2017**. Finland will provide any comments and/or amendments **by 1 December 2017**. Once agreement has been reached, the amended section of the guideline will be sent to the SEAL EG contacts for comment **until 7 January 2018**. The amended guideline will then be presented for endorsement **by State & Conservation 8-2018 on the 23 April 2018**.

- b. Mr. Mart Jussi to inform **SEAL 12-2018** on the progress with updating the algorithm for submitting telemetry data so that only aggregated data is presented.
 - c. The guidelines for monitoring reproductive and nutritional status of marine mammals will be further improved in cooperation between Germany, Sweden and the health team **by SEAL 12-2018**.
5. Additional work on Baltic Sea harbour porpoise:
- a. Information to the HELCOM/ASCOBANS database is to be updated by filling in the [reporting form](#) and sending it to the Secretariat (petra.kaaria@helcom.fi) **in advance of SEAL 12-2018**.
 - b. Nomination of national contacts for updating the HELCOM/ASCOBANS harbour porpoise database to be submitted to the Secretariat (petra.kaaria@helcom.fi).
 - c. Ms. Katarzyna Kaminska, Poland, is invited to submit a proposal for revising Recommendation 17/2 so that it distinguishes between the Baltic Proper and gap area populations and make any other necessary updates, as they are considered within ASCOBANS.
 - d. Review the situation with the reporting form for Recommendation 17/2 based on developments in ASCOBANS at **SEAL 12-2018**.
 - e. Ms. Penina Blankett, Vice-chair of the ASCOBANS AC to report on activities of ASCOBANS and Ms. Ida Carlén, Chair of Jastarnia Group, to report on activities of the Jastarnia Group at **SEAL 12-2017**.
9. Registered mortality of marine mammals
- a. Denmark to report mortality data from previous years from Kattegat **in advance of SEAL 12-2018**.
 - b. All Contracting Parties to provide data on the mortality of marine mammals for year 2017 **in advance of SEAL 12-2018**.
 - c. **SEAL 12-2018** to discuss the harmonizing of the marine areas used by Contracting Parties when reporting mortality data.
 - d. Ms. Ursula Siebert, Germany, to inform **SEAL 12-2018** on the progress within OSPAR and ASCOBANS to develop databases for collecting detailed data (including geographical information) of mortality, necropsies and dead bodies, and to propose how to harmonize the HELCOM data collection with these other initiatives.
10. Marine mammals - fisheries interaction:
- a. Continue discussion on the interactions between mammals and fisheries in cooperation with the HELCOM Fish group.
11. Intersessional activities of the teams
- a. The health team is requested to inform on their intersessional activities **at SEAL 12-2018**.
 - b. The distribution team is requested to inform on their intersessional activities **at SEAL 12-2018**.
 - c. The population team is requested to inform on their intersessional activities **at SEAL 12-2018**.