

HELCOM indicator functionality questionnaire

Additions made during the meeting are highlighted in yellow.

Questionnaire to indicator leads, co-leads, and hosting expert groups.

This questionnaire forms the initial stage in the HELCOM process to evaluate the status of HELCOM indicators and is intended to be filled in in conjunction with the template on indicator overviews. The information gathered in this step will be reviewed at the HELCOM Working Group level and based on discussion at those levels be used to create the defined priorities and follow up work required. This step should thus be seen as an opportunity for HELCOM experts to provide input on both the scientific needs and policy match related to each HELCOM indicator.

The process is overseen by the GEAR working group, in close collaboration with other technical working groups such as State and Conservation, FISH and PRESSURE. The purpose of this process is to evaluate the HELCOM indicator catalogue, to ensure the indicators match the requirements of Contracting Parties and their policy needs, and to plan directed future work on HELCOM indicators. A broader overview is provided in [HOD 54, document 4-5](#).

Please fill in the questionnaire and associated table and return it to the Secretariat (owen.rowe@helcom.fi) by Wednesday 10 October. Please return one completed document per indicator – i.e. a consolidated response from the indicator leads/co-leads and hosting expert group per indicator.

Please complete this questionnaire with clear answers (not just yes or no answers) that provide defined steps or approaches that can be incorporated into future development work on HELCOM indicators. The aim is to define needs for development/adjustment, identify existing gaps and barriers to development, create proposals to fill those gaps and overcome the barriers, and to define approaches to enhance the purpose and functionality of HELCOM indicators.

Please use as much space as needed in response to each question

Practical information: Name, contact email address and role (e.g. indicator lead, on behalf of hosting expert group) of person(s) filling in the questionnaire/

NOTES: This information is provided so that the Secretariat can take contact and discuss or clarify aspects, if needed, during the process.

Name: [Anders Galatius / Markus Ahola](#)

Email address: agj@bios.au.dk / markus.ahola@nrm.se

Role: [indicator co-leads](#)

Question 1: Indicator name and assessment scale (e.g. HELCOM assessment units scale 1-4).

Distribution of Baltic Seals (assessment unit scale 2: subbasin scale)

Question 2: Is this indicator considered to be operational or are their gaps in coverage or improvements required?

This indicator is considered operational

NOTES: Operational indicators are those with agreed threshold values, agreed methodological processes and sufficient data to carry out an indicator evaluation (generally those published on the HELCOM indicator website) and used in the State of the Baltic Sea report. There are some exceptions to this where indicators are tested within the State of the Baltic Sea report and do not meet the criteria above and where indicators are used descriptively in the report but not published on the indicator website.

Question 3: Is the indicator applicable in all areas of the Baltic Sea, and is it applied in all areas where applicable?

This indicator is applied throughout the HELCOM area.

NOTES: Please state exceptions where the indicator is not deemed applicable and inform of areas where it is applicable but currently not applied or not adequately monitored. Please define the areas using clear terms that relate to the [HELCOM Monitoring and Assessment Strategy](#) (see Annex 4). The aim is to determine where focussed development and discussion is needed for each indicator.

Question 4: What is lacking that makes the indicator incomplete (not fully operational)?

NOTES: For example, why is coverage incomplete – due to: data requirements, methodological aspects, resources, defined leads, expert input, lack of agreement on thresholds, or lack of hosting expert group.

Question 5: Please define further work needed to make the indicator fully operational.

NOTES: Please provide practical solutions that would enable progress on this indicator.

Question 6: Please outline a brief plan/suggestion on how to further the work required, and the workload/resources related to this.

Although this indicator is considered operational, the data that support it differ between seal species and regions. In some areas, there are survey data covering moulting season as well as breeding season along with rich telemetry data providing data on offshore distribution. In other areas, the only available data are those derived from the annual moult surveys. In the latter case, there are only data from one short period of the year and the only parameter is distribution on haul-out sites. Another problem is that the monitoring of haul-out sites is designed to yield data on trends in abundance rather than changes in distribution. This means that the norm is to monitor areas and haulouts that are important for abundance. There are no defined criteria for discarding or adding areas/haulouts to the programmes. This means that the sensitivity of the monitoring to detect expansions or contractions of distribution are uncertain.

Changes in monitoring programmes may also have an impact on the data quality underlying future assessments. While current monitoring aims to cover all possible areas of haulouts in the Baltic for grey seals and harbour seals, and possible new haulouts are also searched for some areas with relatively minor importance for estimating both abundance and distribution of grey seals have been not surveyed every year (e.g. Russian side of GoF). However, for example - since 2018

Finland is not surveying grey seals annually, which will create a more extensive gap in the data. The gap is more remarkable in monitoring of the abundance, but also fails to follow regionally variable trends, that can be considered a change in the weight point of the distribution. Southern areas of ringed seal distribution are not surveyed annually due to poor ice-conditions, but open-water survey methods are under development.

NOTES: For the purpose of this plan, please consider the following provisional time frame. The first stream of work would be the operationalization of existing core and pre-core indicators with a target of 2020 (i.e. in advance of the update of the BSAP, 2021). The second stream of work would have a target of early 2022 so that development is completed in advance of the third holistic assessment (timetabled in 2023). This plan would ensure indicator development took place in advance of the assessment and reporting period. An indication of workload and resources (for example hours and costs of the work) will be valuable in defining practical issues when discussed within the HELCOM Working Groups. This plan should be set out as a series of steps or milestones.

Question 7: Please define any obstacles or issues that need to be addressed to ensure successful development/adjustment of the indicator.

Ideally, all species should be monitored throughout their range during breeding as well as moulting. Currently, the indicator is mainly based on information from the haulouts during the moulting time. For the breeding distribution and at-sea components of the indicator, a level of required data in terms of spatial and temporal coverage should be defined and the resulting data gaps should be addressed. Getting this level of data would be costly, but at least an effort could be done to better define the background data for each assessment unit and let the lacking data be reflected in the confidence of the assessments.

There remains a mismatch between these ambitious plans for indicator development and the resources and funding for the work at the expert level, and this is likely the greatest obstacle to the fulfillment of the aims of the programme

NOTES: Please consider major aspects such as: resources required, working arrangements, reviewing within the hosting expert group, known sticking points for development, and data storage and flow issues.

Question 8: Please give a proposal on the most appropriate update frequency for the indicator.

Detecting trends in distribution is not possible on an annual basis. A sensible rate of updating would be in the range of 3-5 years.

NOTES: Please also briefly define the scientific and/or policy reasoning behind the proposed frequency.

Question 9: Is the indicator assessment scale currently applied appropriate?

Ideally, the assessment scale would be at the management unit of the concerned species. However, I realise that this makes integration into higher level assessment tools challenging. Thus, I find that the subbasin scale currently employed has a resolution that is a workable compromise. Some of the subbasin divisions could be redefined to better represent ecologically meaningful areas for seals.

NOTES: Please confirm that the scale is deemed most appropriate by the experts, or if not then what would be more appropriate.

Questions 10 to 15 (inclusive) should consider the indicator in the current state. Where the answer is no, details should be provided on how to adapt the indicator to meet the requirements (i.e. concrete development steps).

Question 10: Please confirm that the pre-filled policy/match table (document 2b. HELCOM Indicator policy match 190918) has been reviewed and that the information provided matches to the lead/co-lead/expert group understanding.

Yes

NOTES: Please see associated table provided and pre-filled by the Secretariat and add any pertinent details that may be required here.

Question 11: Does this indicator suitably address the Baltic Sea Action Plan commitments under which it is assigned? Does it cover all required aspects?

Yes (although the framework for the indicator could be refined, as outlined above)

NOTES: Is the indicator correctly aligned and addressing suitable issues and pressures within the marine environment. Is the policy section (objective/goal) sufficiently addressed.

Question 12: Does this indicator suitably address the EU MSFD related Commission Decision (EU) 2017/848 descriptor and criteria to which it is assigned? Does it cover all required aspects?

Yes (although the framework for the indicator could be refined, as outlined above)

NOTES: Does the indicator in question meet the policy requirements set out. Is the policy section (objective/goal) sufficiently addressed.

Question 13: Does this indicator address the relevant species and compound lists required in association with the Commission Decision (EU) 2017/848? Does it cover all required aspects?

Yes

NOTES: Does the indicator in its current form enable the appropriate integration to be carried out. Is the policy section (objective/goal) sufficiently addressed.

Question 14: Is the indicator established and operational in a way to enable the integration rules associated with the Commission Decision (EU) 2017/848 to be applied? Does it cover all required aspects?

Yes

NOTES: Does the indicator in its current form enable the appropriate integration to be carried out. Is the policy section (objective/goal) sufficiently addressed.

Question 15: Does this indicator correspond with a UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target and indicator? Which SDG target (and SDG indicator) does it address?

We are not familiar with this framework.

NOTES: Does the indicator correspond with an SDG target and indicator and does the HELCOM indicator match the requirements of that SDG target/proposed SDG indicator?

Question 16: Please list this indicator (named in question 1) with other related indicators (e.g. existing candidate) or new proposals, and assign importance (high, intermediate, low) to them.

Distribution of seals should be rated on par with abundance for management purposes. These two aspects complement each other, and knowledge on distribution as well as on regional abundance trends is vital to management decisions. Also relates to other mammal health indicators /these are under development / and bycatch and as a top predator other factors such as pollutants, litter and noise will also be relevant. Noise is likely a potential distribution factor but other factors likely to affect abundance.

NOTES: Consideration for this stage should be given to the following aspects: relevance to policy initiatives (e.g. the BSAP, the MSFD (and new Commission Decision) and the UN SDGs) and to definable scientific or environmental concerns. Importance should be used to define the perceived importance/priority for the development work to follow. Please also define proposals on indicators required to fill gaps identified in the preceding questions and identify to which policy objective/goal each is relevant.

Question 17: What is the most appropriate body (or formulation of institutions/groups) considered most optimal for further development, and are synergies with other organisations (e.g. OSPAR) practical for this named indicator?

The Distribution team of HELCOM SEAL EG is the most appropriate body to work on the refinement of this indicator. This work should be coordinated with OSPAR, where a very similar indicator is used. In the OSPAR area, quality and quantity of supporting data are much more geographically variable than in HELCOM, but the basic challenges are the same.

NOTES: Please define the most appropriate forum for developing the named indicator and determine if cooperative work would benefit this indicator. Please provide practical suggestions and details of the relevant organisations so that these can be considered in the planning process.

Question 18: Please indicate major design and presentation aspects where improvements could be made in the indicator website and template.

A clear statement of the type and amount of data available for each assessment (including a statement regarding data that are not available) would benefit the text. Data format and reporting needs to be reassessed to meet indicator needs, including data calls.

NOTES: Please consider this question in the light of a standardised approach that needs to suit all the indicators, how they are hosted, and how they are accessed.

Question 19: Please comment on aspects where greater/different support from the Secretariat could assist with the process.

NOTES: The Secretariat (and via the indicator planning process) will consider these comments and try to implement aspects that are practical and can be applied to all indicator processes.

Question 20: Any other factors?

This questionnaire indicates a very ambitious plan for refining and updating indicators. In this regard, it must be recognised that funding to devote time and resources to this work is severely limited for most experts, and that ambitions or national need to be adjusted accordingly.

NOTES: Please feel free to add any further information or comments you feel would assist with the process at hand.

Thank you for your time and the valuable information provided.