



Document title	Joint management of grey seal – Danish proposal to HELCOM
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Submitted by	Denmark
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Background

Denmark has submitted a proposal regarding cooperation concerning the management of grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) in the Baltic Sea to HELCOM STATE & CONSERVATION 2-2015 (meeting document 4N-3, paragraph 7J-1) and HOD 48-2015 (doc. 3-11).

STATE & CONSERVATION 2-2015 noted that the proposal was a late document and that national consultations are still required. The Meeting however noted that the existing HELCOM Recommendation 27/28-2 'Conservation of seals in the Baltic Sea Area' in principle covers the issues addressed in the document and noted the information that Polish national management plan for grey seal is now to be finalized.

HELCOM HOD 48-2015 discussed the proposal and noted the information that grey seals are now again breeding in Danish waters resulting in conflicts with local fishermen and a national need to regulate the grey seal population has been identified. The high mobility of grey seals was also presented as a reason for considering a common management plan.

HOD 48-2015 noted the view of Finland and Germany that HELCOM Recommendation 27/28-2 provides sufficient guidance for actions needed at the national level and that a joint management plan is not required in the Baltic Sea and that this view was supported by Lithuania and further noted that Estonia and Sweden supported the proposal by Denmark to mandate the HELCOM Seal Expert Group discuss and follow-up the proposal contained in doc. 3-11.

This document contains the Danish proposal on joint management of grey seal in the Baltic Sea, as it was submitted to STATE & CONSERVATION 2-2015 and HOD 48-2015.

Action required

The Meeting is invited to

- exchange views regarding the Danish proposal for strengthening joint management of grey seals in the Baltic Sea, and
- discuss benefits and potential concerns on e.g. a joint Baltic action plan as well as the way forward concerning this issue.

Further cooperation on the management of grey seals in the Baltic Area

Background

The total population of grey seals in the Baltic Sea has significantly increased since the beginning of the last decade. The population has especially increased in Southern Finnish and central Swedish parts of the Baltic and in the Baltic between Southern Sweden and Denmark. It is estimated that the total population in the Baltic Sea numbers around 40.000 individuals (HELCOM 2012). Out of this population the major part breeds along the Swedish East Coast and in the Finnish Gulf. A minor part of the population (at least 500 individuals) visit the Danish parts, mostly the Baltic Sea around the island of Bornholm. Since 2003 grey seals have started breeding in Danish parts of the Baltic Sea though the annual number of breeding females does not exceed five. In 2015 the first puppet was recorded in the Wadden Sea and it is expected that numbers of breeding grey seals will expand further.

The grey seal (as well as the harbour seal, *Phoca vitulina*) is covered by the EU Habitats Directive annex II, which means that protection requires establishment and management of designated sites for the species, and annex V which means that Member States when considered appropriate can establish protection measures if e.g. hunting or other activities may affect the population negatively.

Each Member State in the EU within their territory is obliged to obtain a favourable conservation status of wild animals covered by these annexes within the biogeographical zones, which the Member State covers. Since there is only a small Danish non-self sustainable population of breeding grey seals, favourable conservation status is not yet obtained in Denmark, although grey seal in other parts of the Baltic Area have a favourable conservation status, despite the fact that the population ecologically can be considered as one population.

New challenges

During recent years increasing seal/fishery conflicts have arisen in the Baltic Sea around the island of Bornholm. Inshore fishermen, who make up a substantial part of the Bornholm-fishing industry, experience losses of their catch and their fishing gear being destroyed by grey seals. Grey seals seem to compete for fish with the fishing industry by eating the cod, salmon and sea trout caught in the fishing nets. As the inshore fishing industry is important for income and employment on the island of Bornholm the damages caused by grey seals have socioeconomic impacts.

Existing measures

The Danish government has in 2005 adopted a management plan for harbour seal and grey seal. The plan addresses measures aimed to protect the seal populations and at the same time reducing potential conflicts with the fishing industry. In 2014 an amendment to the plan provided possibility for culling grey seals under strict conditions.

At the same time, substantial financial support is put into research and development of fishing gear that can reduce damages caused by grey seals. The plan will be revised in 2016 and could feed into a comprehensive Baltic management plan.

Strengthened Baltic cooperation

In line with the recommendations from the Seal Project Group from 2001, and the recommendation 27/28-2 from 2006 that establishes the HELCOM seal expert group and invites the contracting parties to apply general management principles, the Seal Expert group might consider the need for further collaboration on the management of grey seals in the Baltic Sea and in this context discuss the following questions:

- If the recommendations on management cooperation of seals in the Baltic Sea area contained in recommendation 27/28-2 has been fully implemented.
- If the increase of the population of grey seals especially in some parts of the Baltic Sea calls for further cooperation on sustainable management and development of mitigation measures to reduce damage to fishing and fishing gear.
- If further coordination and exchange of national management plans or a joint management plan should be developed