



Document title	Extracts from recent HELCOM meetings of relevance for Seal EG
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Agenda Item	2 – Information by the Chair, HELCOM Secretariat and Contracting Parties
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Background

This document contains extracts from recent HELCOM meetings of relevance for Seal Expert Group, including:

- STATE & CONSERVATION
 - [1-2014](#) (Pärnu, Estonia, 3-7 November 2014),
 - [2-2015](#) (Helsinki, Finland, 11-15 May 2015) and
 - [3-2015](#) (Helsinki, Finland, 9-13 November 2015),
- HELCOM HOD 48-2015.

The topics of relevance for the Seal Expert Group include the following issues:

1. [HELCOM core indicators on marine mammals](#)
2. [HELCOM Recommendations on seals and harbour porpoise](#)
3. [Review and update of HELCOM monitoring guidelines, including guidelines on seal monitoring](#)
4. [Conservation plans for species](#)
5. [Follow-up system of HELCOM agreements and activities](#)
6. [Danish proposal on the management of grey seal in the Baltic Sea](#)
7. [Mapping of landscape and biotopes](#)
8. [Harbour porpoise reporting system](#)

Action required

The Meeting is invited to take note of the information.

Extracts from recent HELCOM Meetings of relevance for SEAL EG

1. HELCOM core indicators on marine mammals

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- considered and discussed the proposed indicators, noting especially the recent developments in the marine mammal indicators, in particular in the outcome of the SEAL 8-2014 expert group meeting the agreement to split the marine mammal indicator into three indicators namely ‘Population abundance and trends of seals’, ‘Distribution of seals’ and a ‘Harbour porpoise’-population indicator. The Meeting also noted the initial work to indicate in which HELCOM Level 2 assessment units the indicators would be applicable for the various species, and for seals noting in particular that national monitoring is to be carried out at haul-out sites and that seals might be present in assessment units that do not need to be monitored nationally if the assessment unit does not contain any haul-out sites.
- took note of the proposed opportunities for cooperation on biodiversity indicators between HELCOM and OSPAR in order to make use of synergies to reach better results with less effort, as presented by the CORESET II Project Manager (**Presentation 11**, document 4J-4). The Meeting welcomed in general the proposed cooperation on biodiversity indicators between HELCOM and OSPAR, including as a means of increasing inter-regional coherence. Regarding the specific proposals on joint working groups the Meeting was of the view that reorganization of the HELCOM marine mammal expert group would be a considerable change compared to the current structure and that this proposal requires careful consideration.

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- took note of the summary of existing data flow arrangement in support of the HELCOM core indicators (document 3MA-1, **Presentation 1**), as presented by the Secretariat. To improve data flow arrangements for status indicators in HELCOM the Meeting agreed to the following, with responsibilities in brackets:
 - develop databases/datahost arrangements for parameters required for core indicators where they are missing (seal, birds, coastal fish, etc.), when possible by mid-2016 (Secretariat with support of relevant projects and in collaboration with relevant EGs)
 - use existing EGs and expert projects in the production and quality check of data products e.g. SEAL EG, FISH-PRO II, JWG Birds, PEG, MORS, ZEN.

Based on the technical review of the indicators, the Meeting agreed on the GES-boundaries and publication of the following core-indicator reports, with the following comments and exceptions in addition to the general study reservations by Denmark and Germany (paragraphs 4J-4 and 4J-5):

Distribution of Baltic seals

The Meeting noted the concern raised by Finland and Sweden regarding the suitability of including ringed seal in the evaluation of distribution since this is currently linked to sea ice coverage and recommended that evaluation of ringed seal could be further considered in the future, and noted that Finland recommended that the evaluation of GES boundary should be based in direct human pressures which affect the distribution under the current ice conditions.

The Meeting noted a Germany study reservation on the indicator and that it will be clarified as soon as possible.

The Meeting recommended to evaluate each species separately, and that possible aggregation of assessment of species should be discussed in the upcoming biodiversity assessment as part of the holistic assessment.

Nutritional status of marine mammals

The Meeting noted that Germany and Sweden cannot accept the GES boundaries and publication of the indicator reports as presented to the Meeting, noting a German study reservation on the indicator.

The Meeting agreed that Germany and Sweden should provide detailed comments by 19 May to the Secretariat (lena.avellan@helcom.fi, ullali.zweifel@helcom.fi) that will be forwarded to the indicator experts with the aim to seek for possible resolution to the concerns raised before the HOD 48 meeting and to report the status of the issue to HOD.

The Meeting recalled the existing recommendation from the SEAL EG not to hunt mammals for the purpose of assessing their status, but that use of data on hunted seals is acceptable.

Population trends and abundance of seals

The Meeting noted the proposal to display trends together with the status evaluation in the key message section.

The Meeting recommended to evaluate each species separately, and that possible aggregation of assessment of species should be discussed in the upcoming assessment of biodiversity as part of the holistic assessment. The Meeting noted that the proposed GES concept could be understood in different ways and requested the authors of the indicator report to clarify that the target reference level is the agreed long-term target in HELCOM.

Germany has already provided respective proposals to the Project Manager Ms. Lena Avellan.

Reproductive status of marine mammals

Same comments and study reservation from Germany as for the indicator on Nutritional status of marine mammals.

The Meeting supported the further development of the core indicators currently lacking GES-boundaries and provided guidance and comments as follows:

Number of drowned mammals and waterbirds in fishing gear

The Meeting agreed on the publishing of the core indicator report.

The Meeting noted the proposal from Sweden to harmonize the concept for target setting with the comparable OSPAR indicator.

The Meeting took note of the work in progress regarding the following candidate core indicators and provided the following guidance:

Harbour porpoise distribution and abundance

The Meeting recommended that the further development of the indicator should consider harmonization with assessments done under the EU Habitats Directive.

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Taking note of the study reservations from Denmark and Germany, the Meeting agreed on indicators and GES-boundaries and further development of the set of indicators as contained in **Annex 4** of the Outcome, including their use in HOLAS II assessment according to the recommendation by the Gear Group (document 3-17), and the publication of agreed core indicator reports at the HELCOM website as they become ready for publishing.

Finland informed that they could not accept that the GES boundary for ringed seals distribution is based on ice coverage as presented to State and Conservation 2-2015 where it was agreed that the issue will require future expert work. The position of Finland on this indicator will depend on the outcome of ongoing consultation among experts.

The following table is an extraction from the HOD 48 Annex 4, including the indicator and GES agreements regarding marine mammal indicators:

Indicator name [link to report on the HELCOM Meeting Portal]	GES-boundary or Environmental Target		Based on HOD 48-2015
Core indicators			
Distribution of Baltic seals	All historically identified and available haul-out sites used and no migration barriers		Agreed on GES Agreed to publish DE: study reservation on GES
Population trends and abundance of seals	Populations at TRL	No decline in population size or pup production exceeding 10% occurred over a period up to 10 years	Agreed on GES Agreed to publish
	Populations below TRL	3% below the maximum rate of increase, i.e. annual rate of increase; 7% for grey seals and ringed seals, 9% for harbour seals.	
	For GES to be achieved the population size of each management unit must in addition be >10,000 individuals.		
Nutritional status of marine mammals	Samples from	Populations at carrying capacity	
	Hunted seals	40 mm blubber	25 mm blubber
	By-caught seals	35 mm blubber	25 mm blubber
Reproductive status of marine mammals	Species	age class [year]	pregnancy rate
	Grey seal	6	90%
	Ringed seal (tentative)	6	90%
	Harbour seal	5	90%
	Harbour porpoise	?	?
Number of drowned mammals and waterbirds in fishing gear	General environmental target concept agreed, no specific boundaries are yet proposed.		Agreed to publish
Candidate core indicators			
Harbour porpoise distribution and abundance			Keep as candidate

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- noted the view by Sweden that the marine mammal health indicators should be split to seals and harbor porpoise and that Sweden will present non-lethal methods for providing data for the marine mammal health indicators to SEAL 9-2015.
- noted the view by Sweden on the need to advance the work on the harbour porpoise indicator.
- noted the information that the German study reservation on the indicators is still valid. However, regarding the indicator ‘Nutritional status of marine mammals’ and ‘Reproductive status of marine mammals’ Germany is willing to discuss the issue at the next meeting of HELCOM Seal EG (SEAL 9-2015).

2. HELCOM Recommendations on seals and harbour porpoise

HELCOM Recommendation 27/28-2 'Conservation of seals in the Baltic Sea Area'

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- recalled that the effectiveness of the Recommendation 27/28-2 *Conservation of seals in the Baltic Sea Area* should be assessed every five years, next time in 2016.
- recommended that this issue should be addressed at the next meeting of the SEAL EG in autumn 2015 and that the group should be requested to provide input for such assessment. The Meeting also requested SEAL EG to evaluate if the EG currently follows-up the Recommendation as a whole or if complementary reporting is required.

HELCOM Recommendation 17/2: Protection of harbour porpoise in the Baltic Sea area

STATE & CONSERVATION 2-2015

- noted the proposal from Poland, the Lead Country on Recommendation 17/2 *Protection of Harbour Porpoise in the Baltic Sea Area*, to report to the next meeting of State and Conservation on the Recommendation as previously done, i.e. to ask ASCOBANS to provide information on countries' activities on harbor porpoise conservation. Those countries that are not part of ASCOBANS will be contacted separately.

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- took note of the ASCOBANS Annual National Reports on the protection of small cetaceans and in particular harbour porpoise and HELCOM Recommendation 17/2 (document 3J-6), as presented by Poland. The Meeting noted that the reporting under ASCOBANS fulfills the reporting requirement of Recommendation 17/2. The Meeting recognized that to facilitate the assessment of accomplishment of HELCOM Recommendation 17/2 it may still be necessary to develop a HELCOM reporting format into which specific components of the reporting to ASCOBANS could be inserted.
- further noted that ASCOBANS is currently revising national reporting formats on harbour porpoise and suggested that ASCOBANS would consider taking HELCOM requirements into account in the revision.
- invited SEAL 9-2015 to discuss how to organize reporting for the countries that are not parties of ASCOBANS and welcomed the offer from Poland to develop a draft HELCOM reporting format and submit it to SEAL 9-2015 for their consideration.
- agreed to finalize the discussion on the reporting for the Recommendation at State and Conservation 4-2016.

3. Review and update of HELCOM monitoring guidelines, including guidelines on seal monitoring

STATE & CONSERVATION 1-2014

- took note of the presentation by Mr. Mart Jussi, representative of the HELCOM *ad hoc* SEAL Expert Group, on the proposed guidelines for seal abundance monitoring in the HELCOM area as contained in document 3N-1 (**Presentation 3**). The guidelines have been produced by the seal experts of the EU co-funded BALSAM project Work Package 3: Seals and seabirds and the HELCOM *ad hoc* SEAL Expert Group.
- welcomed and adopted the methods for seal abundance monitoring in the HELCOM area as contained in document 3N-1, with the understanding that in specific cases ship based monitoring should be possible as for example conducted in Germany.
- noted that the guidelines for monitoring of seal abundance will be included into the HELCOM Monitoring Manual and published on the HELCOM website.
- noted that the guidelines for seal abundance monitoring will be regularly reviewed and can be adjusted in the future if need arises.
- discussed how to proceed with review and revision of the COMBINE manual, including the updating of existing HELCOM monitoring guidelines as well as development of new guidelines for topics where

guidelines are incomplete or lacking. The Meeting proposed that existing expert groups (SEAL, MORS EG) and projects (FISH-PRO II, PEG, ZEN QAI, PLC) should be used as far as possible for this work.

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- took note of the suggestion for a template for HELCOM monitoring guidelines (document 2MA-2), welcomed the proposed template, clarified that quality control of guidelines should be specific for a monitoring guideline in question, and agreed on using the template for harmonization of HELCOM monitoring guidelines.
- proposed that the Seal Expert Group will be consulted in the development of guidelines for the reproductive status of marine mammals.
- noted that some monitoring sub-programmes are still lacking a Lead country, invited the Seal Expert Group to consider monitoring guidelines for harbour porpoise abundance and encouraged the Contracting Parties to take on the lead for the sub-programme on hard-bottom species.

4. Conservation plans for species

STATE & CONSERVATION 2-2015

- took note of the information by Germany that work is ongoing on a national conservation plan on harbour porpoises, with the aim of adoption in 2015 and by Poland that national regulations related to recreational fishing of salmon and sea trout have been prepared. The Meeting took note of the information by Poland that additionally eel management plan for the Pregola river basin has been prepared together with Russia.

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- took note that Poland has recently adopted a conservation programme for harbour porpoise.

5. Follow-up system of HELCOM agreements and activities

STATE & CONSERVATION 2-2015

- welcomed the new follow-up system for HELCOM agreements (document 5J-1, **Presentation 11**), as presented by the Secretariat and noted that the next follow-up of HELCOM agreements is planned to be carried out in autumn 2015. The Meeting further noted that once the system is agreed on, a reporting template with relevant guidance will be developed by the Secretariat.
- scrutinized Annex 1 of the proposal as contained in document 5J-1, and proposed that:
 - the action *Finalization and implementation of national management plans for seals* could be suggested to be taken up by the SEAL EG,
 - noted in relation to the action *Protect the ringed seal in the Gulf of Finland, ..., and URGE transboundary co-operation between Estonia, Finland and Russia to support achieving a viable population of ringed seals in the Gulf of Finland* that scientific cooperation between Finland, Estonia and Russia is ongoing on the matter and will be reported at the annual SEAL EG meeting.
 - the action *Evaluation of the effectiveness of existing technical measures to minimize of by-catch of harbour porpoises* could be taken forward in cooperation with ASCOBANS/Jastarnia group,
 - for the action *Take decisive action to work towards a favourable conservation status of the harbour porpoise based on implementation of the CMS ASCOBANS Jastarnia Plan for the harbour porpoise in the Baltic Sea, in particular by addressing the pressing problem of by-catch status and bycatch for harbour porpoise* should be assessed separately

6. Danish proposal on the management of grey seal in the Baltic Sea

STATE & CONSERVATION 2-2015

- took note of the proposal from Denmark regarding cooperation concerning the management of grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) in the Baltic Sea (document 4N-3, paragraph 7J-1). The Meeting noted that it 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. The Meeting noted the information that Polish national management plan for grey seal is now to be finalized
- Denmark invited the Contracting Parties to present their view on the issue by HOD 48-2015.

HOD 48-2015

- discussed issues related to the management of Grey Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) in the Baltic Sea (doc. 3-11) and the proposal by Denmark to develop a joint management plan of grey seals. The Meeting 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.
- 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.
- noted that Estonia and Sweden supported the proposal by Denmark to mandate the HELCOM Seal Expert Group to discuss and follow-up the proposal contained in doc. 3-11.

7. Mapping of landscape and biotopes

STATE & CONSERVATION 3-2015

- took note of the reported national metadata on biotopes, as presented by the Secretariat (document 6J-1) and the available data for development of distribution maps for non-benthic species (document 6J-2) and discussed for which habitats, biotopes and species HELCOM should aim to develop Baltic-wide maps, as a first step to support assessments under the HOLAS II project.
- proposed that when developing maps for non-benthic species (document 6J-2), the focus would be on the distribution or functional habitats for harbor porpoise, seals, selected birds and fish species and recognized the need to collect new data and information to support the development.

8. Harbour porpoise reporting system

HOD 48-2015

- took note of the information from Sweden on a smart phone friendly pilot Citizen's reporting system for alien species & harbour porpoise developed and the comment by Finland on a similar system hosted by SYKE for reporting alien species. SYKE was encouraged to be in contact with the Swedish authorities.