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Agenda Item	3J – HELCOM indicators and assessments
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Submitted by	Mammal Health Team (Germany and Sweden)
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Background

The seal/mammal health indicators and work of the Health Team were discussed at SEAL EG 12-2018 ([Outcomes paragraph 3.8-3.9 and Annex 3](#)) with the Meeting welcoming the information that Germany is willing to lead the work on developing new health indicators and support Sweden in other activities within the Health Team. A drafting group developed a brief plan for the Health Team and associated work (Annex 3 to the SEAL 12-2018 meeting outcome) which focused on developing a strategy for the plans and work of the team, which is to be presented to State and Conservation, and includes four major aspects to consider:

1. Further development of existing core indicators.
2. Work on new mammal health indicators.
3. Complete indicator questionnaire – **DONE**.
4. Further develop monitoring guidelines for relevant indicators.

The country lead for the seal reproductive status and nutritional status indicators (Sara Persson, Sweden) and the proposed target organ health indicators for seals and porpoises (Ursula Siebert, Germany) met in Turku on 2 April, 2019, together with Kristina Lehnert (Germany) and Owen Rowe (HELCOM secretariat), to discuss general issues and consider a suitable work programme and time line.

There was a general agreement that the two existing seal health-related indicators (reproductive status and nutritional status) are important and could be adapted to better incorporate data from as wide a spatial area in the Baltic Sea as possible, and that the text can be adjusted to clearly reflect potential confounding issues when making assessments regarding health (e.g. such assessments are indicative but rarely inform on every aspect of 'health'). It was acknowledged that to incorporate seals from more southerly populations significant work will be involved to develop appropriate threshold values (nutritional status), and that work is required to ensure harmonization of methodologies when assessing reproductive status.

Discussion related to other mammal health indicators concluded that these should also be developed, and that a single target organ approach should ideally be developed to provide the best regional assessment. Furthermore, it was noted that building a cluster of relevant and complementary indicators, each indicative of different mammal health aspects, would provide the opportunity to establish a better overall health assessment (e.g. by an integration of multiple independently assessed variables). A number of possible approaches were discussed, with an initial assessment acting as a proof of concept which will be steadily expanded as spatial and temporal data availability increases, potentially supported by an assessment of confidence to guide monitoring towards defined best practices. To further support these developments other aspects, as detailed in this document, such as the further development of HELCOM Monitoring and

Assessment Guidelines to detail best practices, and the sharing of expertise through hands on practical sessions to harmonize approaches regionally, will also be of relevance.

The leads from Sweden and Germany agreed that they will start to work on updating the monitoring guidelines directly and distribute the suggested revisions to the whole health team before the end of May 2019 for additional comments. Issues which need further discussion will be on the agenda for a physical meeting of the health team (see below).

A number of other relevant issues were raised such as the need for an improved database solution designed to accommodate the relevant data for these work themes and how together this cluster of indicators would better represent an overall assessment of 'health' in the future.

As there are several international meetings planned in June (e.g. ASCOBANS/ACCOBAMS stranding protocol meeting, HELCOM FISH WG, Marine Mammal Health Index Workshop) from which the outcomes are of importance for the HELCOM Mammal Health Team. It was agreed to hold a physical meeting for the whole Health Team on the 14th to 15th of August 2019 in Büsum, Germany. A "save the date" will be sent out by Germany shortly.

This meeting will also include some practical exercises, with the aim to harmonize assessments on the reproductive organs and target organs and thereby develop expertise and support harmonized and appropriate monitoring across the Baltic Sea region.

This time plan for will ensure that development on the indicators has been advanced and that draft versions of the monitoring guidelines have been updated for review at the EG MAMA meeting that starts on 24 September, 2019.

Action requested

The Meeting is invited to

- take note of the update provided.
- provide any comments to guide the future work of the group.

