



Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission

Intersessional Meeting of the Working Group on the State
of the Environment and Nature Conservation

STATE & CONSERVATION
13E-2021

Online, 2 March 2021

Outcome of the Intersessional Meeting of the Working Group on the State of the Environment and Nature Conservation (STATE & CONSERVATION 13E-2021)

Introduction

0.1 In accordance with the decision by STATE&CONSERVATION 13-2020 (paragraphs 4J.25, 4J.68, 3N-20 and 3N.21 of the outcome), the intersessional meeting of the State and Conservation WG (STATE & CONSERVATION 13E-2021) on development of marine mammal indicators was held as an online Meeting on 2 March 2021.

0.2 The Meeting was attended by delegations from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Sweden, as well as observers from Coalition Clean Baltic and Nordic Hunters Alliance. The List of Participants is contained as **Annex 1**.

0.3 The Meeting was chaired by Ms. Marie-Louise Krawack (Denmark), co-Chair of the State & Conservation Working Group. Ms. Jannica Haldin, HELCOM Professional Secretary and Ms. Laura Kaikkonen, HELCOM Associate Professional Secretary, acted as secretaries of the Meeting.

Agenda Item 1 Adoption of the Agenda

1.1 The Meeting adopted the Provisional Agenda, as contained in document 1-1.

Agenda Item 2 Progress and development of marine mammal indicators

2.1 The Meeting took note of the provisional timelines related to HOLAS III as presented by the Secretariat (document 2-1).

Item 2.1 Seal abundance and distribution

2.2 The Meeting took note of development in the Distribution and abundance of Baltic Seals indicators as presented by the Chair of EG MAMA and that the indicator review process following HOLAS II, and the consequent topic specific indicator workplan, outlined no foreseen changes to the indicator for HOLAS III. As a consequence, no development work has taken place.

2.3 The Meeting took note that expanding the scope of the distribution indicator to include e.g. foraging distribution of seals or breeding distribution for grey seal would require additional data, such as telemetry data, not currently available to support an indicator. However, should the monitoring be expanded to include monitoring of distribution outside of haul-outs further development of the indicator should be possible.

2.4 The Meeting took note that Sweden sees a possible need adjustment of the existing threshold values for grey seal, particularly as to the scientific basis for setting the threshold values for abundance and the interaction between the number of individuals and the growth rate when approaching carrying capacity.

2.5 The Meeting recalled that establishing the abundance indicator was a long and complex process and agreed that any changes to the threshold values should be considered at a STATE & CONSERVATION level before EG MAMA commences a revision process, to ensure that there is regional support for such an effort. The Meeting invited Sweden to prepare a document supported by the leads and co-lead to function as a basis for further considerations and discussion at STATE&CONSERVATION 14-2021.

2.6 The Meeting discussed challenges in identifying the precautionary approach level before target reference level is reached. The Meeting took note that all the factors affecting seal abundance are not fully understood, with a certain degree in error variation in the monitoring surveys, which make it difficult to assess the temporal developments, requiring several years of monitoring data before conclusions can be drawn (see also Agenda item 3).

2.7 The Meeting took note that, while not yet fully supported by the monitoring data it is the expert opinion that there is some level of density dependence visible in Baltic grey seal populations, however this is convoluted by the so far slow rate of re-establishment of seals in the southern Baltic and local factors affecting the carrying capacity of the environment, through e.g. locally varying food availability. The Meeting further took note that when combined with variation in the survey methods, it is hard to tell the source of variation in the population size.

Item 2.2 Harbour porpoise abundance and distribution

2.8 The Meeting took note of the progress on harbour porpoise distribution (document 2-2) and abundance indicators and what is expected to be achieved by HOLAS III (document 2-3, [presentation 1](#)).

2.9 The Meeting discussed using national monitoring data for assessment and acknowledged that an issue for acoustic monitoring data is that CPs are collecting data in different formats. The Meeting welcomed the information that the HELCOM DataFlow project has been working together with the EG MAMA Harbour Porpoise Team to identify a suitable data format for reporting acoustic data to HELCOM, however, acknowledged that regretfully there will be no time to reprocess the existing data in time for HOLAS III. The Meeting took note that the SAMBAH II project will aim to create a regionally harmonized procedure for inclusion in the monitoring guidelines.

2.10 The Meeting took note that the common data format for harbour porpoise data is about to be finalized and will likely be ready in March and will be included in the upcoming HELCOM HOLAS III data. The developed data format is generally flexible and allows for heterogeneity between countries, noting that it is important to inform how data has been collected and processed.

2.11 The Meeting acknowledged that in case if SAMBAH II is not funded, the issues of how to develop data collation and harmonization will need to be addressed within EG MAMA and STATE&CONSERVATION to secure necessary funding.

Item 2.3 Mammal health status indicators

2.12 The Meeting took note of reproduction and nutritional status of marine mammals indicator (document 2-4, [presentation 2](#)).

2.13 The Meeting discussed how much time would be needed for the modeling work to advance indicator development. The Meeting invited the lead to include resource estimates in the updated document on the indicator which will be submitted to STATE&CONSERVATION 14-2021.

2.14 The Meeting acknowledged that it is unlikely that a fully revised and newly developed indicator will be ready for HOLAS III and that proposals for what kind of information will be available for inclusion in HOLAS III will be decided at the next health team meeting and presented for consideration to STATE&CONSERVATION 14-2021. It was anticipated that an expanded version (i.e. spatial coverage and species coverage) of the approaches applied in HOLAS II would be a minimum expectation by HOLAS III.

2.15 The Meeting noted that the current indicator development has targeted mainly grey seals but that in the future the intention is to expand the work to also include other seals and harbour porpoise.

2.16 The Meeting took note of the status of the health of marine mammal indicator (document 2-6).

2.17 The Meeting took note that the Health Team has planned to organize a workshop focused on parameter harmonization which has yet to take place due to Covid-19 restrictions. The focus of the workshop will be on practical exercises on necropsies on different marine mammals for indicator development, and future work will focus for harmonizing the protocol and data collection.

Item 2.4 Mammal by-catch indicator development

2.18 The Meeting took note of progress in bycatch indicator with regards to marine mammals (document 2-5, [presentation 3](#)).

2.19 The Meeting discussed possible thresholds to be proposed to STATE & CONSERVATION. The Meeting took note that the development is based on the proposals from the joint OSPAR/HELCOM workshop on bycatch, and that some of the work stemming from the workshop is still under development. The Meeting took note that further work could address calculating the potential-biological-removal (PBR) values with different, Baltic and species-specific conservation objectives, thus supporting the establishment of Baltic and species-specific threshold values.

2.20 The Meeting took note that work on the bycatch indicator will progress under the HELCOM BLUES project.

2.21 The Meeting took note that the planned SAMBAH II project has action on targeting fisheries, with an aim to map out fisheries effort and relate to this to harbour porpoise to create bycatch risk maps.

Item 2.5 Data developments related to mammals

2.22 The Meeting took note of information on the progress of improving and establishing data flows for marine mammals under the HELCOM DataFlow, Baltic Data Flow and HELCOM BLUES projects, as presented by the Secretariat. The Meeting took note that the details of the HOLAS III data call concerning data that will feed into indicators in HOLAS III were approved in HOD-59 meeting.

Item 2.6 General

2.23 The Meeting discussed integrating indicators to ensure a balanced and transparent assessment, e.g. how much weight to assign to different criteria in the assessment and how to deal with different levels of indicators and the use of the BEAT tool for producing integrated assessments for species groups, e.g. seals.

2.24 The Meeting discussed how to approach integrating threshold values (e.g. OOA), and the possible need for weighing thresholds, e.g. for some indicators currently 3 different qualitative thresholds are used, and their integration could be clarified. whether integration should be done at a species level, e.g. in a way that abundance and distribution would be linked within the species rather than aiming for a universal approach for weighing and linking indicators, as different species have varying levels of data to be used within the indicators.

2.25 The Meeting took note of that the indicator leads would benefit from a more in depth understanding of the technicalities of the BEAT tool and the integration in order the better consider this aspect in the further development.

2.26 The Meeting noted the issue of challenges in defining the share of the various populations to national waters for the purpose of reporting, i.e. the MSFD requires regional coordination and that assessment of status is done at an ecologically relevant scale while the Habitats Directive (HD) requires reporting on the national share of a population. For reporting there is a requirement to coordinate MSDF with HD, yet the differing scales may be reflected in the results.

2.27 The Meeting emphasized the importance of congruent outcomes from MSFD and Habitats directives at ecologically relevant scales.

2.28 The Meeting took note of the information by Germany that where useful and possible results of national assessments for the reporting under the Birds- and Habitats Directives are used unchanged for MSFD reporting.

2.29

Agenda item 3 Precautionary Approach Level for seal populations

3.1 The Meeting considered the overview on setting the PAL for seal (document 3-1), outlining the options for setting PAL levels and the caveats associated with these solutions.

3.2 The Meeting took note that at the request of State and Conservation WG the issue was addressed at EG MAMA 14-2020 and reported to S&C 13-2020, however, the meeting identified that there is a need for more in-depth discussion.

3.3 The Meeting took note of the conclusion that currently PAL can only be set retrospectively and highlighted that this impairs both the functionality of the Recommendation 27-28/2 and its use for active management purposes.

3.4 The Meeting discussed what is needed for implementing the option 2) on Modelling of population growth trajectories as presented in document 3-1. The Meeting took note that the early descriptions of the PAL did not fully consider that the theoretical maximum seal population size does not directly translate to reality, as there are many local and temporal variations that must be take into account.

3.5 The Meeting took note that currently the best available methods are used in monitoring. The underlying challenge with regard to improving population and distribution estimates is that seals are only available for monitoring during moulting period, which does not correspond to the total number of seals.

3.6 The Meeting took note that methods are under development to improve monitoring of seal abundance, including equipping monitoring stations with cameras and making use of telemetry studies to support abundance studies.

3.7 The Meeting took note that collecting more data to support better understanding of PAL would require substantial financial contributions.

3.8 The Meeting further acknowledged that at present EG MAMA does not have capacity to improve the approach.

3.9 The Meeting acknowledged the need to better outline what is needed to operationalize PAL in terms of time, funding, or changes in monitoring, as this is a central issue for the implementation of Recommendation 27-28/2.

3.10 The Meeting acknowledged the need to raise discussion on PAL with STATE&CONSERVATION 14-2021 before the next EG MAMA meeting and invited the relevant EG MAMA experts to produce a more detailed document for STATE&CONSERVATION 14-2021 explaining the issue, with a description of what is realistically needed to operationalize PAL. In addition, the document should outline on the pros and cons for the two different approaches for defining the PAL threshold for the three Baltic seal species to obtain further guidance on where to go with these thresholds. For a project from the HELCOM science agenda, EG MAMA was asked to consider possible content for a feasibility study or project to model the PAL without knowing the carrying capacity.

Agenda Item 4 Any other business

4.1 The Meeting took note of information that Germany had presented at EG MAMA 14-2020 a planned screening study on hazardous substances in marine mammals. Six contracting parties had indicated their interest to participate in the screening study and to provide tissue samples from marine mammals. After the MAMA meeting, Germany had distributed guidance on sample requirement and shipping instructions for pooled liver samples of marine mammals. During a following WebEx meeting with the nominated contact persons, questions regarding the sample requirement and shipping instructions were answered. The samples were needed as soon as possible. Until now, only samples from PL and DE have been provided and sent by courier to Athens for screening. DK, SE and FI are still in the process of checking their possible samples. The Baltic Republics have no stored marine mammals available and wait for seals from bycatch

and hunting. In order to perform a successful project and link pollution with hazardous substances to the health status of marine mammals.

4.2 The Meeting took note that Germany invites the contracting parties to provide their samples as soon as possible to the contractor in Athens and to inform Anita Künitzer (anita.kuenitzer@uba.de) by when they can provide the pooled liver samples.

4.3 The Meeting took note that meanwhile also Sweden has delivered samples.

4.4 The Meeting took note of the consideration by EG MAMA 14-2020 on the adequacy for MPAs in protecting seals as raised by STATE&CONSERVATION 11-2019 and that while it is fairly straightforward to produce an overview of the overlap of MPAs and haul outs, without improved information on other distribution, e.g. through telemetry, it is not possible to provide an adequacy assessment.

4.5 The Meeting took note that Sweden is answering the EU inquiry on the adequacy of Natura 2000 sites for grey seals by overlapping seal distributional data with N200 site, improving surveys and involving seal pup surveys which covering entire Baltic coast of Sweden, including both molting and breeding haul outs.

4.6 The Meeting took note of the information by Germany that as former lead of the distribution team it had conducted a comprehensive assessment on the overlap between grey seal haul-out sites and MPAs in the Baltic Sea and had presented the results to SEAL 3/2009 (Docs 5.1 and 5.2). This approach could be considered for a corresponding study with more recent data.

4.7 The Meeting took note of information that Poland has carried out aerial surveys from February/March to late August for almost 3 years, and as a result of the evaluation these surveys, will continue molting and breeding monitoring only on the haul outs.

4.8 The Meeting took note of information that Poland has carried out aerial surveys from February/March to late August for almost 3 years (2016-2018) within the frame of State Monitoring Programme, and as a result of the evaluation these surveys, will continue molting and breeding monitoring only on the haul outs (since 2019).

4.9 The Meeting took note that similarly in Germany aerial surveys are carried out during pupping and molting season over whole coastline in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

4.10 The Meeting discussed the use of citizen science in monitoring marine mammals. The Meeting took note that for instance, the German oceanographic museum collects sightings from the public, with more the two thousand sightings per year. The Meeting took note that WWF are planning to conduct a project to collect sightings of marine mammals all over the Baltic.

4.11 The Meeting further took note that SAMBAH II aims to develop recommendations on what kind of data should be collected for citizen observation of harbour porpoise to enable collating data from different sources via different applications.

4.12 The Meeting recalled that incidental sightings of harbour porpoises are stored in the HELCOM-ASCOBANS database within the HELCOM biodiversity database. The Meeting took note that while reporting from the contracting Parties has not been very complete in the recent years, all currently reported data are found in the Biodiversity database.

4.13 The Meeting took note of planned further work on seal-fish-parasite interactions planned under EG MAMA as discussed in EG MAMA 14-2020 and included in the ToRs for EG MAMA 15-2021.

4.14 The Meeting recalled that STATE&CONSERVATION 11-2019 had emphasized a need to collect and collate more precise information on bycatch and illegal killing of marine mammals.

4.15 The Meeting took note that there is variation between CPs on what kind of mortality data it is possible to obtain. For instance, in the Finland and Sweden most dead seals never end up in places where can be found, and the ones that are found represent only a small fraction of the total numbers. In turn, the

situation is very different in the southern Baltic coast, where carcasses more often wash up to the sandy beaches.

4.16 The Meeting took note of information from the Secretariat that the indicator development will be revisited in the STATE&CONSERVATION 14-2021, and that indicator leads will be invited to update the information provided to this meeting, where considered relevant. A template, based on the and more detailed indicator workplans, will be provided by the Secretariat. The Meeting invited the indicator leads to, wherever possible, provide time/resource estimates for the outlined work in order to improve the chances to secure resources.

Agenda Item 5 Outcome of the Meeting

5.1 A draft outcome was prepared by the Secretariat and adopted via correspondence.

Annex 1. List of participants

Name	Name of organization	E-mail address
Contracting Parties		
Denmark		
Marie-Louise Krawack	Ministry of Environment and Food	makra@mim.dk
Anders Galatius	Aarhus University	agj@bios.au.dk
Lotte Knudsen	Danish EPA, Ministry of Environment of Denmark	lotkn@mst.dk
Signe Sveegaard	Aarhus University	ssv@bios.au.dk
Finland		
Olli Loisa	Turku University of Applied Sciences	olli.loisa@turkuamk.fi
Germany		
Anita Gilles	University of Veterinary Medicine Hannover, Foundation	anita.gilles@tiho-hannover.de
Dieter Boedeker	German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN)	dieter.boedeker@bfm.de
Farina Reif	German Oceanographic Museum	farina.reif@meeresmuseum.de
Juliane Wendt	State Agency for Environment, Nature Conservation and Geology MV	juliane.wendt@lung.mv-regierung.de
Linda Westphal	German Oceanographic Museum	linda.westphal@meeresmuseum.de
Kristina Lehnert	Institute of Terrestrial and Aquatic Wildlife Research	kristina.lehnert@tiho-hannover.de
Lithuania		
Vaida Surviliene	Vilnius University	vaida.surviliene@gmail.com
Poland		
Michal Malinga	Chief Inspectorate of Environmental Protection	michal.malinga@gmail.com
Magdalena Kamińska	Chief Inspectorate of Environmental Protection	m.kaminska@gios.gov.pl
Russia		
Mikhail Verevkin	Saint-Petersburg Research Centre of Russian Academy of Sciences	vermiv@yandex.ru
Sweden		
Norbert Häubner	Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management	norbert.haubner@havochvatten.se
Sara Persson	Swedish Museum of Natural History	sara.persson@nrm.se
Kylie Owen	Swedish Museum of Natural History	kylie.owen@nrm.se
Markus Ahola	Swedish Museum of Natural History	markus.ahola@nrm.se
Observers		
Ida Carlén	Coalition Clean Baltic	ida.carlen@ccb.se
Hans Geibrink	Nordic Hunters Alliance	hans.geibrink@jagareforbundet.se
HELCOM Secretariat		
Jannica Haldin	HELCOM Secretariat	jannica.haldin@helcom.fi
Laura Kaikkonen	HELCOM Secretariat	laura.kaikkonen@helcom.fi
Owen Rowe	HELCOM Secretariat	owen.rowe@helcom.fi
Joni Kaitaranta	HELCOM Secretariat	joni.kaitaranta@helcom.fi

