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Baltic MPAs

A rich and unique sea

The Baltic is a truly unique sea and the second-largest brackish-water sea in the world.

It is also relatively young - app. 10.000 years - and showing an extreme salinity gradient from the North Sea to the Bothnian Bay. The species diversity is relatively low and the flora and fauna show a marked decrease in species number with the decrease in salinity. Despite its relatively low species numbers, the brackish conditions together with its unique and diverse habitats makes the Baltic a rich and valuable sea both ecologically and economically. It is also one of the most productive seas in the world. The sea plays a role as an important wintering area and migration corridor for many birds on a global scale.

The archipelagos with thousands of islands and hard bottoms form the habitat for algal communities, providing feeding and breeding grounds for fish, three seal species and vast numbers of sea birds. Soft bottoms, large cold-water lagoons and submerged sandbanks offer good conditions for rich bottom dwelling life forms, fish and sea birds. In the Kattegat - close to the North Sea - bubbling reefs at depths of no more than 12-20 meters form habitats found nowhere else on earth.

The problem

Due to the extreme water retention time of app. 30 years in average and the huge pollution in the catchment area, the Baltic Sea is one of the world's most polluted seas. Overfishing and bycatch have reduced cod and salmon stocks and brought the harbour porpoise to near extinction. Baltic Sea habitats and species are threatened by the effects of eutrophication, hazardous substances, fishing and shipping. Also physical exploitation and invasive species pose an increasing threat to ecosystems and biodiversity. The fact that the Baltic ecosystem depends on so few species makes it extremely vulnerable. The disappearance of a single species could upset the balance of the entire Baltic ecosystem.



Marine protected areas — a solution

By creating a coherent network of ecologically representative and well-managed marine protected areas, we can protect the Baltic Sea's unique features, habitats and species for the future.

MPAs are tools for conservation of biological diversity. MPAs can legally protect complete ecosystems, habitats or areas with high importance within the lifecycle of species groups, such as

WWF defines a marine protected area (MPA) as:
“An area designated to protect marine ecosystems, processes, habitats and species.”

spawning grounds for certain fish, and wintering or breeding areas for seabirds.

They can safeguard important species and habitats for the future, by eliminating threats to these, such as destructive fishing methods, overuse by tourism activities, environmental effects from shipping, etc. MPAs also have benefits beyond conservation. They

can contribute to the restoration and replenishment of resources for social, economic and cultural reasons e.g. commercial fish species.

Why networks?

One single large MPA is not always the best solution. For protected areas to promote the build up of declining species, they must provide protection at all critical stages in the life cycle. The ranges of movement of a species can be very large over a life cycle and involve many habitats and ecosystems. But protecting all this in one single MPA is often not possible. The best solution for the Baltic is therefore a network of MPAs of varying sizes. Such a network must comprise well selected key inshore and offshore habitats, ensuring protection for the full range of habitat types and species. It must also include important routes for migratory species and ecological corridors across the Baltic.

Management, enforcement and monitoring are crucial

Adequate management must be put in place and rules enforced if protection is to work. This is unfortunately not the case for a large majority of MPAs worldwide, as most MPAs are open to unrestricted tourism and to unrestricted fishing. To evaluate and develop established MPAs, a sound ecosystem-oriented monitoring regime must also be put in place by the responsible states.

Commitments made

Government leaders in the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea have agreed to establish MPAs through a number of international conventions and agreements, in particular through the following:

- The World Summit for Sustainable Development and the Convention on Biological Diversity commitments to establish a globally representative system of marine and coastal protected areas by 2012, and maintain a network of MPAs that are effectively managed, ecologically based, consistent with international law and based on scientific information
- The HELCOM Recommendation 15/5 on the establishment of a system of coastal and marine Baltic Sea Protected Areas (BSPA) (1998)
- The EU Natura 2000 network, where the Annexes of the Habitats Directive list habitats and species of Community interest, whose conservation requires the designation of Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)
- The commitment of the Helsinki and OSPAR Commissions (2003) to complete by 2010 a

joint network of well-managed marine protected areas that, together with the Natura 2000 network, would be ecologically coherent

Little action

Despite almost 20 years since HELCOM designated its list of 62 marine and coastal BSPAs, few of these areas have actually been implemented. The establishment of offshore MPAs has only just begun. Areas set aside to safeguard coastal biodiversity often only protect the part above the surface, whereas life and habitats under water remain without any form of protection. Much remains to be done. Also the implementation of Natura 2000 in the marine environment is lagging behind, especially protection of offshore areas.

WWF's goal

The establishment and implementation of a network of effectively managed, ecologically representative marine protected areas covering at least *10 per cent* of the Baltic Sea by 2010.

WWF's Goals

WWF is working to ensure that urgent measures are taken to conserve the Baltic Sea's unique marine life, its valuable fisheries as well as preserve its fantastic potential for recreation and tourism for the future. WWF therefore urges governments to speed up the process to designate and implement the network of marine Natura 2000 sites and BSPAs. To

Worldwide, only a mere 0.6 % of the oceans are designated as marine protected areas (MPAs) – compared to 13 % of protected land area. Only 7 % of the Baltic Sea surface is listed as BSPAs (98 sites), only 32 sites officially notified, but management plans exist for only 20% (HELCOM, 2006).

Reference and further reading:

Do Governments protect the Treasures of our Seas? WWF Germany, Frankfurt, 2003
How is your MPA doing? IUCN, Gland Switzerland, 2004
HELCOM, Biodiversity and Nature Protection, Thematic Assessment, 2006

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