



HELCOM RECOMMENDATION 27-28/2

Adopted 8 July 2006
having regard to Article 20, Paragraph 1 b)
of the Helsinki Convention

CONSERVATION OF SEALS IN THE BALTIC SEA AREA

THE COMMISSION,

RECOGNIZING that the three seal species (the grey seal *Halichoerus grypus*, the ringed seal *Phoca hispida botnica*, and the harbour seal *Phoca vitulina*) are important, unique and valuable components of the Baltic Sea ecosystem, and that their continued survival and well-being are inextricably linked to, and dependent on the quality of the Baltic Sea environment;

ACKNOWLEDGING therefore that the seals of the Baltic Sea are important elements of the Common Natural Heritage of the Baltic Sea Region, and that the continued existence and prosperity of the seal populations, and consequently the quality of their habitats, are shared responsibilities of the Contracting Parties to the Helsinki Convention (re. Article 15);

BEING AWARE that in the 1970s and 1980s the populations of all seal species in the Baltic Sea were alarmingly low;

ALSO AWARE that the population decline, apart from ringed seals in the Gulf of Finland and Gulf of Riga, is now reversed, but except for the Kattegat harbour seals, the seal populations of the Baltic Sea remain below the theoretically calculated population levels if compared to the beginning of the 20th century, and that the current carrying capacity levels are not known;

FURTHER AWARE of the documented regional differences in the status of Baltic seal populations, and that National Management¹ Plans are suitable instruments to address the regionally different status of seal populations and differences in priorities of seal management through the Baltic Sea area;

OBSERVING the EU Habitat Directive, which defines the following requirements for Favourable Conservation Status of species:

- that it is maintaining itself on a long-term basis as a viable component of its natural habitats;
- the natural range of the species is neither being reduced nor is likely to be reduced for the foreseeable future; and
- there is, and will probably continue to be, a sufficiently large habitat to maintain its populations on a long-term basis;

¹ In this text Management is defined as any legal decision taken with regard to the conservation of the seal species and their habitats, *inter alia* decision taken to: protect the species from hunting, or to set hunting quotas, reduce bycatches, stop disturbance at critical habitats, protection and restoration of critical habitats, and prevention of discard of harmful substances with the purpose of improving the quality of seal habitats.

RECOGNISING that the HELCOM/ICES/EU Seal Expert Workshop (Stockholm, 6-8 September 2005) proposed a set of **General Management Principles** for seal management applicable to the whole Baltic Sea area, and that these general management principles allow for National Management Plans to be developed based upon sub-regional and national aspects;

NOTING that the proposed **General Management Principles** are the following which link the seal populations to the Baltic Sea Ecosystem:

- **populations size** (with the long-term objective to allow seal populations to recover towards carrying capacity levels);
- **distribution** (with the long-term objective to allow breeding seals to expand to suitable breeding distribution in all regions of the Baltic); and
- **health status** (with the long-term objective of attaining the health status that secures the continued existence of the populations);

NOTING FURTHER that **Specific Reference Levels** form an integral part of these principles, and for population size, these reference levels are defined as:

- **Target Reference Level:** the level where the growth rate starts to level off and the population asymptotically approach the current carrying capacity level (e.g. 0.8 K);
- **Limit Reference Level** (the Safe Biological Level): the Minimum Viable Population Size, which is to be defined for each of the management units;
- **Precautionary Approach Level** where the populations are at maximum productivity level²;

ALSO NOTING that the HELCOM/ICES/EU Seal Expert Workshop defined and agreed on the following **Management Units** for Baltic Sea seal populations:

- 1) Harbour seals in the Kalmarsund region (Sweden);
- 2) Southwestern Baltic harbour seals (Denmark, Germany, Poland, Sweden);
- 3) Gulf of Bothnia ringed seals (Finland, Sweden);
- 4) Southwestern Archipelago Sea, Gulf of Finland and Gulf of Riga ringed seals (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Russia);
- 5) Baltic Sea grey seals (all Contracting Parties to the Helsinki Convention);

RECOMMENDS to the Contracting Parties to the Helsinki Convention:

1: to apply the General Management Principles and Management Units as defined above, and in conformity with these principles develop and implement National Management Plans³ which will be the main management instruments to ensure that the favourable conservation status of the species is attained or maintained. In particular so that:

- for all populations below the Limit Reference Level (the Safe Biological Level), no allowances for deliberate killing should be issued;
- for populations between the Limit Reference Level (the Safe Biological Level) and the Precautionary Approach Level, licenses for anthropogenic removals can only be issued if in the population a significant positive long-term growth rate can be observed, and if licenses for anthropogenic removals are issued, special care has to be taken so that the positive long-term growth rate is not jeopardized;
- for populations between the Precautionary Approach and the Target Reference Levels, and for population above the Target Reference Level, licenses for anthropogenic removals can be issued provided that the long-term objectives of the General Management Principles are not compromised;

² Between 50-80% of K. Likely in the lower portion of this range.

³ NMP would also be the appropriate instrument for issuing any exemption from the General Management Principles for specific scientific purposes, animal welfare reasons and for removing identified individuals specialising on depredation of captured or farmed fish.

- 2: to** take effective measures for all populations in order to prevent illegal killing, and to reduce incidental bycatches to a minimum level and if possible to a level close to zero;
- 3: to** establish a HELCOM seal expert group with the tasks:
- to develop and co-ordinate monitoring programmes and assess the population structure, size and growth, reproduction and breeding distribution, contaminant burden and health status, fisheries interactions and bycatches, and evaluate their results;
 - to quantify the Limit Reference, Precautionary Approach and Target Reference Levels for populations of the described Management Units;
 - to define and quantify similar reference levels with regard to seal distribution and health status;
 - to assist in harmonising National Management Plans for those cross-boundary Baltic Sea Seal Management Units described above;
 - to draft HELCOM Guidelines for exemptions to the General Management Principles⁴;
 - to consider detailed annual Term of Reference for the meetings to be adopted by HELCOM HABITAT;
 - to report to HELCOM HABITAT annually;
- 4: to** carry out respective monitoring programmes as indicated above;
- 5: to** collaborate within the HELCOM seal expert group to identify and establish a network of protected areas for important actual and potential seal habitats across the Baltic Sea area (re. the EU Habitat Directive, Annex II), and attempt to harmonize the regulations and monitoring of these conservation areas;
- 6: to** develop and to apply where possible non-lethal mitigation measures for seals to reduce bycatch and damage to fishing gear, as well as to support and coordinate the development of efficient mitigation measures;

INVITES the Contracting Parties when possible to fund the development and application of bycatch reduction measures, including alternative fishing gear and methods, as well as to compensate for losses of catch and fishing gear;

INVITES the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea to participate in the work of the HELCOM seal expert group;

RECOMMENDS HELCOM to assess in 5 years time the effectiveness of this Recommendation with regard to the conservation of seals in the Baltic Sea Area, and whether amendments are necessary;

AND FINALLY RECOMMENDS that the Governments of the Contracting Parties to the Helsinki Convention observe Article 16(1) of the Convention and report on the implementation of this Recommendation according to HELCOM Monitoring and Assessment Strategy.

⁴ The Contracting Parties to HELCOM being also Member States of EU should acknowledge the obligations of Annex VI (prohibited methods and means of capture and killing and modes of transport) of the Council Directive 92/43/EEC (the Habitats Directive).