

## **Statement by Executive Secretary Ms Monika Stankiewicz at HELCOM 40-2019**

For HELCOM, 2018 was the year of major assessments of the Baltic Sea environment, providing our organization with strong scientific underpinnings that I believe will guide HELCOM work and regional policy for some time to come. It was also the year of major decisions and good planning for future.

The Second Holistic Assessment of the Baltic Sea (HOLAS II), with its final results published mid-2018 in the State of the Baltic Sea report, gave us a clear picture of the ecological state of our sea and the pressures affecting it.

For the first time in the Baltic Sea region, the assessment also included social and economic analyses that quantified, in monetary terms, the benefits we could get out of a sea in a healthy state. We can now better compare the contribution of the Baltic Sea, to our welfare, with any other economic activity.

HELCOM can also look back on the Sixth Pollution Load Compilation (PLC-6), a comprehensive report on the input of nutrients and selected hazardous substances into the Baltic Sea. New to PLC-6, nutrient inputs from the seven biggest rivers were also analysed, taking our engagement for a healthy sea deeper into the catchment area – where many pressures currently stem from.

More key data and information also came from the FISH-PRO II project – a Baltic-wide assessment of coastal fish communities in support of an ecosystem-based management, with the results published in the Third Assessment on Coastal Fish.

On maritime activities, our insight was strengthened through the Maritime Assessment 2018 that comprehensively assessed the status, environmental risks and opportunities of maritime activities in the Baltic Sea region.

Never did we have such a comprehensive overview of the Baltic Sea. This insight is not just for us: parts of the assessments is also being fed into global processes such as the UN's World Ocean Assessment.

Unfortunately, according to the recent findings, the Baltic Sea is not in its best state, and the ecological objectives set out by the Baltic Sea Action Plan are unlikely to be attained by 2021.

For instance, eutrophication remains a major pressure on the sea, and only half of the assessed areas for coastal fish are in a satisfactory state. Emerging pressures such as marine litter and plastic pollution, pharmaceutical residues, underwater noise and disturbance to seabed also need to be addressed with a certain urgency.

Nevertheless, the assessments also show improvements in overall trends, a sign that we are on the right track and that concerted regional cooperation to address the ecological challenges of the Baltic Sea is bearing fruits. This clearly confirms that HELCOM works.

The assessments also form a solid basis for developing future HELCOM actions. Decided during the HELCOM Ministerial Meeting 2018 in Brussels, the update of the Baltic Sea

Action Plan – HELCOM’s strategic programme for a healthy sea – will greatly benefit from the current findings.

For its part, the strategic plan for the BSAP update is advancing steadily, with first steps towards its implementation already taken through the establishment of initiatives for the analysis of sufficiency of measures – the EU-funded ACTION project and the HELCOM platform on sufficiency of measures (HELCOM SOM Platform). Working closely together and drawing on interdisciplinary expertise from across the Baltic Sea region, both initiatives are analysing if the measures that are currently in place are sufficient to achieve good environmental status for the Baltic Sea.

Closer to the short-term, another milestone for addressing the emerging pressures affecting the Baltic Sea was the approval of the new regional monitoring sub-programme of continuous noise and the HELCOM guidelines for monitoring beach litter.

In 2018, our work also led to the inclusion of nine ecologically unique marine areas in the Baltic Sea to the global registry of Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs) maintained by UN Biodiversity. Describing these EBSAs was a commitment made by HELCOM at the UN Ocean Conference in New York in 2017, a pledge of the Baltic Sea region for advancing the ocean-related Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 14). I am proud that we concluded the entire process in less than two years.

HELCOM also established the HELCOM Ad hoc Group MINUTS that is tasked to develop regional principles and a risk assessment framework for the management of internal nutrient reserves. This will be instrumental in filling the current gaps on by developing a regional framework that will guide how to deal with potential measures related to the internal nutrient loads that have accumulated in the Baltic Sea over the past decades.

On the protection of biotopes, the freshly adopted HELCOM Recommendation on Conservation and Protection of Marine and Coastal Biotopes will certainly provide further guidelines to protect marine habitats in the Baltic Sea that are currently under threat but crucial for a well-functioning ecosystem.

Responding to the growing concern of climate change, HELCOM established the Expert Network on Climate Change (EN CLIME) that will harness the expertise of leading scientists on both direct and indirect effects of climate change on the Baltic Sea environment from both Baltic Earth and HELCOM, and make this expertise available to policy makers.

To further bridge the gap between policy and science, we also held the joint HELCOM-BONUS stakeholder conference that focussed on sustainable development and the benefits of healthy seas. The conference was also a good opportunity to advance our plans on how to utilize the latest results of BONUS and other research projects for the purpose of the update of the BSAP.

To conclude, 2018 provided us with a deep insight of where we currently stand in regard to the ecological matters of the Baltic Sea. But it also showed us that we still need to strengthen our efforts to meet our targets. And despite 2018 having been instrumental in mapping the road ahead, we must not forget to implement the already agreed upon actions.

I would like to thank all Contracting Parties, as well as Observers for the very successful year in HELCOM history. I would especially like to express my appreciation to the Contracting Parties and Heads of Delegation for your firm support to keep a high ambition level in HELCOM work and steering the update of the BSAP into the right directions. I would also like to sincerely thank my dear colleagues in the Secretariat for their immense work during last year in preparing for the BSAP update and all other important matters. You are not afraid of taking up new tasks and your dedication is very inspiring. Good luck HELCOM for your future work!