

Outcome summary: Delivering Global Commitments in the Baltic Sea Region

During the [UN Ocean Conference](#) in Lisbon, Portugal from 27 June to 1 July 2022, a [side event](#) by the Baltic Sea countries, the OSPAR Commission, the World Commission on Protected Areas (IUCN/WCPA), Coalition Clean Baltic (CCB) and the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) discussed the role of effective regional marine governance in achieving SDG 14 and presenting [HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan](#) as a best-practice example.

The side event used as examples Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and, areas that are achieving the effective in-situ conservation of biodiversity outside of protected areas – the so-called Other Effective Conservation Measures or OECMs. The programme of the event is available [at the event webpage](#).

General summary

The fact that Regional Seas Conventions (RSC) and instruments such as the [HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan \(BSAP\)](#) are key elements in implementing SDG 14, was reiterated in the high-level statements delivered by Germany, Finland and Estonia, as well as in the statements of the keynote speakers.

The Regional Seas Conventions in general are well placed to facilitate cross-sectoral and transboundary cooperation and enable the use of existing structures and relationships to speed up implementation of the commonly agreed commitments. Cooperation across RSCs is highly beneficial in the pursuit of reaching the goals and their collaboration is effective, resource efficient and supports good ocean governance.

Key outcomes of the panel discussion

The potential of Other Effective Conservation Measures (OECMs), as referred to in Aichi Target 11 of the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), as a means of advancing the ocean agenda and enhancing marine conservation is being acknowledged in the Baltic Sea and North-East Atlantic. Processes towards leveraging that potential and recognizing the role of stakeholders in marine conservation have been set in motion in both the HELCOM and OSPAR areas. However, a number of questions remain to be answered, related to definitions, terminology, and the suitability of specific areas as potential OECMs. Regional governance for the Baltic Sea and North-East Atlantic is looking into how to take these factors into account.

The discussion emphasised that OECMs cannot and should not replace MPAs but should be seen as complementary instruments. On the one hand, advantages of OECMs include both the increased coverage in areas offering protection and their potential for enhancing connectivity between protected areas. On the other hand, there is a risk of creating “alibi” areas of limited or no conservation value. However, it is equally true that, in practice, MPAs have frequently turned out to be mere “paper parks”, suffering from a lack of implementation of sufficient measures or from insufficient management, and that OECMs are in fact in many ways subject to stricter criteria than MPAs insofar as they need to demonstrate their conservation value and the focus is on outcomes rather than processes. Applying similar, more stringent criteria to MPAs would therefore enhance the value of those areas and should be considered in the future.

In identifying and recognizing OECMs, it should be borne in mind that the objective is not to engage in adding up numbers to achieve the “30 x 30” target*, but to ensure effective protection to safeguard biodiversity, ecosystem functions and ecosystem services. In that context, we should never lose sight of the need to achieve a coherent protection network.

Moreover, stakeholder involvement and cultural sensitivity, as well as mutual learning and exchange of experience beyond the immediate HELCOM and OSPAR regions are key elements of success in establishing effective OECMs. The need for the global community to support collaboration efforts at the regional level in regions of the world where resources for such collaboration might be limited should also be borne in mind. Whereas the ecologic, social, and economic characteristics of different marine regions require tailor-made solutions for protected area networks, a lot can be learned from each other. Dialogue between regions is therefore needed to facilitate the exchange of best-practices and support the development of common approaches.

As in many other cases, OECMs do not present a black-and-white scenario and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. If the above considerations are taken into account, however, they offer a high potential as a valuable element on achieving our conservation objectives as we move towards 2030. And the northern European regional seas are well-positioned and poised to rise to the challenge.

* 30 percent of the world's terrestrial and marine habitats protected by 2030. A target formulated by the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD)