



## Keynote, Ministerial Meeting 2024

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Honoured ministers, high level representatives, madam Chair, esteemed participants in this Ministerial Meeting, my name is Jannica Haldin, I'm the Deputy Executive Secretary of HELCOM and the coordinator of the Third Holistic Assessment of the Baltic Sea.

I grew up by, on and in the Baltic Sea.

For me the Baltic Sea it is smooth cliffs, sunwarm under bare feet, the light drawing patterns on the sand in the shallows, the sound of the water lapping the shore in the late evening, the ancient creak of the ice heaving on a crisp cold night, or the oppressive anticipation of a storm rolling in.

There is probably no place that has shaped who I have become in the same way as the Sea. It has, as you might imagine, played no small part of why I have ended up here in front of you.

And while my picture of the Baltic Sea has changed over time, as my understanding has broadened, the Sea of my past, the one in my memory, is still there.

In Swedish we have a saying: a picture can tell you a story of a 1000 words. The Status of the Baltic Sea assessment provides us with exactly that, a picture, a snapshot if you will, of what the situation has been for the Baltic Sea between the years 2016-2021.

Regrettably, it is not the pretty picture we had hoped to see, nor is it aligned with the picture of the Baltic Sea I have in my mind.

The third holistic assessment shows that pressures on the environment, including hazardous substances, eutrophication, extraction of species and the introduction of non-indigenous species, remain above sustainable levels.

We can also increasingly see the effects of climate change across the region, something which is highly likely to play an increasing role in future of the Baltic Sea.

The sea teaches us about the reality of connectivity, for good and bad. Each species links to others, weaving a web of resilience, a safety net that extends far beyond the shores of our sea, onto land and which directly affect our society. The species that inhabit the Baltic Sea, and the connections they have, do not recognise our anthropogenic borders, but neither do the pressures we put on the marine environment, and pressures impacting one species create ripples across the foodweb, fraying the links holding it together.

As a consequence of decades of unsustainable use, the assessment now shows cases of inadequate status in biodiversity and the foodweb across the full extent of the Baltic Sea. Only a few biodiversity indicators have acceptable levels in parts of the region, and none in all areas.

This threatens populations, habitats and the functioning of the ecosystem, increasing the risk of further unravelling our safety net by reducing the resilience of the ecosystem against further environmental changes, climate change included.



While the sea might know no borders, it has a long memory, one much longer than ours. While the holistic assessment shows the picture of what the situation looked like in the last six years, that picture has been painted over decades. We are facing the legacy of those who came before us, and while the actions taken over these decades might be history for us, it is the present for the marine environment.

My, and your, picture of the sea is, at its core, largely defined by our memories and previous experiences. But this means that our collective view of the Baltic Sea only stretch back one generation, changing the picture of what a healthy Baltic Sea was like for every generation that passes. This is referred to as shifting baseline syndrome, and has been shown to have major impact on our relationship with the world around us.

Shifting baselines might make it challenging for us envision the reality of what a healthy Baltic Sea will look like, but even without a clear picture of what our future should look like, we can through collectively understanding the patterns underneath the problems, enable change.

And while at first glance the snapshot provided by the State of the Baltic Sea report looks dark, that is not the full picture, and the results are not the only aspect of the assessment I wish to highlight.

In the past 6 years our knowledge about the Baltic Sea ecosystem, and policies to support it, have developed substantially, and as an endeavour, HOLAS 3 is an extraordinary example of what can be achieved through true regional cooperation and long-term commitment.

From millions of data entries, through the 59 indicator reports, 14 integrated assessments, 5 thematic assessment reports, and the State of the Baltic Sea summary report, the holistic assessment represents the most comprehensive assessment ever produced for the Baltic Sea.

It builds on the vast knowledge and experiences developed among HELCOM countries over several decades and now covers every known major pressure and each part of the ecosystem.

Close to 1000 experts from all across the Baltic Sea have been included in the review process and over 9 months we have processed almost 3000 comments to ensure the robustness of the information presented.

With improved data availability the confidence in the results, as well as the possibility to use them for management have also significantly improved. Such advancements are of key importance in unlocking a sustainable future. It is not enough that we understand what is happening, we also need to understand why it is happening, and how we can change it.

The results show, unequivocally, that at the core of the poor status we can see across the Baltic Sea ecosystem there is one common denominator: us.

There is no pressure currently facing the Baltic Sea that does not stem our activities. Activities which are occurring at a number and an intensity beyond what the ecosystem can tolerate. Now, while the sea might know no borders, it does have boundaries. There are no unending resources. And when we use more than the ecosystem can provide we are taking from the next generation. This is no imaginary debt, it is a very concrete one, the consequences of which we can see in every result in the assessment. The situation we are facing is not something that happened to us, it is something we did, and are doing.

This does however, come with a very concrete silver lining. When we know that our activities are what underpins every pressure on the Baltic Sea, it means we have the power to change it.



If we limit the impact from the activities we can control, the ecosystem will start to rebuild, the Baltic Sea will heal and improve the resilience to face pressures which are harder to control. While the complexities surrounding this can be challenging, at its heart it is as simple as that: if you stop breaking it, it stops breaking.

And this is what measures is all about. Possibly the most important thing the latest status assessment show us is that when we have the right measures, and when we implement, **they work**.

We see these signals in the results of the assessment, first in the pressure related indicators because these react directly to changes in our behaviour.

While the results of the assessments might not reflect it, in other words we might not yet have reached the threshold value for good status, we can see positive trends where measures have been implemented across the region, for example for some of the hazardous substances included in the assessment. Also for input of nutrients where, for example, the assessment shows a reduction of phosphorus of 28% overall, and up to 49% in the Gulf of Finland, compared to the reference period.

While we can see that measures are working, they only work when they are implemented. The poor status of many species and habitats in the Baltic Sea reflects their response to many environmental pressures acting in combination, rather than to individual pressures. In practice this means that to see a change in the status for the ecosystem, as opposed to a change in individual pressures, we need a combination of measures.

And, with the exception of a few measures such as habitat restoration, the reality is that the most effective, and cost efficient, measures to alleviate the pressures are those that target managing our activities, so that they are within the boundaries the ecosystem can tolerate.

It is easier to stop nutrients from entering the marine environment than it is to remove them once they are there.

Adaptive management is about iteratively improving management, but not in the way that we start with limited management and then move to more management, rather that we manage activities precautionarily and then, with more information, there is a possibility to be less precautionary.

So where do we start? What measures are needed, you might ask? Luckily, when it comes to measures the Baltic Sea Action Plan specifies our shared objectives and agreed actions and measures for the Baltic Sea.

The State of the Baltic Sea report provides us with an opportunity to reflect on how our current measures affect the Baltic Sea environment and assess the urgency and need for implementation of the Action plan. The assessment also enables us to tune our management efforts and helps each country in their efforts to ensure that we are doing the right thing in the right place at the right time.

Next year we are half way to 2030, the target year of the Baltic Sea Action Plan, and it will also be the first full scale reporting on the level of implementation of the Action Plan across all the countries around the Baltic Sea.

But already now the Baltic Sea Action Plan and the results of the holistic assessment make it clear that achieving good environmental status of Baltic Sea ecosystems requires transformative change across all sectors affecting the sea.

We need to acknowledge that systems don't break, they only react. They function to produce the outcomes they are designed for, or have evolved, to produce. And our system of unsustainable use



has led us here. So, it isn't a question of fixing a broken system, it is about actively replacing a system that does not serve us. Because make not mistake, the system that put us in this situation does not serve us. The economic and social analysis in the holistic assessment show that our failure to secure good status is costing us.

Fishing has lost 20% of the jobs in the regions since 2014, and this year yet more stocks collapsed. Even growing sectors like coastal and marine tourism are estimated to be missing out on 9 billion euros per year due to poor status. And that is just one sector.

Beyond the market value, the non-market recreational benefits for the Baltic Sea countries amount to at least 33.7 billion euros on average per year, following a conservative estimation approach. And there is potential for more, would status be improved.

We know enough. What we need now is scale and speed. Ultimately, the recovery of Baltic Sea biodiversity is entirely dependent on how well we can manage our activities to ensure that they are truly sustainable, both in the near future and in the long term. Considering the high costs of inaction, achieving a healthy Baltic Sea is also an investment in the sustainable economic and societal development of our region.

We are facing the consequences of the actions of those that came before us, and it is no easy thing. But what about our legacy? What will we hand over to our children or grand-children. At the UN Ocean Decade conference a few weeks ago one of the keynote speakers said that right now we have a once in a planet chance. And while we might not be able to fix the whole planet, the Baltic Sea is our contribution, our responsibility, and we actually can fix it. If we choose to.

I have an 8 year old daughter at home. By making the right choices now we can turn the direction of our sliding baseline. We can leave the next generation memories that shape a picture of a Baltic Sea that is healthier than the one we see, rather than the opposite. Richer, more diverse and healing. It is time to start mending our safety net instead of taking it apart. Because our failings inevitably become our children's reality.

The first step to fixing a problem is understanding what causes it. We know that now. And the second is to fix it. And that is why we are here.

Thank you.