

HELCOM 50th Anniversary
25 April 2024, Riga
Leena Ylä-Mononen

Minister Bērziņa, Ministers, Executive Secretary, dear members and friends of HELCOM,

It is with great pleasure that I join you today to mark HELCOM's 50th anniversary. As a Finnish national, for me the Baltic Sea is "our sea", *Mare Nostrum*. And now located in Denmark as Executive Director of the European Environment Agency, this sea is not only close to my heart but also part of my daily work.

The Baltic Sea continues to be under increasing impacts from climate change and biodiversity degradation catalysed by eutrophication, pollution, land use and resource extraction. In many ways, it is a very troubled ecosystem. But imagine, what would its state and future be, if there had not been 50 years of cooperation and dedicated efforts under the Helsinki Convention?

HELCOM's work has significantly advanced the field of environmental protection of marine ecosystems, and over the last five decades, the wealth of data, indicators and assessment produced by HELCOM has set an example at regional, European, and global level.

Amongst HELCOM's many contributions over the years I would like to stress the importance of the HOLAS reports, first published in 2010. These contain the core, pressure, state, and driver indicators that are so vital for the Marine Strategy Framework Directive while regionalisation of the indicators has been a huge contribution to the knowledge base of the Baltic marine environment.

HELCOM holds high-quality data on the Baltic Sea, with different working groups helping to gather information. One of the organisation's great achievements has been its convening power – bringing together experts across diverse environmental fields, and enabling pioneering work including the mapping of the status of – and threats to – different species and habitats.

HELCOM is a driving force in preserving the Baltic Sea's delicate ecosystem and advancing overall environmental protection efforts.

The EEA is an independent agency of the European Union. Our role is to inform policy makers and the public about the state of Europe's environment, climate and wider sustainability issues. In light of this, I would like to now say a few words about HELCOM and the EU.

The European Union and HELCOM have a longstanding partnership, with HELCOM playing an important role in facilitating the implementation of EU environmental and marine policies in the Baltic Sea. In fact, before their EU memberships, most HELCOM parties already had regulations in place due to their prior adoption of HELCOM recommendations.

HELCOM's strong standards have often served as inspiration for EU directives, particularly when it comes to issues such as urban wastewater treatment. In this way, HELCOM has actually helped in the implementation of key directives.

HELCOM has also been instrumental in supporting the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. The Directive outlines the EU's approach to marine environment policy, and HELCOM's contributions extend to the implementation of the directives. For example, it has provided critical inputs to the Framework Directive's Common Implementation Strategy and has offered substantial assistance to Member States.

HELCOM's collaborative efforts among its contracting parties have helped tackle pressing environmental challenges in the Baltic, by promoting sustainable fisheries, reducing marine litter, and mitigating nutrient pollution. These achievements closely align with the EU's environmental agenda, including the European Green Deal and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, enhancing ecological resilience and supporting a greener, more sustainable future.

Additionally, HELCOM's ongoing focus on Marine Protected Area Projects demonstrates a proactive approach to ecosystem restoration and resilience, strengthening the environmental goals of both HELCOM and the EU. These initiatives not only directly contribute to the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 but also reinforce the implementation of EU nature legislation in the Baltic Sea region.

Last, but not least, HELCOM's recommendations on shipping, maritime fuels, and port facilities have also set a high standard, paving the way for the EU to adopt similar measures and support the transition to sustainability in the maritime sectors.

Our Agency works across many different thematic areas covering climate, environment and sustainability. What is clear from all our work is that the challenges we face are complex, interlinked and systemic. Tackling such challenges requires, above all, collaboration. Collaboration across continents, countries and regions, and collaboration across thematic fields of expertise and organisations. At the EEA, we highly value the excellent collaboration with HELCOM. Making use of HELCOM's data and assessment tools, such as those addressing biodiversity and eutrophication, the EEA has produced insightful reports on contaminants in Europe's seas and on marine protected areas, that directly support the EU Member States in implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

Moreover, our "Marine Messages" report used assessment tools originally developed by HELCOM in its second edition and we will benefit from them again in the third edition to be published in 2026.

In order to enhance the exchange of data and assessments, regular meetings are held between the EEA and the Regional Sea Conventions in European Seas – including HELCOM. Our shared objective is to further streamline the exchange and management of marine data at regional and European levels, and to distil reports for wider uptake across the EU, including through the EEA's WISE-Marine platform.

The ongoing collaboration between EEA and HELCOM further extends to preparations for the upcoming reporting cycle. We deeply appreciate HELCOM's invaluable assistance in this endeavour. In many ways, through our collaboration we have been illustrating the synergies and complementarity of our respective mandates and deliverables.

To close then, let me once again offer the EEA's congratulations on 50 years of excellent work by HELCOM and underline our Agency's desire to continue the outstanding collaboration between our two organisations. Our close partnership – particularly on data and assessments – serves to help safeguard the Baltic Sea and its ecosystems for generations to come. Indeed you have: "Proud past, promising future."

Thank you for your attention, and looking forward to many more years of fruitful collaboration.