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# Where do we stand?

Rüdiger Stempel, HELCOM Executive Secretary  
and Jannica Haldin, HELCOM Deputy Executive Secretary

## **Rüdiger Stempel, HELCOM Executive Secretary**

Dear Ministers, Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

So where do we stand?

We have just heard many inspiring remarks about HELCOM. We have taken a walk down memory lane. And we have listened to some thought-provoking views on the future of HELCOM and the protection of the Baltic Sea from the next generation.

I believe we can all agree that we have come a long way. We have achieved a lot.

In some cases, as noted by Juha Markku Leppänen, we have even achieved the impossible. Or at least what was deemed impossible back in the day.

But have we achieved enough?

And what, for that matter, would be “enough”?

Well, “enough” would mean achieving our HELCOM vision of “a healthy Balti Sea environment with diverse ecological components functioning in balance, resulting in a good ecological status and supporting a wide range of sustainable economic and social activities.”

But we know we aren’t there yet. And one of the reasons we know that is because we undertake periodic assessments of the state of the Baltic Sea, the so-called Holistic Assessments, or HOLAS, in HELCOM speak.

The third and most recent of these assessments (HOLAS 3) has just been completed, the report was published last year – and it contains food for thought.

Allow me, at this point, to ask Jannica to tell you more about HOLAS 3 and share with you some of the knowledge and insights we have gained through that assessment.

JANNICA

So, the message is mixed. On the one hand, it is clear that our Baltic Sea is not in good shape. On the other hand, a silver lining is discernible above that horizon.

HOLAS 3 itself, like its predecessors, constitutes a remarkable achievement (in fact: one of those that, as we heard earlier today, was considered impossible in HELCOM's early years). We have a better understanding of the nature of the problem and the state of affairs than ever before and we know that if we act in concert, based on that knowledge, we can make a difference. We can fulfill our HELCOM vision.

So really, all we need to do – is do it! Right?

Right. But of course, this is not a matter of throwing a switch. We are faced with a complex issue, or rather: a complex of complex issues. Taking appropriate action requires a plan. An action plan.

And this is, of course, where our 2021 Baltic Sea Action Plan comes in. That plan, with its 199 actions and final target year of 2030 is our roadmap to progress on the way to GES. We are now roughly at the half-way mark and implementation is progressing reasonably well, though there is a distinct discrepancy between joint actions and national actions, with the former advancing more speedily than the latter.

So, we have a sound scientific basis, we have the requisite knowledge and we have a plan.

But two other elements are required for success: determination and tenacity. If we are to achieve our ultimate goal, we cannot and we must not relent now. And we must stay the course and redouble our efforts until we reach our destination.

This would be challenging at the best of times. And these are certainly not the best of times as we battle a triple planetary crisis against a backdrop of geopolitical upheaval.

But we have no choice and there is no time to waste. In closing, I would like to quote Secretary John Kerry, who, at last week's Our Ocean Conference in Athens, Greece, said,

"In a race against time itself even our current ambition is not enough. Our commitment must keep growing and we must still accelerate."

If we do that – and HELCOM's proud past makes me feel confident that we can – HELCOM and, most importantly, the Baltic Sea, will indeed have a promising future.

Thank you very much!

## **Jannica Haldin , HELCOM Deputy Executive Secretary**

The third holistic assessment shows that pressures on the environment, including hazardous substances and eutrophication, all 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 HELCOMs future.

These pressures are a direct consequence of our activities at sea and on land, and these pressures, in turn, affects the biodiversity of the Baltic Sea, impacting the ecosystem.

As a consequence the assessment show us that there is inadequate status of 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.

Persistent unsustainable human activities threaten habitats, populations and the functioning of the ecosystem, increasing the risk of further degradation by reducing the resilience of the ecosystem against further environmental changes, climate change included.

But while the results of the assessment reflect the consequences of many decades of unsustainable use, the results are not the only aspect of the assessment I wish to highlight.

Because as an endeavour, HOLAS 3 is extraordinary, thanks largely to the efforts and dedication of the national experts involved, and my colleagues at the HELCOM Secretariat!

It is the most comprehensive assessment of the Baltic Sea ever produced. Almost 1000 experts from around the region were invited to review the HOLAS 3 products, and in the course of 9 months the Secretariat processed close to 3000 comments, all to ensure the robustness of the results.

Never before has our ecosystem knowledge been better. For the first time the assessment strives to concretely link together information on activities, the subsequent pressures and status, taking a leap towards a truly holistic approach, and one that significantly improves the possibility to use the assessment for management. From millions of data entries, through the 59 indicator reports, 14 integrated assessments and 5 thematic assessment reports, to the State of the Baltic Sea summary report, all of the HOLAS material is publicly available and interested parties can access the information at the level of detail that best suits them.

But one of the most important messages that the third holistic assessment has provided us is this: when duly implemented measures do work.

While the direct 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 changes in the long timeseries for a number of pressures, pressures for which regional level measures have been implemented. We can see a downward trend for some of the hazardous substances, as well as for input of nutrients, where for example there has been a reduction of phosphorus of 28% overall, and up to 49% in the Gulf of Finland, compared to the reference period.

That said there is a lot of work still to be done. Pressures at sea do not recognise anthropogenic borders and neither do the species that inhabit the marine environment. At any given time a multitude of pressures are simultaneously affecting the Baltic Sea ecosystem, and in the end it is the cumulative impacts of these which needs to be addressed in order to properly move towards a healthy Baltic Sea.

This brings me to the second important message the State of the Baltic Sea report has provided us with: the work of HELCOM over the last 50 years has been instrumental in securing the positive changes that we can see, not to mention making it possible for us to track changes in the first place. When there is a will there is a way, and the relevance, and value, of tackling challenges together will only increase in the future.