



## Terms of Reference for the Expert Group on Coastal Fish (EG Coastal Fish)

*Adopted via correspondence in May 2024 by the HELCOM Working Group on Biodiversity, Protection and Restoration (WG BioDiv)*

### Purpose

Coastal fish communities are important components of the Baltic Sea ecosystems, and many species of coastal fish are of a high socio-economic value for coastal societies through small-scale coastal fisheries, recreational fishing as well as cultural value. The status of coastal fish communities serves as an indicator of coastal ecosystem health, reflecting pressures like eutrophication, fishing, and degradation of coastal habitats. The structure of coastal fish communities is also dependent on climate change impacts and the level of natural predation. Species of coastal fish might modify other ecosystem components through ecological interactions. Given the dramatic changes in Baltic Sea ecosystems and coastal fish communities during the last decades, attention and focus should be devoted to this component of the ecosystem.

The purpose of the Expert Group on Coastal Fish (EG Coastal Fish) is to support the implementation of the Helsinki Convention, including its Baltic Sea Action Plan, and, for those Contracting Parties being EU members, relevant EU legislation (e.g. Habitats Directive and Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), etc.).

EG Coastal Fish aims to support ecosystem-based management of coastal fish communities in the Baltic Sea coastal countries through further developing regionally harmonised monitoring and assessment methodologies, conducting harmonised indicator-based status assessments of coastal fish, and by proposing ecosystem-based management measures to support and restore coastal fish communities. In addition, EG Coastal fish serves as a Baltic-wide forum for advancing and disseminating national and regional research projects related to coastal fish.

### Duties

EG Coastal Fish will build upon the work carried out by the FISH-PRO projects from 2003 to 2023 (FISH-PRO, FISH-PRO II and FISH-PRO III). The duties of the Expert Group are to:

- 1) Serve as platform to update, improve and share knowledge about occurrence, distribution, population status and threat and/or decline of coastal fish communities based on all relevant data and recent research projects;
- 2) Identify the lessons learnt from previous holistic assessments (i.e. HOLAS) and consider them in future work;
- 3) Develop existing and new biologically relevant indicators for the next holistic assessment (HOLAS), based on the best available scientific knowledge including indicators with quantitative threshold and reference values;
- 4) Ensure that data flows for relevant indicators are operational;
- 5) Regularly review the relevant actions of the 2021 Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) and consider the BSAP to guide the work of the EG within a workplan;
- 6) Further harmonized and develop monitoring strategies for coastal fish, such as:

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- a. Support the development of relevant research to evaluate the use of alternative data sources in addition to gillnet monitoring to complement the assessment of coastal fish community status, for example commercial catch statistics, citizen science, eDNA as well as other non-invasive techniques such as cameras;
  - b. Work towards further expanding the spatial coverage of coastal fish monitoring in the Baltic Sea, by including additional monitoring programs and Contracting Parties that have not previously been engaged in the network;
  - c. Update the HELCOM Monitoring manual with regard to coastal fish monitoring when needed and as requested by the Working Group on Biodiversity, Protection and Restoration (WG BioDiv).
- 7) Serve as a platform to share information on the implementation of the Helsinki Convention (including the BSAP) and other corresponding international activities, e.g. the implementation of the EU Habitats Directive and EU MSFD and the EUSBSR, etc.);
  - 8) Support the development of relevant research, including e.g. initiatives investigating the role of human impact and environmental variation on coastal fish community status;
  - 9) Serve as a platform providing advice to national authorities and ongoing HELCOM work on implementation of coastal fish related actions in the BSAP as well as on ecosystem-based measures;
  - 10) Ensure relevant information flow and work synergies with other HELCOM groups in case the need for cooperation is recognized.
  - 11) Identify, if needed, available funding and possibly apply for projects to support the work of the EG.

### Expected outcomes

The Expert Group aims to deliver:

- Reporting of relevant and up-to-date data to support the next holistic assessments;
- Regularly updated operational core indicators to be used for the next holistic assessments (HOLAS) based on the best available scientific knowledge;
- Development of existing and new indicators as relevant for coastal fish;
- Proposals of ecosystem-based management measures for coastal fish communities in the Baltic Sea;
- Contribution to the HELCOM thematic assessment on coastal fish, including an assessment of status and recommendations on ecosystem-based management measures for reducing the pressures of human activities on the marine environment. The project will contribute to reporting relevant data and the periodic updating of the core indicators;
- Harmonized and extended monitoring strategies (alternative data sources, increase spatial coverage, update monitoring manual) for coastal fish.

### Organization of work

EG Coastal Fish will be guided by the HELCOM Working Group on Biodiversity, Protection and Restoration (HELCOM WG BioDiv). Information flow to HELCOM WG BioDiv is a key factor and timely exchanges will increase acceptance of the work. HELCOM Working Group on Biodiversity, Protection and Restoration may request that specific topics or issues are addressed.

A chair will be elected by the members of EG Coastal Fish for a 2-year mandate period. The maximum mandate period for the Expert Group Chair should be three consecutive mandate periods, consisting of 2 years per period, resulting in a maximum consecutive mandate period of 6 years.

The Expert Group will document its meetings. A concise outcome will be adopted before the end of each meeting or by correspondence after each meeting. The outcome is agreed by consensus.

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HELCOM Meeting Portal will be used to distribute documents (in a restricted access mode) as well as publish the meeting documents, presentations, and the outcome (public after the meeting). Access to some documents may be kept restricted. The mode of work for the Expert Group will include at least two annual meetings, including one physical meeting hosted by a Contracting Party to the Helsinki Commission. Correspondence and online meetings are facilitated by the HELCOM Secretariat, with physical meetings and workshops taking place as needed.

The HELCOM Secretariat will provide administrative support to the Expert Group.

The group, with the support of the Secretariat, shall ensure good information flow between the relevant HELCOM bodies (e.g. HELCOM WG Fish, EG Fish-M, EG Foodweb, EG Stur etc.).

The Chair(s) will report back to the HELCOM WG BioDiv on the activities of the Expert Group. For HELCOM WG BioDiv, this will take the form of an agenda item at WG meetings.

Contracting Parties nominate experts for EG Coastal Fish, taking in consideration that the experts which took part in FISH-PRO III would be nominated to continue the current work after the project. Additional nominations are anticipated where experts have knowledge related to the assessment of coastal fish. The nomination of relevant Experts, from existing HELCOM Groups or other sources, is carried out at the discretion of the Contracting Parties. Updates in the nominations should be submitted to the Secretariat on a regular basis.

The current Terms of Reference are to be reviewed periodically, every four years, or as the need arises.