



Terms of Reference for the HELCOM Expert Group on Benthic habitats and biotopes (HELCOM EG Benthic)

Approved by the HELCOM Working Group on Biodiversity, Protection and Restoration via correspondence in June 2025.

Purpose

The overall purpose of the HELCOM Expert Group on Benthic Habitats and Biotopes (EG Benthic) is to support and further develop the coordination of regional work on benthic habitats and biotopes and to support the implementation of relevant actions of the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan, HELCOM commitments and other existing international frameworks such as the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the EU Habitats Directive, the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the EU Maritime Spatial Planning Directive, the EU Nature Restoration Regulation, the EU Water Framework Directive.

EG Benthic is under the remit of the HELCOM Working Group on Biodiversity, Protection and Restoration (WG BioDiv).

EG Benthic is to function as a coordinating framework and a platform for benthic experts to make their expertise available to policy makers. The Expert Group ensures that up to date information is accounted for in regional processes. The Expert Group also ensures that its expertise can be used by other international processes, for example regarding technical related topics to enhance international cooperation.

Duties

The duties of the Expert Group are to:

1. Support relevant HELCOM subsidiary bodies to implement relevant BSAP actions;
2. Provide scientific support in producing harmonized high-quality habitat maps for the HELCOM area through EMODnet Seabed Habitat;
3. Serve as a platform to share information on existing and planned national benthic habitats mapping methods and programmes;
4. Provide guidance and support to merge HELCOM HUB into EUNIS; aiming to use EUNIS in collaboration with the European Environment Agency;
5. Review the HELCOM benthic monitoring programmes and guidelines and update them as necessary;
6. Serve as a platform to support dataflows from national monitoring programmes to regional assessment (e.g. HOLAS);
7. Develop, review and update benthic habitats and biotopes assessment methods including indicators, integration and aggregation methods for regional assessment (e.g. HOLAS);
8. Support the development of thresholds in order to assess the quality of benthic habitats and biotopes, particularly with relevance for regional coordination (e.g. HOLAS);
9. Ensure cooperation with ongoing work at the EU level and other international processes (e.g. EU TG Seabed, EMODnet Seabed Habitat, ICES, other Regional Sea Conventions);
10. Identify funding and possibly apply for projects to support the work of the EG;
11. Report to WG BioDiv.

Expected outcomes

EG Benthic aims to deliver:

- Effective cooperation with relevant HELCOM subsidiary bodies to support the implementation of relevant BSAP actions and other international commitments;
- Updated HELCOM Recommendations and guidelines for Benthic biotopes monitoring in the Baltic Sea (i.e. monitoring guidelines);
- Support to merge HELCOM HUB and EUNIS into a regional habitats classification system which fit the needs of the Contracting Parties;
- Guidance to produce harmonized high-quality maps for the HELCOM area including through engagement with EMODnet Seabed Habitat;
- Operational core indicators for the next holistic assessments (HOLAS) based on the best available scientific knowledge;
- Proposals for new indicators as needed for the assessment of benthic habitats and biotopes;
- Revised integrated assessment methods of benthic habitats for the next HOLAS based on the best available scientific knowledge.

Organization of work

Concrete tasks for the Expert Group will be presented in the work plan. The work plan is valid for a two-year period but should be reviewed and updated on an annual basis to ensure that the timeline and planned work remains relevant. This task list enables long-term planning and delivery of significant products that may require several components to be developed during consecutive years.

Membership of the Expert Group is obtained by nomination from their national HELCOM delegation. It is important that all members of the Expert Group have a firm connection to their national delegations. The Expert Group Chair can also invite non-members to attend individual meetings or to take part in intersessional work as deemed relevant. Invited experts should demonstrate particular skills that are relevant to the delivery of a specific request. HELCOM observers are invited to nominate a representative for the Expert Group.

The Expert Group will meet at least twice a year including one physical meeting per year and decides if more meeting(s) is/are needed.

The Expert Group is encouraged to connect with other relevant HELCOM bodies if relevant (e.g. WG Sea-based pressures, EG DreDs, EN Clime, EG Foodweb, HELCOM-VASAB MSP WG). The Expert Group should report on the latest activities to the meetings of WG BioDiv.

The Expert Group will elect a Chair for a 2-year period. The post can be reconducted to a maximum of 6 years.

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

The Terms of Reference are to be reviewed in 2030.