

To: **HELCOM Heads of Delegations**
Relevant ministries of HELCOM
Contracting Parties



The Baltic Sea We Want: *Mare Nostrum Balticum* (Our Baltic Sea)

HELCOM BSAP: Call to Action - statement by NGOs and scientists across the Baltic Sea region

We, the signing NGOs and scientists, would like to express our concern on the recent developments in the revision of the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP). After more than a year of intensive work on revising the BSAP with the goal to reach a healthy Baltic Sea, we note dwindling ambition, target years pushed back as far as possible and a general lack of commitment of the HELCOM Contracting Parties.

The HELCOM Contracting Parties have over the last year revised the BSAP set to be adopted by all Baltic Sea countries and the European Union on the 20 October 2021. The updated plan suggests 200 actions to be rolled out over the course of the next nine years aiming to prevent further deterioration of the Baltic Sea. Certain measurable targets are particularly positive e.g. allocating at least 30% Marine Protected Areas across the Baltic Sea by no later than 2030, including at least a 1/3 to be strictly protected and the national nutrient input ceilings setting clear thresholds to be achieved by individual countries by no later than 2027 to reduce eutrophication.

Yet, apart from these clear commitments, the remaining actions fall short and lack the sense of urgency that is now essential. Concrete political targets are the only way to shift away from the current trajectory of cumulative, negative impacts from human activities towards actions to improve the Baltic Sea environment. It is not enough to keep updating BSAP measures to establish and develop guidelines, road maps, evaluate existing programmes and conduct baseline surveys. While these are vital in assessing and addressing pressures, they are not in themselves going to help achieve good environmental status by 2030. Regretfully, despite clear scientific backing, even the ambition set for the desired state of the Baltic Sea in the sea-based segment is underwhelming – calling for ‘minimal’ harm and disturbance to biodiversity, ecosystem and marine life – instead of committing to achieve zero pollution and full recovery of the Baltic Sea ecosystem.

Science has always been the backbone supporting the actions of the Helsinki Convention, driving the joint efforts of all nine Baltic Sea countries towards restoring our sea to a ‘thriving and resilient ecosystem’¹. A number of scientists are raising their voices with deep concern on the dramatic changes of the Baltic Sea² and the overall ocean³, which could lead to irreversible consequences for nature and humans. There is no question that a fundamental shift in our relationship and management of the sea is needed. Yet, during the development of the BSAP, much of the relevant scientific advice has not been listened to, and instead measures have been watered down to avoid making the necessary trade-offs between human activities and recovery of nature. By setting precautionary boundaries and highlighting current and emerging challenges, science clearly and undoubtedly demonstrates that human pressure on our sea is unsustainable, and that climate change impacts and biodiversity loss are two of the most important risks for human societies. As highlighted by the recently presented contribution to IPCC Sixth Assessment Report⁴, climate change will significantly affect marine ecosystems; increasing water temperatures and acidification, as well as decreasing oxygen levels will greatly impact marine life. Therefore, measures to significantly reduce human pressures are vital.

¹ Draft updated Baltic Sea Action Plan, Doc 4-1 of HELCOM HODs 60 online meeting 3-4 June, 2021, pg 3 of 45.

² Reusch, T.B.H., Dierking, J., Andersson, H.C., Bonsdorff, Carstensen, J. et al. 2018. The Baltic Sea as a time machine for the future coastal ocean, *Science Advances*, 4(5): 1-16.; HELCOM, 2018: State of the Baltic Sea - Second HELCOM holistic assessment 2011-2016. *Baltic Sea Environment Proceedings*. 155.

³ United Nations, 2021: World Ocean Assessment II, & IPBES-IPCC CO-SPONSORED WORKSHOP BIODIVERSITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE WORKSHOP REPORT, 2021.

⁴ [IPCC, 2021](#): Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, A. Pirani, S. L. Connors, C. Péan, S. Berger, N. Caud, Y. Chen, L. Goldfarb, M. I. Gomis, M. Huang, K. Leitzell, E. Lonnoy, J.B.R. Matthews, T. K. Maycock, T. Waterfield, O. Yelekçi, R. Yu and B. Zhou (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press. In Press

We call on the Contracting Parties to agree on a 2021 HELCOM BSAP and Ministerial Statement that sets the political ambition required for the coming 9 years with the following:

- Based on scientific advice, ensure that actions in the revised BSAP allow for the Baltic Sea to become a thriving and resilient ecosystem, defining the Baltic as a pilot marine region to be fully ecosystem-based managed, including fisheries.
- Set ambitious yet realistic target years, with the target year 2030 as a deadline for delivering a recovering Baltic Sea healthy environment and not just for measures to commence.
- Commit to secure financing for the full implementation of the updated BSAP via state budgets and the BSAP Fund.
- Determine aspiring actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and to mitigate and adapt to the negative impacts that climate change has and will have on the Baltic Sea marine environment.

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