
Document title	Introduction to the PROTECT BALTIC project
Code	5-5
Category	INF
Agenda Item	Agenda item 5 Coordination of the EUSBSR Policy Area Spatial Planning, MSP related projects and initiatives
Submission date	10 October 2023
Submitted by	HELCOM Secretariat
Reference	

Background

PROTECT BALTIC is a project funded by EU Horizon, running from mid-August 2023 to mid-August 2028, and coordinated by the HELCOM Secretariat. The project's overarching aim is to achieve sufficient protection and restoration for marine environments. This aligns with the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 (EU BDS), which seeks to strengthen biodiversity through various means, including the establishment of a coherent network of protected areas and restoration efforts. In PROTECT BALTIC, the focus is on strategic, outcome-driven initiatives that secure genuine positive biodiversity outcomes that surpass mere percentage targets. The main project innovation will be a Protection Optimization Framework, which is a holistic transboundary decision support package. This framework aims to develop a transparent, data driven, science-based, step-by-step approach for identifying protection and restoration targets (i.e., what to protect and restore, and the quantities required to achieve objectives and goals). Furthermore, the framework aims to establish a shared approach for implementation (i.e., how to best protect and restore to reach the objectives and goals), all grounded in the latest scientific knowledge. The project will then translate these plans into actionable steps by identifying where to implement measures to optimize biodiversity benefits for protection and restoration through the use of state-of-the-art modelling. This modelling will serve as a blueprint for determining where, why and how to protect, considering ecologically relevant spatial and temporal scales. All components within this framework will be developed with guidance from the HELCOM Contracting Parties and will create a blueprint for planning, executing, governing, managing, and monitoring protection and restoration efforts in the Baltic Sea region.

This document introduces PROTECT BALTIC, the project's aim and gives a brief introduction of the work packages.

Representatives of PROTECT BALTIC will present the project in more detail aiming for discussion during the next session or meeting of the HELCOM-VASAB MSP WG.

Action requested

The Session is invited to take note of planned work in the project PROTECT BALTIC coordinated by the HELCOM Secretariat.

Introduction to the project PROTECT BALTIC

Aim of the project PROTECT BALTIC

PROTECT BALTIC will function as a major contributor towards achieving the biodiversity goals of the Baltic Sea Action Plan, the EU Biodiversity Strategy and the CBD Global Biodiversity Targets in the Baltic Sea. The aim of the work is to ensure sufficient spatial protection, covering both marine protected areas (MPAs) and possible other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs), as well as sufficient restoration of the marine environment. The focus is on strategic, outcome-driven efforts that secure genuine positive biodiversity outcomes that surpass mere percentage targets. In other words, PROTECT BALTIC seeks to maximize the effectiveness of our current and future protection efforts so that they can reach their full potential. This secures positive biodiversity outcomes, maintains ecosystem functions, and enables short and long-term production of ecosystem services and sustainable use. The planned work covers the full spectrum of planning, designation, governance, and management of protection and restoration efforts. This encompassing approach establishes the groundwork for a long-term, region-wide protection framework. One that transcends national borders and prioritizes ecological relevance and ecosystem function in decision making.

Running from 2023 to 2028, PROTECT BALTIC seeks to create and showcase a robust foundation of evidence and infrastructure to guide decision making and spatial protection. It will identify and comprehensively address protection gaps by offering cutting-edge solutions for Baltic Sea preservation and restoration. This involves optimizing spatial protection efforts, minimizing the negative impact of human activities on the ecosystem, and enhancing the understanding of what, why, where, and from what protection is needed. This approach adapts to the changing demands of spatial protection amid the triple threat of biodiversity loss, climate change, and pollution challenges. The project's aim is to preserve and revive the Baltic Sea ecosystem. This means maintaining and restoring its ecosystem functions to enable the provision of short and long-term ecosystem services, allowing both the Baltic Sea and society to thrive.

PROTECT BALTIC takes a holistic approach to the development of the MPA network where governance, designation and management challenges are addressed simultaneously and in a comprehensive manner. Addressing the full network of MPAs across an entire ecoregion allows PROTECT BALTIC to address ecoregion specificities, leveraging the project results closer to full operationalization. It also ensures the work can build on the most realistic distribution of e.g., biodiversity hotspots (WP 3), ecosystem services (WP4) and comprehensively account for aspects like ecosystem function (WPs 3 and 4) and connectivity (WP 5) using a systemic and coherent approach. Through this, the project strives to ensure that that project work, as well as future expansions of the network, effectively enhance the benefits of existing and future protection measures, ultimately optimizing the potential for positive biodiversity outcomes.

Targeted expected outcomes PROTECT BALTIC and EU Horizon Mission on Oceans Program

PROTECT BALTIC has three core Project Objectives (POs) adapted from the IUCN Green List criteria for effective protection and fully in line with the EU Horizon Mission on Oceans program. Each PO is supported by Project Objective Components (POCs). The objectives and tasks of the project have been set to enable: 1. building a robust evidence and infrastructure basis; 2. identifying gaps in the protection efforts; and 3. addressing said gaps cohesively and holistically across the full protection and restoration cycle.

Planned work under PROTECT BALTIC

The project has 10 work packages (WPs) dealing with different topics and tasks related to the project aim. The project has 17 partner organizations taking part in the work of the different work packages. A list of partner organizations can be found at the end of this document. A short introduction to the work in the different work packages is given below.

Work package 1: Project management and coordination

This work package is inherently relevant to successfully achieving all the project objectives as good project management is prerequisite for securing high quality project outcomes. The responsibility of WP1 is the overall project coordination, day-to-day management, meeting organization and execution, ensuring the most inclusive and integrated approaches are used, and links are established with the Advisory Board, the HELCOM WG BioDiv.

Work package 2: Collation of data to establish the knowledge base for optimization of marine spatial protection

This work package focuses on data management, collection, and collation, including a data management plan, regional data calls, and gathering information on species, habitats, and human pressures. Additionally, it aims to collect MPA-related management data and conduct a gap analysis to identify further needs, ensuring comprehensive, high-quality data for transparency and research.

Work package 3: Developing and executing environmental and socioeconomic spatial modelling for the optimization of marine spatial protection

Work package 3 has two phases. Phase 1 focuses on data and model development and involves creating high resolution environmental datasets for the Baltic Sea, using remote sensing and 3D modelling, including satellite imagery. This data will then be used to develop distribution models for key species, biotopes, and habitats. The WP will then focus on modelling and quantifying human-induced threats to marine life. In Phase 2, WP3 will project future species and habitat distributions based on environmental scenarios. It will also identify present and future biodiversity hotspots and areas of resilience using spatial conservation prioritization. Overall, WP3 plays a pivotal role in providing the scientific foundation needed for effective conservation and management of the Baltic Sea ecosystem.

Work package 4: Progressing and assessing ecosystem services and their value to society

This work package progresses and assesses ecosystem services and their value to society. WP4 will develop a versatile methodology to assess ecosystem services in the Baltic Sea. This approach involves identifying, mapping, quantifying, and valuing ecosystem services to support marine conservation and optimize the marine protected area (MPA) network. WP4 collaborates across disciplines to create the methodology, considering the role of species, habitats and human activities. It also explores how habitat quality and location affect ecosystem services.

Work package 5: Improving and executing the coherence assessment of the Baltic Sea MPA network and identifying new areas for MPA network expansion

The work package focuses on enhancing the ecological coherence of the Baltic Sea's marine protected area (MPA) network. It aims to ensure effective protection of biodiversity, ecosystem services, and climate refugia while considering human activities. The work begins with revising ecological coherence criteria and targets, aligning them with current scientific knowledge and environmental goals. WP5 develops connectivity models to understand species and habitat interactions within the Baltic Sea. The next phase assesses the coherence of the HELCOM MPA network, emphasizing representativity, replication, adequacy, and connectivity, with a focus on species and habitat distribution.

Work package 6: Creating a shared framework for the MPA network in the Baltic Sea and supporting the capacity of protection actors

The work package will create a shared framework for the MPA network in the Baltic Sea and support the capacity of protection actors. Due to its breadth, WP6 has been subdivided into four categories dealing with:

1) Governance

This part aims to foster a shared regional understanding of MPAs, establish common terminology, and set ecologically relevant protection targets and indicators. It also identifies threats and pressures on the Baltic Sea with the goal to optimize the network by identifying areas that need protection.

2) Management

This component assesses the management effectiveness of the entire Baltic Sea MPA network and supports the development of a Regional Restoration Action Plan and toolbox.

3) Monitoring

This part reviews existing monitoring systems in Baltic Sea MPAs, explores innovative monitoring tools and methods, and develops a comprehensive monitoring framework and guidelines for the entire MPA network.

4) Restoration

This component contributes to the development of a Regional Restoration Action Plan and toolbox, emphasizing regional priorities, methods, costs, and feasibility.

Work package 7: Improved understanding of, and proposed solutions to address, barriers in the legislative framework affecting marine protection

Work package 7 focuses on assessing international and EU legal frameworks relevant to marine protected areas (MPAs) in the Baltic Sea, aligning them with protection targets set by the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) and the EU Biodiversity Strategy.

Work package 8: Building and updating a regional portal for MPA information to improve regional capacity of actors in marine protection

Work package 8 is the building and updating of a regional portal for MPA information to improve regional capacity of actors in marine protection. This involves defining portal requirements, analyzing and updating the existing MPA database, and developing the online user interface.

Work package 9: Communication, dissemination and outreach

Work package 9 focuses on vital aspects of communication, outreach, and dissemination to amplify project impact. It encompasses tasks like devising a communication strategy, crafting a visual identity, setting up a project website, and leveraging social media for wider engagement. It also includes the development of an augmented reality app, and initiatives like webinars, conferences, videos, and publications to enhance project visibility and knowledge sharing. The aim is to amplify awareness, deliver crucial information for informed decision-making, and secure the long-term effectiveness of the Baltic's marine protected areas.

Work package 10: Sustainability and exploitation of project results

Work package 10 centres on sustainability and exploitation to maximize outcomes. WP10 involves creating a sustainability strategy, maintaining ongoing communication with policy stakeholders, and seeking collaboration with other projects for enhanced marine protection in the Baltic Sea.

Cooperation with other projects

The PROTECT BALTIC project has been designed so that the data, tools and developed plans will contribute to and make use of work done under other projects. These include ongoing LIFE projects, projects under the HORIZON funding instrument, including directly cooperating with e.g., Blue4All, MSP4BIO, MPA EUROPE, as well as linking into work under UN and IUCN biodiversity and protection processes.

Partner organizations:

AAU: Åbo Akademi University

AKTiiVS: AKTiiVS

AU: Aarhus university

BfN: Bundesamt für Naturschutz

CCB: Coalition Clean Baltic

EMOE: Keskkonnaministeerium /Kliimaministeerium

HELCOM: Baltic Sea Environment Protection Commission

JHS: Jade Hochschule Wilhelmshaven/Oldenburg/Elsfleth

KU: Klaipėdos universitetas

MHPWF: Metsähallitus

MIM: Danish Ministry of the Environment

MoE: Ministry of the Environment (Finland)

SLU: Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

SwAM: Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management

SYKE: Finnish Environment Institute

TU: University of Tartu

VSTT: State Services for Protected Areas under the Ministry of the Environment