

ASSESSING THE BALANCE BETWEEN
NATURE AND PEOPLE IN EUROPEAN SEAS:

MARITIME SPATIAL PLANNING IN THE BALTIC

ASSESSMENT REPORT

GLOSSARY

- Ecosystem-based approach (EBA)
- European Union (EU)
- Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)
- Good Environmental Status (GES)
- Helsinki Convention (HELCOM)
- Marine Protected Area (MPA)
- Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP)
- Maritime Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD)
- Member States (MS)
- Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)
- Vision and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea (VASAB)
- World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)



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INTRODUCTION

Taking an ecosystem-based approach to Maritime Spatial Planning in the Baltic is the key to striking a sustainable balance between nature and people.



THE EU IS THE SIXTH-LARGEST PRODUCER OF FISHERY AND AQUACULTURE PRODUCTS



THE EU AND ITS MEMBER STATES ARE AIMING TO PROTECT AT LEAST 30% OF MARINE AND COASTAL AREAS BY 2030

Taking a sustainable and ecosystem-based approach (EBA) to planning and managing the use of the world’s ocean has long resided at the core of WWF’s mission. This approach is critical for both ensuring biodiversity protection and securing the ecosystem services that people rely upon. Therefore, supporting the development of Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) based on an EBA in the European Union (EU) has been a clear choice for WWF organizations globally, and especially in Europe.

To this end, the WWF Baltic Ecoregion Programme has supported the enactment of the EU MSP Directive 2014/89/EU¹ and is working toward an ecosystem-based and sustainable implementation of the Directive in Europe, and the Baltic Sea in particular. WWF believes that adopting an EBA is a vital overarching necessity for managing marine environments and building resilience – and should become a core element of all relevant EU Directives and policies in this field, not least the MSP Directive.

Implementing the MSP Directive means that the coastal EU Member States (MS) are obliged to develop national maritime spatial plans and put them into force by March 2021. The plans are to be in line with the MSP Directive. Among

other implications, this necessitates that the maritime spatial plans meet the environmental requirements of EU Directives (including the Birds and Habitats Directives, Maritime Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), Water Framework Directive, etc.) and policies, and that the plans follow an ecosystem-based management approach.

The Baltic Sea is one of the first regional sea basins to conduct a first planning cycle according to the new EU MSP Directive. Each country in the region has a different starting point, and no clearly agreed upon indicators exist yet to monitor and evaluate maritime spatial plans for their “Ecosystem-based Management performance.” WWF has taken the initiative to assess nine maritime spatial plans from around the Baltic Sea, developed by eight different EU countries and one autonomous region, to measure and compare the degree to which they comply with the principles of ecosystem-based management. This assessment report provides a snapshot (from the end of March to the end of November 2021) of the current situation of MSP in the Baltic Sea region concerning how well it aligns with an ecosystem-based approach, with special emphasis on the performance of ecosystem-based planning aspects.



Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP)

Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) is a future-oriented process that considers all economic sectors and ecological factors related to a marine area and allocates space, both geographically and temporally, to different activities and people whose livelihoods are tied to our seas for the purpose of ensuring a long-term sustainable balance between people and nature.



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Box 1: What does it mean to take an “ecosystem-based” approach to managing our oceans?

As defined by McLeod et al., “What is Ecosystem-based management for the oceans?”, 2005.

“Ecosystem-based management is an integrated approach to management that considers the entire ecosystem, including humans. The goal of ecosystem-based management is to maintain an ecosystem in a healthy, productive and resilient condition so that it can provide the services humans want and need. Ecosystem-based management differs from current approaches that usually focus on a single species, sector, activity or concern; it considers the cumulative impacts of different sectors.

SPECIFICALLY, ECOSYSTEM-BASED MANAGEMENT:

- Emphasizes the protection of ecosystem structure, functioning, and key processes;
- Is place-based in focusing on a specific ecosystem and the range of activities affecting it;
- Explicitly accounts for the interconnectedness within systems, recognizing the importance of interactions between many target species or key services and other non-target species;
- Acknowledges interconnectedness among systems, such as between air, land and sea; and
- Integrates ecological, social, economic, and institutional perspectives, recognizing their strong interdependencies.”

McLeod, K.L., Lubchenco, J., Palumbi, S.R. and Rosenberg, A.A. 2005. Scientific Consensus Statement on Marine Ecosystem-Based Management. Signed by 217 academic scientists and policy experts with relevant expertise and published by the Communication Partnership for Science and the Sea.

¹<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32014L0089>

METHODOLOGY

A set of 33 indicators across four categories developed by WWF were used to assess the compliance of national maritime spatial plans with ecosystem-based management.

In the assessment, a total of nine maritime spatial plans belonging to eight EU Baltic Sea countries – including Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden – and the autonomous region of Åland, were reviewed to determine the degree to which they are ecosystem-based. Although the MSP Directive asks MS to meet certain common standards and procedures, the EU leaves it open to the States to develop and implement national MSP legislation and schemes in line with the Directive. In order to analyze the States' EBA to MSP, WWF has therefore developed an assessment framework with specific indicators and criteria based on a large literature review and expertise across the network. This framework is set up to allow for comparison between maritime spatial plans and to help identify remaining gaps.

Assessment framework

The underlying criteria for measuring the maritime spatial plans were derived from criteria defined in the WWF guidance paper: Ecosystem-based MSP in Europe and how to assess it (April 2021)², as well as A practical approach toward an Ecosystem-based Approach in Maritime Spatial Planning – including a method for the evaluation monitoring and review of EBA in MSP³ by the European Commission (October 2021)³. A set of 33 indicators were used to measure the ecosystem-based management performance of the plans, including to what extent socio-economic principles have been respected, how the MSP process has been performed and how each Member State or planning authority has addressed the implementation of their plans' measures. These indicators were assigned to four main categories, each of which assess a key domain of sound MSP in national maritime spatial plans: Inclusion of nature, Socio-economic considerations, Good ocean governance, and Comprehensiveness of the complete MSP process.

FIG 1: Description of four main categories of ecosystem-based MSP

Inclusion of nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The plan accounts for integrating marine protection, limiting the expansion of at-sea activities, and considers the cumulative effects of human activities on the carrying capacity of marine ecosystems as essential components of securing a sustainable blue economy.
Socio-economic considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The plan takes diverse at-sea human activities and socio-economic factors into consideration, including the Principles for a Sustainable Blue Economy⁴.
Good ocean governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The plan aligns with other EU policies and designates competent authorities to manage and enforce a high-standard EBA to MSP.
Comprehensiveness of the complete MSP process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The MSP process is based on the robust management of all maritime activities, including transboundary cooperation between national authorities for long-term sustainability, as well as an adaptive approach to monitoring and future planning.

² https://wwf-eu.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/wwf_eb_maritime_spatial_planning_guidance_paper_march_2021.pdf

³ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a8ee2988-4693-11ec-89db-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

⁴ wwf-principles-for-a-sustainable-blue-economy-15_1471_.pdf (triggerfish.cloud)



EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF MPAs DELIVERS DIRECT BENEFITS TO INDUSTRIES LIKE FISHERIES AND TOURISM

In order to avoid long lists of indicators, closely related subjects were merged into single indicators, and some highly abstract and complex indicators (such as #12, regarding following the principles for a sustainable blue economy (SBE)⁵ and the SBE finance principles⁶, as well as defining clear economic objectives) were turned into “Indicator questions” allowing the scores of respective indicators to be differentiated. To measure the performance level of each indicator, a three-step scale from zero to one (0 - 0.5 - 1) was provided. For each indicator, three description choices were offered according to the level of criterion fulfilment (see full list of indicators in the [Technical Annex](#)). In the evaluation part of this report, the three scoring categories (0 - 0.5 - 1) were changed into a per cent-scale (0 to 100%).

Assessment process

A total of nine maritime spatial plans and respective supporting documents were assessed by a global and Baltic MSP senior expert, based on the MSP information that was publicly available from end of March till end of November 2021. Scoring was completed from September to December 2021, based on the planning authorities' planning documents. These documents consisted of, where applicable, completed or draft versions of maritime spatial plans, Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs) and/or Environmental reports, the legal enactment documents, and any additional material (such as review documents and transboundary consultation material) available in the English language. All documents were assessed by the consultant against the indicators developed.

The consultant assigned the respective scores to an indicator list for each of the nine maritime spatial plans. The assessments were then reviewed by WWF field country experts and, in some cases, by external national MSP experts, then adapted respectively. All scores, along with brief justifications, can be found in the [Technical Annex](#).

To better understand the national background and interpretation of the MSP, “Country Dossiers” were developed for each nation. For Finland, two assessments were carried out—one for Finland and one for the autonomous Åland Islands, which had a slightly different process. Russia was excluded since the country is not part of the EU, nor does it have a maritime spatial plan in place yet. Although Russia has implemented a number of pilot MSP projects for the Baltic Sea, and the national Roadmap for promoting MSP is currently being developed and discussed (Capacity4MSP project, 2019-2022). Each of these dossiers contain, a short description of the national MSP scheme, and two focal summaries of the overall country assessment. One summary focuses on the way the sea areas have been assigned and prioritized to be used for specific sea uses or functions in the future. The second summary refers to the process and how closely an ecosystem-based management approach has been followed, whether innovative new methods were applied or how well certain principles have been acknowledged in the plan (i.e., precautionary principle, stakeholder involvement, monitoring, and adaptation). For those countries bordering two sea basins (i.e., Denmark, Germany and Sweden), an assessment was completed for both the Baltic and the North Sea; however, focus was primarily placed on the Baltic Sea assessment.

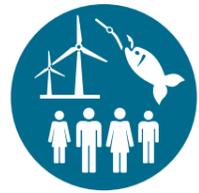
⁵ wwf-principles-for-a-sustainable-blue-economy-15_1471_.pdf (triggerfish.cloud)

⁶ The Principles – United Nations Environment – Finance Initiative (unepfi.org)



RESULTS

MSP in the Baltic can be considered to be partly successful, with totals from all four categories achieving an average of score of 49% for ecosystem-based MSP in the Baltic region.



The results of the assessment, based on indicators within four categories (Inclusion of nature, Socio-economic considerations, Good ocean governance, and Comprehensiveness of the whole MSP process), show significant differences among three to four maritime spatial plans. While some scored higher performance values of 50% or greater for certain indicators, others scored lower. As a result, the overall average value of all four categories combined is less than 50% of what is achievable for ecosystem-based MSP in the Baltic region.

In particular, significant differences were observed in the legally-binding plan indicator (#22) under the Good ocean governance category. The planning cultures among countries differ starkly; while some plans are binding, others are only guiding in character. Large differences were also observed in the Comprehensiveness of the whole MSP process category. Some countries' national maritime spatial plans only cover parts of the sea area and,

because of this, inner coastal waters and parts of the territorial waters fall under a different planning regime (municipality, region). Since these coastal plans cannot be assessed yet, the respective countries scored zero on this indicator.

Where countries were more homogenous in their maritime spatial plans, they scored 70% or above on indicators. This included "Results from cross-sectoral public consultation incorporated" (#16), and "Competent authority for delivering EBA-MSP in place" (#24). Some of the indicators countries scored the worst on (30% or below) were the following: "Areas for nature restoration included" (#8), "Blue Carbon ecosystems protected" (#9), "Temporal and spatial uncertainties in the era of climate change addressed" (#17), "Aligns with EU policies for reduction of noise pollution" (#19), and "Tools for monitoring progress and aligning with key policies included" (#32).



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The results of the assessment, based on indicators within four categories (Inclusion of nature, Socio-economic considerations, Good ocean governance, and Comprehensiveness of the whole MSP process), show significant differences among three to four maritime spatial plans

TABLE 1: Average Member State score for each Maritime Spatial Planning assessment category

For each Member state the worst and best scores for each category is highlighted in red and green respectively. A high percentage score denotes a positive performance, a score below 50% denotes a negative performance.

SCORE IN % ● 0-10 ● 11-20 ● 21-30 ● 31-40 ● 41-50 ● 51-60 ● 61-70 ● 71-80 ● 81-90 ● 91-100

CATEGORY AVERAGE	INCLUSION OF NATURE	SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICATORS	GOOD OCEAN GOVERNANCE	COMPREHENSIVENESS OF THE COMPLETE MSP PROCESS
Baltic Average	43.4%	54.0%	46.9%	50.7%
Denmark	16.70%	28.6%	38.9%	37.5%
Estonia	57.4%	78.6%	66.7%	56.3%
Finland	29.6%	28.6%	27.8%	37.5%
Åland	40.7%	50.0%	27.8%	28.0%
Germany	31.5%	42.9%	55.6%	68.8%
Latvia	68.5%	92.9%	88.9%	87.5%
Lithuania	27.8%	50.0%	22.2%	31.3%
Poland	48.1%	28.6%	38.9%	43.8%
Sweden	70.4%	85.7%	55.6%	68.8%



CATEGORY RESULTS/ INCLUSION OF NATURE

THE INCLUSION OF MPAs IN THE COUNTRIES' MARITIME SPATIAL PLANS SCORED RATHER LOW, WITH A 41% AVERAGE OVERALL

The Inclusion of nature category comprises nine indicators (see [Technical Annex](#)) that constitute formal MSP Directive requirements (i.e., SEA, Land-sea interaction), relevant elements of ecosystem-based management (i.e., precautionary principle, cumulative impacts), aspects of marine nature conservation (i.e. Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), blue corridors, identification of sensitive areas) and recent approaches for reestablishing ocean resilience (i.e., areas for restoration, fostering blue carbon storage). The average score for the Inclusion of nature indicators is 43%. Three countries, Estonia (57%), Latvia (69%), and Sweden (70%) had maximum scores of 100% on four out of nine indicators. These countries conducted comprehensive cumulative impact assessments and studies identifying sensitive areas and, as a result, based decisions using the precautionary principle. Åland (41%), Finland (30%), Germany (32%), and Poland (48%) scored mediocly. Denmark and Lithuania had the lowest scores in this category with, respectively, 17% and 28% of indicators being partially fulfilled. Designating areas for habitat restoration (Indicator #8) has not yet been outlined in any maritime spatial plan and thus scored 0% in all countries. Meanwhile, providing space for blue carbon storage, i.e., seagrass, algae, (Indicator #9) scored a low 22% average overall in the Baltic.

The inclusion of MPAs in the countries' maritime spatial plans (Indicator #6) scored rather low, with a 41% average overall. The Inclusion of MPA indicator is an average value of three indicators which look at the following:

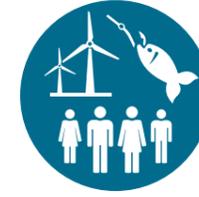
1. MPA management provisions are transposed into MSP priorities in the maritime spatial plans
2. MPAs cover the EU Biodiversity Strategy Goal of protecting at least 30% of marine waters by 2030, of which 10% should be strictly protected
3. Measures are in place to connect and manage the MPAs in a coherent network within the planning area and across countries' protected

species, including regional Seas goals (HELCOM, Barcelona, OSPAR Conventions, etc., protected areas)

Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden scored high in terms of MPA management provisions being transposed into MSP priorities in the maritime spatial plans (Indicator #6a). However no Baltic MSP has yet fulfilled the EU Biodiversity Strategy goal of protecting at least 30% of marine waters by 2030, and especially the 10% strict protection area has not been included (Indicator #6b). Furthermore management measures (Indicator #6c) have only been fully implemented (including fisheries restrictions) in one country, Sweden. Denmark declares 30% of the sea area as MPAs but defers the decision about measures to future MSP procedures. Most of the countries have not yet completed their management plans for Natura 2000 areas or designated strict protection zones. In some countries, MPAs in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) are still only under consideration or in the examination phase.

The highest scoring countries in the Inclusion of nature category – Estonia, Latvia and Sweden – scored especially well in the “Strategic Environmental Assessments conducted” (#1) and “Consideration for ecologically-sensitive areas” (#2) indicators. For the most part, they all used novel and innovative tools and recent data to systematically identify cumulative effects and sensitive areas, and partly translated the precautionary principle into their spatial plans. These countries also participated actively in EU projects for innovative MSP, and used the knowledge gained and added capacity for developing maritime spatial plans.

A positive finding is that four countries (Estonia, Germany, Latvia, and Sweden) conducted detailed SEAs (Indicator #1), while Poland, Lithuania, and Åland presented environmental reports with some solid evidence. Only Finland reported that they did not need a SEA for their plan because there is no intended impact from sector activities on the plan. Finland, however, presented an environmental report and an assessment of potential impacts from sea uses delineated as suitable in the plan document.



CATEGORY RESULTS/ SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

SURPRISINGLY, THE LOWEST SCORING INDICATORS BALTIC-WIDE ARE “INDUSTRY EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME GENERATION FORECASTED” AND “MARINE ECOSYSTEM SERVICES ASSESSED AND INCLUDED” BOTH AT 33%

Seven indicators were assessed in this category, see [Technical Annex](#). They comprise the integration of different sectors of marine uses (i.e., offshore wind energy, fisheries), but also ecosystem services and how they have been translated into spatial measures in the plan (Indicator #10). Maritime spatial plans were also assessed in terms of their contribution to the mitigation or resolution of conflicts between uses and functions (Indicator #11), especially with nature conservation, by prioritizing assignments and conditions for sea uses. One indicator looks at tools and data used to evaluate the effects of different maritime spatial plan scenarios on the income and employment situation in the coastal areas (#13).

On a Baltic-wide scale the socio-economic considerations category average was the highest score, 54%. Estonia (79%), Latvia (93%) and Sweden (86%) scored overall highest in the Socio-economic considerations category. Åland (50%), Lithuania (50%) and Germany (43%) had overall medium average scores, and Poland, Finland, and Denmark each had low scores averaging 29%. The three highest scoring countries had five to six indicators out of a total of seven with a maximum score of 100% in this category.

All Baltic Sea countries scored medium (0.5) or high (1.0) for stakeholder inclusiveness (Indicator #16; 78%), which is due to the support of the EU MSP capacity building projects in recent years. Most of the countries scored relatively high in offshore renewable energy development (Indicator #15; 61%), sea use by fisheries assessed and included (Indicator #14; 61%) and risk in conflicts (Indicator #11; 61%), profiting from the partly innovative application of ecosystem-service assessments, and job and income assessments, as well as looking at sustainable blue economy (which is linked to renewable energy, stakeholder inclusion, ecosystem services and cumulative impact considerations). Estonia, Latvia, and Sweden participated actively in EU

MSP development projects and managed to transfer novel knowledge into the development of maritime spatial plans.

Countries with medial scores only took some of the elements comprising the indicators (i.e., fisheries sector involvement, job and income generation scenarios) into moderate consideration, or they didn't include certain elements (i.e., ecosystem services, sustainable blue economy) in the plan documents at all. In the case of Finland, socio-economic considerations have been assessed, but not been translated into conflict solutions nor has guidance been given on how to set priorities for conflicting sea uses or functions since the plan is assumed to have no direct impact at all. Denmark has issued a binding plan but shifts decisions about some of the conflicting uses (i.e., mineral extraction, fisheries, offshore renewable energy) into the follow-up permission or licensing procedures and exempts fisheries from regulations.

The reason offshore renewable energy development (Indicator #15) had a high Baltic-wide average score was because the translation of renewable energy targets into MSP while respecting biodiversity goals is mainly the result of the introduction of the EU wide goals for renewable energy production⁷ which have gradually been introduced in the whole European Union. For some countries like Denmark, however, the continuation and increase of oil and gas resource exploitation until 2050 has led to a lower scoring despite high renewable offshore wind values. Surprisingly, the lowest scoring indicators Baltic-wide are “Industry employment and income generation forecasted” (#13) and “Marine ecosystem services assessed and included” (#10) both at 33%. Definitions of sustainable blue economy objectives and finance principles (Indicator #12) were not found in the maritime spatial plans of three countries, leading to the assumption that their MSP is based on an economic growth model that does not take into account planetary boundaries and potential negative feedback loops from environmental overuse and habitat destruction.

⁷ The European Commission estimates between 240 and 450 GW of offshore wind power is needed by 2050 to keep temperature rises below 1.5°C. Electricity will represent at least 50% of the total energy mix in 2050 and 30% of the future electricity demand will be supplied by offshore wind.



CATEGORY RESULTS/ GOOD OCEAN GOVERNANCE

THE AVERAGE SCORE FOR THE GOOD OCEAN GOVERNANCE CATEGORY BALTIC-WIDE IS APPROXIMATELY 47%

Nine indicators comprise the Good Ocean governance category, see [Technical Annex](#). One group of indicators screens how much the maritime spatial plans contribute to the fulfilment of EU policies and to reaching a Good Environmental Status (GES) of the sea. There is an indicator for seafloor and habitat protection (#18), one for noise reduction (#19), for species protection (#20), and one that looks at mechanisms to harmonize implementation and reporting timelines for MSP and the other environmental directives and policies (#23).

A second group of indicators examine aspects underlying the maritime spatial plan, such as whether a long-term vision has been formulated and scenarios have been applied and discussed in finding solutions (#21), and if space has been reserved for future uncertain developments (including climate change impacts) that cannot be judged today (#25). The last group looks at core factors that are crucial for the implementation of a plan – including whether the designations are binding and enforceable (Indicator #22) and if there is an administration in place to carry out planning and implementation (Indicator #24).

The average score for the Good ocean governance category Baltic-wide is approximately 47%. Latvia (89%), Estonia (67%), and Sweden and Germany (56%) scored above the Baltic-wide average score. Poland and Denmark (39%), Finland and Åland (28%), and Lithuania (22%) all came in under the average Baltic-wide score. The low overall scoring average is not surprising when considering that only Latvia and Poland had fulfilled some of the considerations for temporal and spatial uncertainties in the era of climate change (Indicator #17). This means that certain areas are explicitly left free from designations at the present, and that they may be used for yet unknown functions in the future. Noise reduction considerations (#19)—a descriptor for GES—were only applied by three countries (Germany, Latvia and Sweden); all other countries scored zero for this indicator. The next lowest scoring indicator Baltic-wide was “Aligns with EU policies for

seafloor and habitat protection” (#18), with three countries scoring zero, and five countries scoring 0.5. Only Latvia had the maximum score of 1.

On the positive side, all countries have mechanisms and agencies in place with the mandate and at least reasonable capacities to handle the complex issue of MSP. The four indicators that boosted the Baltic-wide scoring average were “Legally-binding plan” (#22; 61%), which was very polarized in scoring in terms of countries scoring either 100% or 0% with the exception of Denmark, “Various scenarios of sustainable sea uses considered” (#25; 61%), “Aligns with EU Habitats Directive and Birds Directive” (#20; 67%), and “Competent authority for delivering EBA-MSP in place” (#24; 72%) were also higher scoring indicators, without which the Baltic-wide average score for the Governance category would have fallen to 32%. The overall Baltic score of 67% for species protection (Indicator #20) may be attributed to the maturity of the compulsory Birds Directive.

The opportunity to align the cross-sectoral policies and timelines of the MSP Directive and other environmental directives has only been seized to a significant degree by two countries (Latvia and Estonia), and to a lower degree by Denmark, Germany, Sweden, as well as the autonomous region of Åland. Whether the maritime spatial plan is fully or to some degree binding (Indicator #22) scored 61% overall due to the fact that Finland, Åland and Sweden had zero scores under this indicator. Almost all countries have set up competent structures and mechanisms that should be able to deliver good maritime spatial plans, provided the political will to decide on questions of conflicting uses. Most of the countries used some kind of scenario to define the final priorities of future MSP. The formulation of a long-term vision (20-30 years) for the future development of sea use (#21) has been used by Estonia, Sweden and Latvia, with Denmark, Finland to a lower degree; the others did not formulate a long-term vision, hence the Baltic-wide low average of 44% for this indicator. It is striking however, that the indicators of GES from the MSFD (#18) are poorly fulfilled (39%) in the Maritime Spatial Plans.



CATEGORY RESULTS/ THE COMPREHENSIVENESS OF THE COMPLETE MSP PROCESS

A RATHER DIVERSE PICTURE OF THE BALTIC MS CAN BE OBSERVED. AN AVERAGE OF 51% OF INDICATORS ARE COVERED TO SOME DEGREE IN ALL THE BALTIC SEA COUNTRIES' NATIONAL MARITIME SPATIAL PLANS

The category dealing with the comprehensiveness of the plans comprises eight indicators, see [Technical Annex](#). The indicators reviewed the completeness of the data being used as well as the different marine economic sectors and functions addressed, including cross-border cooperation (#28) and process factors like interdisciplinarity (#30), adaptivity of planning (#29), assessment and monitoring of MSP (#32). A very important indicator is the sea area coverage (#33). It measures whether the maritime spatial plans fully cover the sea area of a country within one authority or if they are aligned with the adjacent national sea area plan (following the same rules and procedures). In Sweden and Finland (including Åland), the planning of territorial seas is in the competence of municipal bodies or regions. In the other countries, the entire sea area from inner waters including the EEZ, are covered by the plans. This category scored approximately 51% Baltic-wide, when adding up the amount of indicators fully or partially fulfilled in the national maritime spatial plans; meaning consideration of the indicators was, for the most part, partially or fully taken into account.

In terms of comprehensiveness, a rather diverse picture of the Baltic MS can be observed. An average of 51% of indicators are covered to some degree in all the Baltic Sea countries' national maritime spatial plans. The highest scoring countries in the comprehensiveness category are Latvia (88%), Sweden (69%), and Germany (69%). Medium scoring countries are Estonia (56%) and

Poland (44%). Meanwhile, Åland (25%), Lithuania (31%), Finland (38%) and Denmark (38%) had the lowest category scores overall.

Cross-border cooperation (Indicator #28; 61%), Interdisciplinary process (Indicator #30; 67%), and Area coverage (Indicator #33; 67%) had the highest Baltic-wide scores. Data collection (Indicator #26; 50%) and Industrial, ecological, cultural and societal functions included (Indicator #27; 56%), were fulfilled to a partial degree by countries. Meanwhile, “Sustainable multipurpose use through time and space included” (#31; 44%), “Tools for monitoring progress and aligning with key policies included” (#32; 28%) and “Adaptive management framework applied” (#29; 33%) were the weakest indicators met on the whole.

The use of temporal regulations is still rare among the maritime spatial plans assessed. Many countries have designated large “general use zones” which can be translated as “multi-use”, when, in fact, they just allow current uses to continue unrestricted. It is a positive sign that three of the maritime spatial plans (Estonia, Latvia and Sweden) have utilized a broad knowledge base, involving interdisciplinary and best available science. It is a concern that only five countries have partially addressed the assessment and monitoring of the MSP (Indicator #32) and define what to monitor in the delivery of the plan and how. Four countries (Sweden, Latvia, Denmark and Finland) have at least highlighted this indicator as a future task, while the remaining countries did not touch upon the issue, even though this is a requirement of the MSP Directive.





ANALYSIS

The Baltic Member States have taken a positive step forward in establishing Maritime Spatial Plans in the region, but there is still much work to do to strengthen the implementation of ecosystem-based management.



HOW NATURE IS FACTORED INTO MSP PROCESSES MUST BE IMPROVED ACROSS THE BALTIC

Looking at the last 20 years since MSP first came into existence—and not even 10 years since an EU-wide framework for MSP was created—it can be stated that the Baltic MS have taken a positive step forward in establishing MSP in the region. In general, the region has somehow helped pave the way for an EBA to MSP. The Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (Helsinki Commission – HELCOM) formed a joint working group together with Vision and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea (VASAB), an organization of the Baltic Sea ministries in charge of land-use planning. For years, this working group has focused on defining and operationalizing an approach to MSP that is ecosystem-based. The HELCOM-VASAB organization’s work on ecosystem-based MSP has fostered the development of MSP in the region as well as the EU MSP projects which have helped build knowledge and capacities. HELCOM-VASAB also led the processes in Europe and the global MSP community. The clear commitment of HELCOM and the funding through EU and Nordic financing mechanisms (INTERREG, Bonus, Nordic Council) have been instrumental in developing practices for an EBA to MSP.

How did EU Baltic countries fare in delivering an ecosystem-based approach to Maritime Spatial Planning?

The overall strengths and weaknesses of a maritime spatial plan can be quickly assessed by looking at each country’s scoring per indicator in totality, and comparing those scores to the overall Baltic regional average for all indicators (see [Technical Annex](#)). The overall Baltic regional assessment score for the four categories is 49% of the attainable indicator results for an EBA to MSP. All but three of the Baltic Sea countries fall below the Baltic average, with five countries deviating significantly from the overall regional average. Identified weaknesses or gaps within a maritime spatial plan present obstacles when it comes to executing a robust MSP that can deliver on agreed goals, values and targets. This means that there is still much work to do when it comes to strengthening the implementation of ecosystem-based management in national MSP. Here, WWF has identified the shortfalls and gaps, per assessment category, which must be addressed by Baltic MS in order to avoid potential conflicts, address lack of adherence to requirements or guidelines, and prevent marine resources and habitats from being harmed.



INCLUSION OF NATURE

The weakest scoring countries have yet to fulfil many of the important criteria of an ecosystem-based approach to Maritime Spatial Planning.

The reason Sweden came out so strongly in this category is their inclusion of MPAs with 30% protected areas. Although, all countries have yet to plan for restoration of habitats (Indicator #8) which is a big gap identified. Furthermore, Estonia, Denmark, Finland, Germany and Lithuania have not identified the protection of Blue Carbon zones (Indicator #9). The weakest countries have yet to fulfil many of the important criteria of an EBA to MSP, which includes activities such as conducting SEAs, translating the precautionary principle, incorporating land-sea interactions in planning, and ensuring network connectivity as well as completely leaving areas for restoration and protecting blue carbon out of focus. The reflections of new requirements from the EU biodiversity strategy, to foster the sea’s potential to capture blue carbon through the reestablishment of seagrass-meadows and macrophytes as CO₂ sinks, were only taken up by three countries. Conducting Strategic Environmental Assessments was fulfilled by most of the countries. Finland was the only country to conduct a SEA about the potential impacts of potential uses, but argued in the same document that the plan had no impacts that could be assessed.

Estonia, Finland, Åland, Lithuania and Sweden partially fulfilled the land-sea interaction indicator because the scopes

of their national maritime spatial plans do not fully cover the coastal sea areas, and local sea use plans are not yet established. Finland’s maritime spatial plan does contain coastal areas, and zoning of suitability has been done right up to the coastline. However, detailed plans with specific area designations are not covered by the plan; they will be done on a municipal level. How these municipal plans and the MSP will relate to one another is still unclear. In Latvia and Poland, coastal planning is integrated into MSP, but sometimes not in the sense of sustainability where large industrial development projects are included in the MSP without prioritizing protection requirements (as seen in Denmark, Poland, and Lithuania). Both Denmark and Germany have mostly shifted the majority of decision making to future MSP rounds and, worryingly, have hardly considered land pressures on the sea, not even the nutrient organic impacts from agriculture leakage.

Currently, MPAs have been designated as multi-usage zones, including bottom trawling. Additionally, in two countries, Germany and Lithuania, MPAs are not based on sound sensitive area mapping. Altogether, this means that some of the maritime spatial plans have only fully or partially met the inclusion of nature indicators. If these indicators are not met overall, achievement of GES across the Baltic will be hindered.





SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

Although this was the highest scoring category overall in the assessment, there are clear indications of serious shortcomings and a lack of inclusion of nature protection targets.

The overall score for the Socio-economic considerations category for the Baltic is 54%. Most countries had good results when it came to fulfilling requirements to meet obligatory objectives of EU policies that have been in place for some years, such as EU renewable energy goals (Indicator #15; 61%) for offshore energy production. Latvia scored the highest because their plan is led by the GES principle. Latvia and Estonia also based their stakeholder participation on the principles of the ESPOO Convention, which deals with environmental impact assessments in a transboundary context, thus making it one of the most inclusive. Sweden made economic services a central focus of their plan and ensured active stakeholder inclusivity and participation through many consultation meetings. In addition, Sweden designated fishery recruitment areas under nature areas, in addition to the commercial fishery areas. However, in most maritime spatial plans, commercial fisheries are often hardly restricted and thus allow co-use

in general use zones and also in many conservation areas. The reason being that the integration of fisheries often takes place at the information gathering stage for the plan or when different gear types are being evaluated. But, for the most part, this ends when it comes to deciding over limiting fisheries' impact on biodiversity or even fish stocks. Other EU policies like the Renewable Energy Directive⁸, aimed at establishing renewable energy capacity for offshore wind installations, were followed by most countries. Intensively so by experienced offshore wind countries like Germany and Denmark, and only cautiously by most other countries which treat this claim rather as a future option.

Regarding important aspects of the MSP Directive, strong stakeholder participation was fulfilled by most countries (Indicator #16), with an overall score of 78%. Although Poland has only held two stakeholder consultation rounds and three transboundary consultations with neighbouring countries. The obligation to acknowledge nature conservation demands in all functional zones, regardless of priority, seems to give nature protection a high priority. However, by not granting the Natura 2000 areas the status of a priority for nature, the impact of this rule looks questionable. The Polish plan gives much space to uncertain developments to cover future new demands. The exploitation of fossil energy is allowed in 17 zones, in contradiction to Paris Agreement obligations, including in an Important Bird Area zone (i.e., "zone 92 O"). Poland reported potential conflict, but did not identify any spatial solutions—even though the country has set aside large areas for transport, port and coastal defence growth. But the Polish plan does not address sustainability aspects. Furthermore, reaching a GES is not a goal of the maritime spatial plans. This is in addition to commercial fisheries being allowed in almost all zones. Given the non-existence of targets for protected areas (EU: 30% protected, 10% strictly by 2030) and the lack of clear renewable energy targets, a good opportunity was missed to steer sea use development in Polish waters toward an ecosystem-based direction; instead, it was shifted to the next MSP cycle.

⁸ https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/renewable-energy/renewable-energy-directive-targets-and-rules/renewable-energy-directive_en



During their MSP process, Finland has taken a systematic approach to analyzing potential uses and their diverse impacts and compatibility in detail. They have also put much effort into developing a long-term vision and a roadmap toward a maritime spatial plan. However, the planning process seems to stop after the stocktaking and assessment phase. It fails to deliver a concrete plan for how Finland's sea area will be used in 2030 – including designated uses, and conditions and priorities for each area and how competing uses will be treated. As a plan that should guide the development of sea use until 2030, Finland's maritime spatial plan offers only very limited guidance. Furthermore, while intensive stakeholder dialogues on scenarios were conducted, the consequences were left open. Apart from interpolating current uses into the future as an assumption, no measurable goals are presented (apart from a footnote on the offshore wind goals of 3,500 km²). No specific measures for fisheries management are proposed, no targets for nature protection areas or

reference to the EU strategy goal of 30% MPAs of which 10% are strictly protected, nor are any concrete goals for aquaculture or mineral mining presented. As for Åland, their maritime spatial plan excludes their inner territorial waters (27% of the entire sea area) which concerns mainly private, or municipality owned sea areas. The non-binding character and the fact that the most intensively used inner and near coastal waters are not covered by comparable plans, are the most serious flaws of the plan.

Although this category was the highest scoring category overall in the Baltic MSP Assessment, the above examples give clear indications of serious shortcomings and lack of inclusion of nature protection targets. The adoption of sustainable blue economy principles would provide a roadmap on how to build a sustainable and resilient economy. The principles for sustainable blue economy definitions, descriptions, and actions should be embedded into marine policy and activities.





GOOD OCEAN GOVERNANCE

Maritime spatial plans are still far from being ecosystem-based master plans with the capacity to seriously steer sea uses and functions in the sense of sustainability.

In the Good ocean governance category, indicators for EU targets from the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the Water Framework Directive, as well as the Biodiversity Strategy, are often neglected and hardly translated into the spatial measures of MSP—despite the fact that they are binding for EU countries and also according to the MSP Directive. The “Aligns with EU policies for reduction of noise pollution” indicator (#19) scored 22% across the Baltic, meaning six countries received scores of zero; and “Aligns with EU policies for seafloor and habitat protection” (Indicator #18) scored 39%, with three countries scoring zero and five receiving scores of 0.5. This indicator is directly linked to the fulfillment of the binding goals for a GES of the European seas. If GES is to be achieved, more work must be done in many of the countries in terms of representing and strengthening the indicators in their maritime spatial plans.

Another important indicator is whether or not maritime spatial plans are binding or enforceable (#22). In five countries (Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland), the plans are legally binding at least for public authorities, i.e., administrations that issue permits or licences for projects at sea. In Poland, the plans are binding for functions of certain



areas but, at the same time, sub-functions are assigned that allow for multiple uses, leading to potential overuse and conflict. Denmark has declared its plan as binding as well when, in reality, most of the decisions that can be made are shifted to the follow-up decision-making period on the project application level, and the current uses are also guaranteed for this future planning period. In Sweden, the designations are “guiding” and not compulsory; the plan designates priority uses and these priorities should be respected with follow-up project or licence decisions. Both Finland and Åland define the most suitable areas for various sea uses, but do not take any position or give advice on prioritizing, restricting or conditionalizing competing uses. Shortcomings are also visible for those indicators that have only recently been introduced as sustainable maritime planning components, such as the consideration of uncertainty, by designating unplanned space for so far unknown functions or uses (only explicitly mentioned by Poland’s plan and to some degree Latvia’s). The “Temporal and spatial uncertainties in the era of climate change addressed” indicator (#17) scored the weakest (11%) overall; seven countries have not met this indicator at all.

On the positive side, all countries have mechanisms and agencies in place with the mandate—and at least reasonable capacities—to handle the complex issue of MSP. Also, the interdisciplinary approaches and structures needed to fulfil the task are fairly well met. One important message from the assessment is that the political will to consequently steer marine uses and ecological functions is often limited. Some countries avoid decision-making in the MSP by formulating “guiding” recommendations instead of binding designations; for instance, Finland only proposes most suitable options (“areas of opportunities”) and doesn’t even propose planning priorities. Others exempt traditional uses from restrictions or postpone decisions about restricting measures to future decision-making processes on the project level, and thus avoid the conflicts that are inherent to decision-making. The governance category shows that maritime spatial plans are still far from being ecosystem-based master plans with the capacity to seriously steer sea uses and functions in the sense of sustainability. For the time being, many of the plans are more of a declaration of intent, leaving the decisions regarding conflicting claims for the use of sea space to the future. Maritime Spatial Planning must be transparent and include clear conflict resolution mechanisms.



THE COMPREHENSIVENESS OF THE COMPLETE MSP PROCESS

For most of the countries, this was their first MSP planning cycle. So they do not yet have experience in monitoring and assessment, and no regulations for measuring the progress of their maritime spatial plans have been introduced so far.

For the Comprehensiveness of the whole MSP process category, the overall score Baltic-wide was 51%. Countries coming in under the regional average for representation of all the indicators in their maritime spatial plans indicate that they fall far short when it comes to delineating spatial and temporal use, assessing and monitoring the MSP, as well as data collection; resulting in an overall weak maritime spatial plan. The indicator for sea area coverage (#33) is quantifiable and non-subjective, and there were major differences between the maritime spatial plans assessed. Sweden, Finland and Åland have legislation that is quite different from the other countries: In Sweden and Åland the scope of maritime spatial plans is limited to the EEZ plus parts of the territorial sea. The inner waters and parts of the territorial seas are not within the scope of the national maritime spatial plans and have to be negotiated upon with the municipalities. In Finland, the maritime spatial plan has been developed for the whole sea area, but regions are responsible for developing regional, legally binding land use plans that also cover coastal areas. For Åland, the case is even more complicated because their plan only covers the outer part (starting from 11 nm) of the territorial sea and leaves the coastal and inner waters of the Archipelago to local planning administrations; for example, the EEZ, in the case of Finland. So even a far-reaching EEZ plan only has limited influence on the development of coastal waters.

In Finland, Åland and Sweden, the seafloor and water near the coastline and islands are privately owned and managed which makes it even more challenging to sustainably steer sea uses by potential restrictions from maritime spatial plans. These biodiverse rich zones and land-to-sea link nutrient zones are very important in terms of the overall wellbeing of the marine ecosystem. Having them excluded from a maritime spatial plan represents a big gap in delivering ecosystem-based management and adaptive management and leaves important fishery nurseries and habitats exposed to harmful degradation and destruction. In all other countries, the maritime spatial plans extend to all waters from the coast to the EEZ border, and sea areas are generally public or state-owned. In Germany, for instance, the planning mandate is shared between the Federal State EEZ and the coastline (to 12 nm), resulting in different plans for both EEZ and coastal waters; but the general system of planning is comparable, since it is based on the same planning law.

In some countries, the plans only cover parts of the sea area which allows for only a limited view of the full capacity that the sea offers. So, comprehensive planning that takes account of coastal and open marine areas together is not really possible. These areas play a major role ecologically as well as economically considering that the coastal zone and territorial seas often offer the highest values of biodiversity and ecosystem service functions, and are the most economically used areas of the sea.

The convention of using best available scientific evidence for planning, and to translate this into spatial data, was only fulfilled by a few countries—namely Sweden, Latvia and Estonia. They managed to translate the data into spatial layers and use these for the negotiation processes for the plan and, thus, create better evidence in the decision-making process. However, with the HELCOM database and EU reporting data as a resource, the Baltic countries can rely on a good data structure. The data hub within HELCOM (basemap), stored and regularly updated by HELCOM experts, can be viewed as a valuable resource as well as a first step in offering spatial data for planning and monitoring in a comparable form. As eight of the nine maritime spatial plans assessed are for EU Baltic countries, these countries are experienced in using the EU reporting mechanisms for monitoring and status assessment, and are able to transfer them into MSP thinking.

For most of the countries, this was their first planning cycle. So they do not yet have experience in monitoring and assessment, and no regulations for measuring the progress of their maritime spatial plans have been introduced so far. Only Germany, which has already conducted their second planning cycle, has included these aspects and the law on MSP in their plan. Hence, it is not surprising that the indicator and category scores are still far from reaching full or satisfactory levels. Instead, a diverse picture is presented, with some countries coming from traditional sea use planning backgrounds for shipping or maritime infrastructure, and others just getting started with MSP and using novel approaches and tools for spatial planning that are currently being developed or tested within joint EU projects.

CONCLUSION

Most Baltic MS have the structures and capacities needed to plan and manage the sea areas. What's needed now, is a stronger willingness to make planning decisions that are aligned with ecosystem-based principles.

Overall, it can be concluded that the Baltic MS have taken a major step forward when it comes to establishing systems for MSP across the region and delivering maritime spatial plans, at least close to the deadline. By creating the structures to conduct MSP in all countries and by elaborating the maritime spatial plans within the timelines set by the EU Directive, the Baltic Region is the first regional Sea to establish MSP where all countries have delivered results. This WWF assessment has specifically looked at those components that contribute to the ecosystem-based management aspect of MSP. But it has also assessed the MSP of each country in terms of the capability or willingness to manage the sea space sustainably and in accordance with the GES regulation. What follows is an overall picture of the Baltic maritime spatial plans and what they will deliver in the region, as well as country-specific best practices compared to Baltic and EU MSP.

Cross-border cooperation an important key to ecosystem-based management of the Baltic Sea

When it comes to ecosystem-based MSP, some of the important requirements set by the EU Directive are well met in the Baltic Region. Stakeholder participation and cross-border consultations about the maritime spatial plans are good practice in the region. However, stakeholder participation does not automatically mean that environmental considerations receive more acknowledgement than economic aspects.

The three countries that scored the highest overall – Latvia, Sweden and Estonia – were especially involved in many of the EU projects on MSP and are forerunners in applying innovative planning tools for MSP. They have also successfully introduced new approaches (Box 2) to measuring cumulative impacts and socio-economic impacts,

Box 2: Participative planning and stakeholder participation a common focus for MSP across the region

MSP is still a young planning discipline. Many countries around the Baltic have built up their capacities by participating in regional EU-funded projects (i.e. INTERREG and others) dealing with different aspects of MSP. Within the EU programme framework, many projects have developed and applied innovative planning methods and tools, and carried out initial stocktaking—involving stakeholders and sectors before the official MSP process began. Innovative tools like cumulative impact assessments, socio-economic assessments and decision support tools and checklists for good MSP were tested and later introduced into official planning processes. These were also presented in expert groups and conferences – influencing the quality of good standards of MSP today.



Box 3: Paving the way for ecosystem-based Maritime Spatial Planning

An important step toward harmonizing planning approaches across the Baltic MS and spatial planning authorities, was the creation of a joint working group between the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission, HELCOM and the Representatives of the Ministries in charge of land-use planning, VASAB. For many years, this working group focused on defining how ecosystem-based planning might be made operational and helped facilitate a culture of striving for ecosystem-based approaches. This work has helped stimulate a mutual exchange among the countries, and between different planning approaches and traditions – altogether, helping the Baltic MS agree to aim for an EBA to MSP

and have also introduced cultural values, and partly introduced the “coastal identity” of the community into their planning. The Baltic Region had especially good examples to share in the field of socio-economic and interdisciplinary cooperation and planning approaches. MS should ensure the use of innovative tools and methods that include social, economic and ecological assessments and translate these into spatial thinking (cumulative effects).

Yet, despite the existence of a framework set by the EU Directive on the one hand, and the joint Baltic cooperation on MSP within the HELCOM-VASAB working group (Box 3) on the other, the Baltic Sea countries show a diversity of planning approaches and governance systems with regard to MSP. For example, six of the nine plans assessed work with binding plans that cover the entire sea area of a country. Three plans

(Sweden, Finland, and Åland) work with guiding designations for recommended sea uses and delegate the planning of coastal waters to municipalities or regions for local or regional comprehensive planning. The proposition of “guiding designations” bears the risk that the decisions of a maritime spatial plan could be negotiated afterwards and that tradeoffs will not be made within the plan, but separately and in an uncontrolled manner. Non-binding plans mean trade-offs could be negotiated outside of the MSP authorities regulation resulting in possibly a plethora of different sea usages. The maritime spatial plan must cover the whole sea area from coast to the EEZ boundary (and if coastal areas are covered by municipal or regional planning processes, alignment between these and the Maritime Spatial Planning process should be ensured. The MS also need to have binding plans that generate measures on the ground.



Plans need to be more closely aligned with existing EU legislation for marine biodiversity and marine habitat protection

An important aspect of ecosystem-based management, which is also reflected in the EU MSP Directive, is meeting the requirements of other EU legislation. From an environmental perspective, the MSFD, which had aimed to reach a GES by the year 2020, represents an important gauge for sustainability. Three indicators of the assessment are connected with GES (noise, fisheries inclusion, seafloor and habitat protection). Another important pillar of the EU environmental policies are the Birds and Habitats Directives and the EU Biodiversity Strategy – all three of which aim to promote marine biodiversity and protect marine habitats.

Most countries have referred to the MSFD as a main element of their Maritime Spatial Plans, but only Latvia has based their plan mainly on the MSFD. Astonishingly, only a few countries used MSP to underpin the measures identified in the MSFD process by spatial designations. The MSFD needs to set a clear programme of measures with goals and targets for the MS to follow. In some countries, the distribution and sensitivity of species and habitats were assessed in the SEA or environmental reports, and all countries made textual references to reaching GES. Only Latvia based the spatial designations in their maritime spatial plan on these findings to fulfil the MSFD programme of measures. More MS need to use GES as an overarching principle, as well as harmonize EU Directive reporting and timelines and include mutual implementation of maritime spatial plans and MSFD measures.

Four of the Good ocean governance indicators addressed issues concerning these policies. Despite the relatively long existence of these policies, the scores for MPAs and habitat protection were low. Some countries managed to designate more than 30% as protected areas, but all failed to strictly protect 10% of the sea area. Underwater noise, as a new environmental threat, has been addressed by Germany and partly addressed by Sweden and Latvia. This indicates that most of the countries have not used MSP to address the shortcomings shown by the poor environmental status of the Baltic sea areas by proposing measures in the maritime spatial plans to amend the status. The MSFD targets were reflected in most of the countries' MSP, so that the environmental reports, especially, are often based on MSFD and Habitat Directive reporting data. This, however, did not lead to the harmonization of timelines and reporting standards. The opportunity to use the maritime spatial plan to amend the environmental status for the national sea areas was missed in most cases.

Data from EU nature Directives a valuable resource for the Maritime Spatial Planning process

For many countries, the environmental data from the EU's various nature Directives and their reporting also serve as important sources for the MSP process. None of the countries formulated that they strive to align and harmonize nature Directives reporting, or even harmonize reporting dates between the different Directives. In the case of countries with more planning experience, such as Germany,

it is an advantage that much data from existing projects in their sea areas (offshore wind, pipelines) will be used as a basis for MSP processes.

A sound Strategic Environmental Assessment is an important element of ecosystem-based Maritime Spatial Planning

An important element of ecosystem-based MSP is providing a sound SEA for the plan. While most of the Baltic Sea countries have conducted detailed environmental reports or SEAs, they differ when it comes to comprehensiveness and the content of recent and spatial data. The Danish SEA, for one, did not appropriately consider the impacts of widely distributed bottom trawling on the overall integrity of the seafloor. However, good examples can be found that incorporate the findings from the SEA in the development steps for the maritime spatial plan versions (Sweden, Latvia, Estonia and Germany). The approach used for incorporating recent spatial data and using SEAs to steer MSP toward alignment with environmental considerations should be standard.

Sea use designations need to give more priority to marine ecosystem protection and restoration

When it comes to the coverage of the sea area by MSP indicator (#33), in most of the countries, the sea area is either owned completely by the state or is under the jurisdiction of the State as an EEZ in line with the UN Law of the Sea. Furthermore, the planning competence and the scope of the maritime spatial plans generally reach from the coastline to the EEZ border with the neighbouring country. This allows for comprehensive management of the whole sea area via the maritime spatial plan.

In some maritime spatial plans, it is apparent that the countries with a traditionally strong focus on maritime traffic seek to optimize the conditions for shipping transport by designating large sea areas for transport purposes. Likewise, forerunners of offshore wind development like Denmark and Germany use large sea areas for offshore energy. The principle of using sea space sparingly, and with respect to unknown future demands, was often not followed by the countries. Furthermore, the indicator for planning areas for yet uncertain uses or functions was widely neglected, so that either multi-use zones with hardly any restrictions were planned, or entire sea areas were fully covered with use designations.

Planning for new functions—for example, by designating areas for carbon capturing mariculture or mitigation areas for climate change related sea level rise and other effects—is only reflected in a few of the plans as a potential future option. The designation of areas for the restoration of habitats depleted by human activities and for the recovery of marine ecosystems was not acknowledged at all. As too application of an adaptive framework was for the most part not included in country MSP.

Clear goals have been formulated and justified only in a few cases, apart from renewable energy and area coverage for nature conservation. For most uses, figures are just extrapolated based on previous trends, instead of being based on carrying capacity analysis or on formulated sector goals that can be discussed transparently. Furthermore, hardly any qualitative or quantitative and transparent criteria have been set for assigning amounts/percentages of sea areas to certain uses and functions. Because of this, a proactive steering function (based on GES as a guiding principle) is hardly possible.

The maritime spatial plans show that certain traditional sea uses (e.g., commercial fisheries, oil exploration, or maritime transport) are being generally prioritized without fact-based justification. They are either given priority due to being “traditional” without reflection of income or employment effects, or they are not evaluated concerning space-saving applications (i.e., bundling of shipping corridors to save space for other uses). All uses and functions in MSP designated zones must be questioned and closely scrutinized.

The way forward

Many goals related to sustainability and environmental protection – from the global Sustainable Development Goals to European policy goals and the Precautionary Principle—have been mentioned in the maritime spatial plans. However, when it comes to meaningfully considering taking clear spatial measures to support GES or to restrict uses, for example, many country plans fall short. Additionally, without a strong link to best available data on environmental issues as well as future trends of economic activities at sea, the effect of those measures are difficult to judge. No country has attempted to define the carrying capacity of the sea areas and translate it into capacity limits in their plans. MS need to define carrying capacity based on proper assessments.

In conclusion, the results show that most of the Baltic Sea countries have established structures and capacities (laws, agencies, research) to plan and manage the sea areas – almost seven years after the EU Directive on Maritime Spatial Planning went into effect. With these structures in place, and with a willingness to make planning decisions that are aligned with ecosystem-based principles, the countries will be able to plan sea uses sustainably. From an environmental perspective, the balancing of sea uses and ecosystem-functions remains to be further developed. Steps like defining the carrying capacity for our sea areas, delivering strict integration of environmental Directives and applying sustainable blue economy principles to measures of MSP are important – yet they are missing in the current plans. Good examples of MSP should be generated to be further developed in the future and shared with other regions.



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RECOMMENDATIONS

To find the way forward toward a more ecosystem-based management of the Baltic Sea, WWF calls on Baltic MS to take steps to align their MSP with EU policies that seek a sustainable and secure future for both nature and people.

The Baltic is the first regional sea with established maritime spatial plans from all MS. While this assessment recognizes the good first steps the Baltic countries have taken in MSP and for establishing institutional structures for further developments in maritime management, more commitment and greater effort is needed to strengthen their national plans with regard to Inclusion of nature and Good ocean governance. The Baltic MS

must align their MSP with EU policies that seek a sustainable and secure future for all, including the EU Biodiversity Strategy, European Green Deal, Common Fisheries Policy and Marine Strategy Framework Directive. When harmoniously applied and successfully enforced, these policies can support a sustainable blue economy and safeguard the wellbeing of the wildlife and people who call the Baltic home.

WWF calls on the Baltic Member States to

- Implement an ecosystem-based approach to MSP to meet the EU's 2030 Biodiversity Strategy commitments, align with other European policies such as the EU Habitats and Birds Directives, and achieve good environmental status for European seas as required by the MSFD by way of reducing underwater noise, maintaining the integrity of the seafloor and protecting marine ecosystems.
- Identify and designate areas suitable for marine ecosystem restoration and protection, and implement management plans to ensure nature has the resources needed to recover and thrive. These areas should include blue carbon ecosystems, which are essential for mitigating climate change.
- Ensure that spaces designated for offshore renewable energy development occur outside of Marine Protected Areas and establish how transboundary cooperation via regional sea conventions or agreements between Baltic States may reduce harmful impacts to nature by minimising the level of infrastructure needed.
- After conducting robust environmental assessments (EIAs, SEAs), ensure MSP defines blue economy objectives for all sectors that include the most sustainable long-term scenario.
- Deliver legally-binding state-led national maritime spatial plans that harmonize cross-sectoral policies and timelines. Stakeholders must be involved in all phases of the plan, and the planning authority must justify its decisions regarding space allocation and conflicting interests following stakeholder consultations.
- MSP must be based on scientific knowledge of the carrying capacity of the Baltic Sea and include a comprehensive set of decision support tools that guarantee the ecological integrity and structural components of thriving biodiversity.
- Apply adaptive management tools to continuously evolve national maritime spatial plans as new data becomes available and new pieces of legislation come into force.

CLICK TO DOWNLOAD THE TECHNICAL ANNEX:

https://www.wfbaltic.org/cdn.triggerfish.cloud/uploads/2022/03/wwf_msp-assessment_final-annex_01mar.pdf



OUR MISSION IS TO STOP THE DEGRADATION OF THE PLANET'S NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND TO BUILD A FUTURE IN WHICH HUMANS LIVE IN HARMONY WITH NATURE.

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