

## **HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan – Ecosystem based approach to manage a semi-enclosed European sea area with nine riparian countries**

Juha-Markku Leppänen\*

\*Finnish Environment Institute, Marine Research Centre, Helsinki, Finland

Juha-markku.leppanen@ymparisto.fi

The Baltic Sea is a continental brackish-water sea area situated in the northern Europe. It is eutrophied, harmful substances have been accumulated in its biota and sediment.

In 1974, the then seven Baltic coastal states signed a Convention on the protection of the marine environment of the Baltic Sea area, for the first time ever, covering all the sources of pollution. The 1974 Convention entered into force on 3 May 1980. In the light of political changes, and developments in international environmental and maritime law, a new convention was signed in 1992 by all the nine states bordering on the Baltic Sea, and the European Community. After ratification the Convention entered into force on 17 January 2000. The Convention covers the whole of the Baltic Sea area, including inland waters as well as the water of the sea itself and the sea-bed. Measures are also taken in the whole catchment area of the Baltic Sea to reduce land-based pollution. The governing body of the Convention is the Helsinki Commission - Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission - also known as HELCOM.

HELCOM efforts to reduce pollution and repair the damage to the marine environment have led to noticeable improvements in many areas, enabling people to bathe on beaches that were once polluted, and helping endangered wildlife populations to recover. However, there is still a lot left to do, as many of the Baltic's environmental problems are trans-boundary, proving difficult to solve, and it could take several decades for the marine environment to recover.

In 2007, HELCOM adopted the joint Baltic Sea Action Plan, which is radically different from any other plan or programme previously undertaken by HELCOM. It is implementing the Ecosystem Approach and is based on a clear set of 'ecological objectives' defined to reflect a jointly agreed vision of 'a healthy marine environment, with diverse biological components functioning in balance, resulting in a good ecological status and supporting a wide range of sustainable human activities'.

Example objectives include clear water, an end to excessive algal blooms, and viable populations of species. Targets for 'good ecological status' are based on the best available scientific knowledge. For this purposes HELCOM co-ordinates extensive environmental monitoring programme and produces annually updated indicator reports as well as thematic and holistic assessment on the state of the Baltic sea marine environment.