



Stockholm University comments on the multiannual plan for Baltic Sea fisheries

A multi-species management for the Baltic Sea fisheries is an important step in the right direction. However, the proposed plan does not fully comply with the ecosystem approach as stipulated in the EU's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).

No clear objective

The multi-species management objective of reaching maximum sustainable yield (MSY) for the three species, as stated in the plan, is inadequate. A functional multi-species management also requires decisions about what should be prioritized; MSY for all species together, or on a species-specific level? And MSY in weight (biomass) or in value?

Since the various species interact to such a great extent catches cannot be sustainably maximized for all species simultaneously. The absence of a specified objective for management is especially unfortunate for the Baltic Sea, which is a species-poor sea where the interaction among the few species is crucial for the entire ecosystem.

Cod in focus

The multi-annual plan must take much greater account of the different ecological roles and functions of species covered by the plan. The recovery of the cod stocks is a top priority. F-values should be set for cod stocks first, and then for the other species.

The fact that cod play a key role in the Baltic Sea ecosystem is confirmed by historical data, particularly regarding the eastern cod stock where strong variations in population size has resulted in clear regime shifts and ecological cascade-effects across the Baltic Sea ecosystem.

Adapt to environmental variations

A multi-annual plan for the Baltic Sea must take greater account of environmental factors. The current proposal lacks a mechanism for responding to large and sudden changes in ecosystem conditions. The extremely slow water exchange in combination with perennial human impact in the form of eutrophication and overfishing makes the Baltic Sea extra sensitive. Salinity, temperature and oxygen availability has great impact on the stocks' productivity.

History also shows that large variations occur naturally in the Baltic Sea, and that they are often more powerful compared to many other marine environments. The process of setting quotas must keep abreast of large variations in recruitment and growth, as well as safeguard long-term preservation of stocks and ecosystem functions.

Recommendations:

- Specify the MSY objectives of the plan.
- Prioritize the recovery of the cod stocks.
- Set F values for cod first, and secondly for stocks of other species.
- Take greater account of variations in ecosystem functions and environmental factors.
- Include ICES upcoming estimates of Fmsy for the Baltic cod stocks in the final decision.
- Develop a clear management methodology for adopting revised scientific advice on e.g. Fmsy ranges and targets for stock biomass levels.
- Admit adjustments of the Fmsy ranges and target biomass levels based on changes in the ecosystem and/or revised scientific advice.
- Include size- and age distribution in the conservation reference points for the stock concerned.
- Establish the guiding principle that quotas should never exceed median/mean estimates of Fmsy.

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Levels above Bmsy

The strong linkages among cod, herring and sprat make it impossible to achieve Bmsy for all stocks at the same time - unless they are managed at levels above Bmsy. Levels of Bmsy should also be listed in Article 5 of the plan, in accordance with the MSY objectives for stock biomasses stated in the CFP.

Good scientific basis

The eastern cod stock largely consist of small and lean individuals, and there is currently an extraordinary uncertainty regarding the status and development of the stock. As a result, the proposal to increase F from 0.3 to 0.41-0.51 rests on very uncertain scientific basis.

In early March, ICES will present updated estimates of Fmsy ranges, following the planned benchmarking process for the Baltic sea cod stocks. These estimates should be included before adapting the plan. Consequently, the vote in Parliament should be postponed a few weeks, which is a marginal delay.

No references to stock age and size distributions

In agreement with the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), natural size- and age distributions of commercial fish stocks are important indicators to achieve good ecological status of the marine environment. Unfortunately these aspects are missing in the current proposal.

This is particularly worrying given the current poor conditions of the eastern cod and most sprat and herring stocks.

Flatfish considerations

The proposal recognizes the potential problems with by-catches of flatfish, particularly in Baltic cod fisheries. This initiative should be supported throughout the decision-making process, to ensure a good status of the Baltic flatfish stocks.

Adaptive plan

The multiannual plan needs to be more adaptive to ecosystem changes and have a clear methodology on how the revised scientific recommendations will be handled. The methodology should be in accordance with the agreement of The Inter-Institutional Task Force on multiannual plan (2014), which advocates »a review of exploitation and conservation reference parameters on the basis of periodic benchmarking exercise by ICES« (Annex 2, paragraph 9).

Article 9 in the plan should clarify that Fmsy ranges and targets for biomass levels can be adjusted, due to changes in the ecosystem and/or revised scientific advice from ICES. It should also be clarified how these adjustments are to be decided at regional level through the Commission's "delegated acts", in accordance with the CFP regionalization principle.

The Commission's role to evaluate regional management decisions and ensure their compliance with current EU regulations and law should also be stated in the plan.

Background

Stockholm University's Baltic Sea Centre has submitted comments on the Rural Ministry referral:

Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Regulation establishing a multiannual plan for stocks of cod, herring / Baltic herring and sprat in the Baltic Sea and the fisheries exploiting those stocks, amending Council Regulation (EC) No 2187/2005 and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1098/2007

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This Baltic Eye policy brief is based on the submitted comments to the Swedish Rural Ministry.

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Baltic Eye is a new type of scientific think tank at Stockholm University's Baltic Sea Centre.

Through Baltic Eye, researchers and communicators collaborate to develop and disseminate knowledge that contributes to a healthier Baltic Sea.

Baltic Eye seeks to promote scientifically based decisions aimed at improving the Baltic Sea environment.

