

This week

[News](#)

[Business](#)

[Finance](#)

[Opinion](#)

[Outlook](#)

What's on

[Business calendar](#)

[Art exhibitions](#)

[Films](#)

[Nightlife](#)

[The Baltic Times](#)

[Eurovision page](#)

Feedback

[Letters to editor](#)

[Forum](#)

Marketplace

[Classifieds](#)

[Real estate](#)

[Jobs](#)

[Advertise](#)

Subscription

[Subscribe](#)

[Archives](#)

Business District

OVERFISHING DEVASTATING BALTIC SEA ECOSYSTEM

By *Aleksei Gunter*

TALLINN - Estonian fishermen and other institutions are about to receive additional attention from environment protection experts thanks to the Baltic Sea Regional Project launched earlier this year.

Jan Thulin, head of the project initiated by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, said the Baltic Sea countries of the former Soviet Union would receive sufficient funding from ICES to cope with environmental protection issues.

"Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are the so-called recipient countries together with Poland and Russia. Although they will not contribute financially, their specialists and material base, including ships and other equipment, will be used during the project," Thulin said.

ICES will give about \$18 million to the recipient countries during the five-year project, which started in March 2003. The project will employ about 350 researchers in the Baltic Sea area.

"We put a price tag on the improvements the local governments could do. For fixing this they will get that much money," Thulin said.

Thulin named several basic issues relating to nature protection within the Baltic Sea region, the first of which was eutrophication, or overfeeding of plankton — microscopic organisms drifting in the water — which is caused by excessive use of pesticides and artificial fertilizers in agriculture.

Overfishing practiced by the local fisheries is a second major problem, according to Thulin.

"The fisheries have to get rid of this Klondike mentality and quit taking all that is out there in the sea," said Thulin, referring to a 30 percent – 50 percent gap between the reported and the real amounts of fish caught in the Baltic Sea.

According to Thulin, in Sweden every fishing ship has a satellite control system that tracks its route. In addition, environmental inspections are occasionally carried out without prior notice, and coast guard officers can stop and check every fisherman.

"In the Baltics you have fishing inspectorate boats that occasionally control the ships, and that's all. We want to hire local observers to check the fishermen, and realistically we could do that from 2004 on," Thulin said.

"The governments in the Baltic republics are aware of this problem, but they cannot solve it quickly."

Invasion of alien species – organisms uncommon for the Baltic Sea area that are accidentally imported in the ballast water of cargo ships – is another issue to look into, according to experts.

New organisms can pose a serious threat to local ecosystems. For example, the arrival in Poland of a fish species called the round gobi (*Neogobius melanostomus*), a native of the Black Sea, has devastated the populations of cod and flat fish along the Polish coast.

The Baltic Sea Regional Project will also help build passes inside the river dams for salmon that contribute not only to the salmon population but also to sport fishing tourism development, according to Thulin.

Thulin said one of the major achievements of ICES was using the passenger ferries cruising the Baltic Sea as "ships of opportunity."

The ferries carry scientific equipment on board and take water probes and measurements in certain areas along their routes thus providing regularly updated monitoring of the sea, an arrangement which is easier and cheaper than using special research vessels.

[BACK](#)



[\[This week\]](#) [\[Letters to editor\]](#) [\[Forum\]](#) [\[Advertise\]](#) [\[About us\]](#) [\[Contacts\]](#) [\[Webmaster\]](#)

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