

The Baltic Sea Regional Project: Possibilities for the future.

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The Baltic Sea is a semi-enclosed brackish water ecosystem under extreme stress. The continued degradation of this ecosystem has affected the water quality, modified its biodiversity, and impacted the regional fisheries. The four major threats to the Baltic Sea are 1. eutrophication, 2. over-fishing, 3. contaminants, and 4. invasive species. In response to this situation, five countries in the eastern Baltic Sea area several years ago initiated the planning of a common, cooperative project. The goals of the project is to improve the ecosystem health and productivity, its goods and services, and by that the social and economic development in this area. After a formal application by the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) 1999 the GEF Council approved a grant for preparing the Baltic Sea Regional Project, and this Project planning was approved in March 2001. During springtime 2003, the World Bank approved all project documents and after six years of preparation the Baltic Sea Regional Project, BSRP, was launched.

The Project will run in three phases of which the first will be for 2003-2005 with a total budget of US\$ 12 million. The total project cost for the period 2003-2008 is expected to be US\$ 40 million, of which a GEF Grant will provide US\$ 18 million to the recipient countries, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Russian Federation. Additional funding will come from various grant programs of the European Union and through bilateral assistance from the Nordic countries. The cooperating countries, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden, Norway and USA, will also provide in-kind support from national and local environmental programs.

The long-term objective of the BSRP is to introduce ecosystem-based assessments to strengthen the management of Baltic Sea coastal and marine environments through regional cooperation and targeted, trans-boundary coastal, marine and watershed activities. To achieve this, the three international bodies, the HELCOM, the International Baltic Sea Fisheries Commission (IBSFC), and the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), and the countries in the region will utilize project-developed tools and methodologies for sustainable ecosystem management. The project will implement priority actions to address trans-boundary environmental concerns associated with sustainable production of biomass, conservation of living marine resources and control of non-point source pollution from agriculture. Measures will also be taken to improve decision-making at the regional, national and local level by strengthening assessment and monitoring systems and supporting regional efforts for the development and implementation of ecosystem-based management of Baltic resources.

The BSRP will contribute to implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Baltic Sea Environmental Action Program (JCP) through support for high priority complementary, integrated land, coastal and open sea activities. The Project has four inter-related components that are all based on the concept of the Large Marine Ecosystem (LME). In this context the Baltic Sea LME is composed of not only the sea itself but also its catchment's area, which is four times larger than the sea.

Component 1 - Large Marine Ecosystem Activities, managed by ICES, aims to: 1. introduce ecosystem-based assessments and management for the Baltic Sea; 2. coordinate and integrate the regional monitoring and assessment capacity; 3. improve management practices to increase and sustain fishery yields and biological productivity of the Baltic Sea Large Marine Ecosystem (LME); and 4. in the long term, improve both the marine ecosystem and the economic benefits and standard of living of the fishing and coastal communities.

Component 2 – Land and Coastal Management Activities, managed by HELCOM in conjunction with the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), aims to: 1. increase awareness of environmental issues related to agriculture among farmers and communities; 2. invest in and implement environmentally responsible farm management practices; 3. in the long term, improve the economic welfare and standard of living within the farming community while reducing non-point source agricultural impacts; and 4. coordinate a series of activities, through the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), that will support community-based coastal zone management activities.

Component 3 – Institutional Strengthening and Regional Capacity Building and Component 4 – Project Management, which includes the overall project management activities, will be managed by HELCOM.

An important focus of the project will lie in facilitating expansion of partnerships with the European Union and the littoral countries of the Baltic Sea in the sustainable use of trans-boundary living marine resources by strengthening existing cooperative mechanisms through development of a regional network. The co-operative planning and implementation process of the project will allow collective efforts to have a much greater impact by improving the targeting of priority actions, facilitating better leveraging of human and financial resources and broadening the links between Baltic governments and organizations.

The success of the project will be dependant on good organization, coordination and integration and the ability to fill in significant gaps within the existing monitoring and assessment programs in the Baltic Sea for successful and cost-effectiveness outcomes and to avoid duplication and reduce redundancy. Select laboratories, institutes and organizations will be engaged to meet BSRP, HELCOM and ICES obligations. There is a need to enhance and strengthen the institutional and technical capacity of laboratories as well as farming communities/managements in the recipient countries. For these purpose key institutes will be appointed coordination centres, lead laboratories and local implementation units. The role of these institutes will be the overall coordination of the activities and the data collected within the productivity, environmental health, fish and fisheries, and socio-economic modules for all LME activities.

In launching the BSRP the major tasks are and will be: to organize kick-off coordination/technical workshops relative to their focus area; to organize and train staff as required for new equipment and techniques; to act as reference center within their specialty towards other BSRP laboratories, organizations and ICES; to coordinate procurements, compilations, data processing and assessments; to participate in appropriate national and regional fora; to assist in the preparation for organized integrated evaluations and assessments and report results to ICES and HELCOM WG/Committees and other bodies. Appointment of employed leaders and staff for coordination centres and organizations of the BSRP will hopefully secure engagements and participations in relevant national and international scientific and management activities. The BSRP is also expected to become a good example on how to improve management of a degraded Large Marine Ecosystem.

Some of the lessons learned during the period of preparation of the BSRP are that several of our goals, especially those related to improvement of coordination of activities have been achieved just by getting the chance to discuss and present them. This is also true for the communications between national authorities as well as at the regional commission level. Furthermore, being able to show in economical terms, a “price-tag”, and the benefit of changing/improving certain procedures has been shown being highly warranted, especially for possible donors and for politicians and governments. It has also become more and more obvious that a fifth threat to the Baltic must be added to the four mentioned, perhaps as being the most serious one, and that is: “human behaviour”. Finally, the EU accession 1 May 2004 means that only two parties, EU and Russia, will be responsible for the improvement of the management of the Baltic Sea LME. This in turn warrants further improvements in engaging the Russian Federation in the series of on-going and future LME activities in this so vulnerable Baltic Sea area.