



Raising Awareness of the Urgent Environmental and Socio-economic Issues facing the Baltic Sea

In September 2020 a key breakthrough was made as Ministers of the Baltic States signed a Ministerial Declaration to enable action on the rising environmental challenges of the Baltic Sea.

The 'Our Baltic' conference, which was held on 28 September 2020, saw Ministers, experts, decision-makers, scientists and stakeholders discuss the three overarching issues at stake - eutrophication, unsustainable fishing practices, and marine litter. The conference was opened by Virginijus Sinkevičius, European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries. A crucial aspect of the conference was to involve not only Environment Ministers, but also to include Agriculture Ministers in order to bring the perspective of farmers to the discussion. The goal of the conference was to find common solutions, with every voice represented.

The Baltic Sea, a marine ecosystem with limited access to the wider ocean, is currently considered a highly fragile environment. 97% of the Baltic Sea is affected by eutrophication, a process that occurs when excess nutrients generated mostly by human activity, mainly nitrogen and phosphorus, enter a body of water. High nutrient concentrations lead to intense, potentially toxic, algal blooms.¹ 12% of the sea is considered to be in the 'worst status' category.

These pressing challenges were presented to Ministers of the Baltic Sea States to address the issues from their root causes with sustainable solutions.

The issues concerned present not only an environmental dilemma but also a socio-economic one, as fishing practices are also being affected. As with many climate change concerns, the issues associated with the Baltic Sea are a result of human activity such as littering, unsustainable fishing practices, and onshore pollution. For instance, a staggering 70% of the pollution is made up of plastic.

¹ https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR16_03/SR_BALTIC_EN.pdf

Three opening speakers set the scene in the first session by summarising the current state of the Baltic Sea. Session two addressed the problems of, and solutions to, eutrophication. Speakers explained that many social and economic activities are limited to or restricted by eutrophication. For instance, fishing productivity is reduced by poor oxygen conditions and tourism is negatively impacted by algal blooms. In this case, it is necessary to reduce nutrient levels, so that species and ecosystems can recover.

In response to this, Susanna Kaasinen, Associate Professional Secretary at HELCOM - the watchdog of the Helsinki Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (1992) - explained that HELCOM is in the process of elaborating a Baltic Sea Nutrient Recycling Strategy. Žymantas Morkvėnas, Director of the Baltic Environmental Forum, explained that most nutrient pollution in the Baltic Sea comes from mainstream agricultural practices in EU Member States and that it is vital to re-assess the policy framework and encourage transformation of these practices. Further, Kaj Granholm, Project Manager of the Baltic Sea Action Group, emphasised that the solutions to eutrophication must be inclusive of climate, water and biodiversity objectives, which also make economic sense to farmers.

Session three focused on sustainable fishing practices - an environmental and agricultural issue. Otilia Thoreson, Programme Director at WWF, discussed the impacts of bottom trawling on the seabed and the wider Baltic Sea ecosystem. She explained the need for a law against this unsustainable fishing practice as part of a cohesive approach in order to ensure sustainable fishing practices are enforced in all of the Baltic States. Morkvėnas added that the solution should be coordinated by connecting practices, such as regenerative farming, to policy instruments.

Session four addressed the need to tackle pollution from marine litter. Dr Georg Hanke, Project Officer - Scientific Research at the Joint Research Centre, European Commission, emphasised the need for strong measures to be taken at EU level, such as a ban on single-use plastics and measures against microplastics. Sylwia Migdal, Marine Conservation Specialist at WWF Poland, described the significant impacts of ghost nets on the Baltic Sea, saying that they are considered to be the most deadly form of plastic marine litter, trapping fish, marine mammals and seabirds. Migdal explained that response to this, MARELITT Baltic was one of the first international initiatives aimed at providing practical guidelines for approaching the problem of derelict fishing gear. Another solution to the issue of marine litter is the introduction of different packaging tariffs.

The Ministerial session followed, where all eight EU Member States with coastlines on the Baltic sea (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden) signed the Ministerial Declaration.

The signing of this Declaration reflects a renewed commitment to tackling the issues associated with the Baltic Sea by putting policies into action through a regionally-cohesive approach. In light of the insistence on common solutions and the significance of the signing of the Ministerial Declaration, Commissioner Sinkevičius perfectly summarised the vision of the conference - "we will look for a 'landing zone' where we can all unite our efforts and push for a change, because the political momentum is here".

The Baltic Sea is an important issue from an environmental and social perspective and AEIDL will continue to follow the efforts of those involved in the conference to put their solutions into action.

On behalf of the European Commission, within the Green Growth and Circular Economy Framework, AEIDL produced an in-depth report documenting the 'Our Baltic' conference, as well as an informative video to raise awareness about the pressing issues of the Baltic Sea.

Links to the video and the conference report are available [here](#).

