

Cleaner, safer and brighter future of the Baltic Sea

By Paula Lehtomäki

The Baltic sea is an arena of an active trade as well as an arena for vivid economic and cultural co-operation. All countries in the Baltic Sea region have committed to strengthen the co-operation to maintain the booming economy of the area. Regardless of the flourishing economy, the sea itself is nothing but flourishing. Baltic Sea is more fragile than ever.

One of the greatest challenges for the Baltic Sea region countries is to protect the sea and improve the state of the marine environment in upcoming years. This is one of the highest priorities of the Government of Finland. Our aim is to intensify the EU cooperation and focus on the improvement of environmental safety – hand in hand with the development of economic collaboration. This is the most effective strategy to create a brighter future for the Baltic Sea region: not only for the many species of sea but also for the countries and their future interests.

The good ecological status of the Baltic marine environment requires goal-orientation in all nine riparian countries. We need active implementation and political commitment both nationally and in co-operation in Baltic Sea region. The existing platform for the co-operation is the Helsinki Com-mission (HELCOM), which is the governing body of the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area.

HELCOM's main goal is to protect the marine environment of the Baltic Sea from pollution, and to restore and maintain its ecological balance. In pursuing this vision the nine riparian countries have jointly established HELCOM to supervise and coordinate the protection of the Baltic Sea.

After a long preparation and a series of negotiations the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan was adopted in November 2007. The Action Plan sets an overall goal of achieving a Baltic Sea in good environmental status by 2021. The programme of actions was approved by every member state and the European Community.

I believe that the Baltic Sea cooperation, in many respects, and the Action Plan as its most concrete outcome, can be observed as a source of inspiration to other organizations and cooperation frame-works addressing similar challenges.

The main challenge of the Baltic Sea is twofold. On the one hand eutrophication and nutrient substances worsen the condition of the sea constantly and on the other hand maritime activities, including the growing maritime transport brings closer the risk of the ultimate threat, a major oil spill.

With regard to the eutrophication the Action Plan proposes country-wise annual nutrient input reduction targets for nitrogen and phosphorus. For the other challenge, particularly maritime safety, we need effective cooperation of the riparian countries,

The transport of oil and chemicals which has increased so dramatically and is still increasing in the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic Sea is heightening the risk of oil spills. The volume of oil consignments in the Gulf of Finland rose from 20 million tonnes in 1995 to 140 million tonnes in 2006. It has been estimated that by 2015 it could be as much as 260 million.

If a major oil disaster occurs, the resources we have at present in the Gulf of Finland for tackling the problem would not necessarily be sufficient to bring the situation under control satisfactorily. Russia's facilities for dealing with oil spills are still fairly poor and the situation in Estonia is not very satisfactory either. Finland and Sweden are reasonably capable of dealing with an emergency but it would not be enough if a large-scale accident happened.

Every action we make costs money, but inaction costs even more. The costly management measures have only partially been effective to improve the status of the Baltic Sea. The information on how much the improving the status of the Baltic Sea will cost is needed as much the hard economic facts about how much it would cost not to remedy the problems in the Baltic Sea.

This evaluation can be carried out in the similar ways as done in the global warming issue by the British economist Nicholas Stern in his report on the costs of climate change. In Finland and Sweden the work towards "the Baltic Stern report" has underway.

Among other policy tools and instruments highly relevant to the Baltic Sea cooperation I would like to stress the impact of our own action. Even the minor actions can generate a major effect. We surely have challenges. The scientists from different fields conclude that air temperature in the Baltic Sea basin have already risen and the warming is greater in the sea area than what is the average global temperature increase.

It would be so easy to renounce climate change, say that our actions are simply not enough, but there is no alternative. I believe that meeting the challenges climate change has created, can also present a window of opportunities for innovations and technological development. Not to mention promoting employment and regional policy goals. This is possible in particular with energy questions, because solutions to those can turn out to be win-win situations.

It would be extremely hard to fight climate change if we wouldn't have any tools to operate. Fortunately we have a kit full of them. The international agreement on the fight against climate change, the Kyoto Protocol, does not cover emissions from international maritime traffic. This has been left for the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) to regulate.

Fortunately within the IMO, there has been headway made with discussions. The greenhouse gas index for ships has voluntary trial use status and talks on possible emissions trading or other forms of financial control between shipping companies and countries are going on.

Furthermore, there is an overwhelming need for international regulation to improve maritime safety and environmental protection. The Baltic Sea is a good example of one where we need special measures to protect what is an exceptional environment. A shallow, cold sea with a low salt content, one that is divided by thousands of islands and is heavily polluted, requires more effective protection solutions than, for example, the open seas of the Atlantic.

Such a commitment can only be truly made if the needs of all major users of the Baltic Sea are considered and balanced in a fair and transparent way. This is where spatial planning comes into the picture, a tool which, similarly to its use on land, is becoming one of the key means for cross-sectoral management of human activities in the sea and coastal areas. Regardless of all challenges I believe that the countries of the Baltic Sea region can look toward the future with confidence and optimism.

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