

BSAC input to HELCOM FISH meeting (IC WG FISH 3-2024): Priority list of species for the Baltic Sea Action Plan action S40

Date: 12.03.2024

Ref: BSAC/2023-2024/40

Context

HELCOM FISH meeting (IC WG FISH 2-3023) in November 2023 welcomed that the BSAC would provide input to the next meeting on the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) Action S40¹.

In January 2024, HELCOM Deputy Secretary presented to the BSAC Executive Committee what HELCOM was trying to achieve through the actions of the BSAP. The action aimed at identifying the fish species for which there is a need for better data. Action 40 is linked to Action B35², aimed at operationalising a set of indicators for assessment of fish population health, including size and age distribution. The HELCOM Deputy Secretary presented the criteria for achievement as well as rationale behind the actions.

The Executive Committee decided that this should be considered in the BSAC Working Groups in order to present the results at the next HELCOM FISH meeting in March. The members were asked which species should be prioritised in terms of data requirements, why, and what for. On the 27-28th February and 8th March, the Working Groups have given some input and agreed on the draft document that was approved by the Executive Committee on Tuesday 12th March.

BSAC recommendations

The BSAC appreciates to be able to give some input to HELCOM work on fish species and research needs. Involving stakeholders allows to gather additional information from at-sea experts that have a first-hand experience of the processes unfolding. Stakeholder input to the implementation of the HELCOM BSAP should be promoted and taken into account as much as possible.

Before looking at the list of key fish species, the BSAC formulates 3 remarks:

- First of all, the BSAC would like to point out the **importance of mentioning sustainable fisheries** in the BSAP's actions. The overarching goal of environmental, social and economic sustainability should not be forgotten when implementing those actions.

¹ Action S40: Identify by 2024 fish species for which there is a need for better data for identified purposes, such as setting threshold levels. Utilise dedicated programmes and projects to facilitate recording and reporting of data for these species by 2025 to support the identification and implementation of measures to achieve good environmental status.

² Action B35: By 2024 operationalize a set of indicators for the assessment of fish population health, including size and age distribution, where applicable, and, by 2029, for any remaining relevant species.

- Second, the BSAC would like to highlight that the new requirements included in the **new Control Regulation** that entered into force in 2024 will probably allow to fill some of the data gaps. In particular, the new reporting requirements for parts of the fisheries (including recreational and small scale) might allow for better records on key species.
- Third, the BSAC reminds that in the context of the **ecosystem approach to fisheries management**, it is paramount to also consider data and research needs regarding species interactions and non-fish species. Non-fish species have a direct (predation, prey availability) and indirect (food competition, diseases...) impact on the fish stocks.
Specifically, additional information on stomach content, parasites and population size/distribution is needed for **seals**, a review of existing information and reliable data I needed on **harbour porpoises'** populations size, **benthic food** availability should also be an important focus of research.

The BSAC has identified important data and research needs for **coastal non-quota species** (such as pike, perch, turbot, roach, vendace, burbot, round goby, stickleback and others) and **quota species**: cod, herring, sprat, flat fish (plaice and flounder), and salmon.

While there are **substantial data needs for non-quota stocks**, **all of them are considered to be a priority**.

For each of the quota-species, a specific rationale is given in the table below.

The BSAC has also focused on the type of information that is missing. In that respect, it is important to increase knowledge on **age and sex distribution structure of the stocks** and compare those to the structure of catches. To correctly assess the health of stocks, additional information on **growth rates of age classes** and **natural mortality trends** are also needed. Getting more insight on **stomach content** is also of key importance because it allows to better take account of inter-species dynamics and the overall functioning of the ecosystem.

Quota species	Rationale
Cod	<p>These stocks have a poor status, and the stock structure is critical. There are low fishing opportunities.</p> <p>Cod individuals are not growing, and their size prevents them to feed on pelagic resources, resulting in competition for benthic food with flat fish.</p> <p>Additional data and research should help in understanding the health of the cod population and inform management decisions.</p>

Herring	<p>Herring is the key species in the Baltic ecosystem, and important for fisheries. Size-age structures of the stocks still require more research. This was highlighted by the impossibility for ICES to answer to the European Commission's question on the size and age structure of central Baltic herring and Gulf of Bothnia herring in 2023. Data on catches composition and identification of sub-populations is needed.</p>
Sprat	<p>Data on sprat can contribute to understanding the dynamics of the ecosystem, as sprat is a key prey species for many predators. Data on catches composition and identification of subpopulations is needed.</p>
Plaice & Flounder	<p>There are clear data needs regarding flounder diet and interaction with cod (competition for benthic food, geographical/vertical overlap of stocks). Some BSAC members note concerning observations of starving flatfish in German waters.</p>
Salmon	<p>Salmon is important for both commercial and recreational fisheries. Missing data on the sea-phase of the life cycle (diet, environment's influence). There are specific data needs in Bothnian Sea area. Research data on migration is needed to protect weak stocks and focus on strong stocks.</p>