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EC workshop on Maritime Spatial Planning and environment, 7 December 2015, Brussels

Role of RSCs in MSP - HELCOM experience

Baltic cooperation on MSP is often referred to as a good example. However, it might be that this is the first occasion that I can specifically speak about HELCOM's role in this established Baltic MSP cooperation, and I am very grateful for this opportunity.

With my presentation I would like to 1) advocate for sea-basin and systematic cooperation on MSP, 2) convey a message that it is not impossible to utilize Regional Seas Conventions for fruitful MSP cooperation, and 3) affirm that we – the Regional Seas Conventions –hold responsibility to share what we know of the seas and oceans for the purpose of MSP.

The MSP Directive requires that Member States bordering marine waters shall cooperate with the aim of ensuring that maritime spatial plans are coherent and coordinated across the marine region concerned.

Thus, countries need to organize themselves to cooperate and to choose between existing structures or less regular ad hoc processes. In the same fashion, they may choose a minimal and formalistic approach to consulting with the neighbouring countries, or opt for starting more substantial consulting at an earlier stage.

In any case, strong regional or sub-regional perspective is indispensable to ensure that all move, perhaps at a different pace but to the same direction.

In the Baltic, regional HELCOM-VASAB Maritime Spatial Planning Working Group was established five years ago.

This cooperation is formal. Administrative support for the group is provided by the HELCOM secretariat together with our partner VASAB Secretariat.

I would like to tell you what we do **not** do in our group:

- We do not do any maritime spatial planning, clearly this is national remit;
- The dialogue is not between the environmental side and spatial planning side, but between national MSP competent authorities of the Baltic Sea countries. Also EU is a member of the group;
- We do not only focus on MSP-environment discussions, albeit there is a lot to offer in terms of increasing evidence for MSP from other HELCOM groups, including in relation to the MSFD work.

The main aim of the cooperation is to advance maritime spatial planning in the region with a special focus on the transboundary context.

HELCOM's role

Based on our experience, what is the RSCs' role in MSP:

1. RSCs offer expert knowledge of the marine ecosystems and their functioning;
2. We offer institutional capacities and comprehensive understanding of the sea governance frameworks through close affiliation to UNCLOS regime, and in case of HELCOM through four decades of work in the areas of shipping, response to pollution accidents, surveillance of illegal discharges, offshore oil industry, aquaculture, fisheries, dredging, industrial releases, wastewater, marine litter, underwater noise, marine protected areas, species and habitats protection, and monitoring;
3. We have strengthened the transparency of the Baltic inter-governmental MSP cooperation and processes through public access to meeting documents and outcomes, open data policy as well as organized and formalized framework for stakeholder interaction and input. There are currently over 50 international organizations which have been granted observer status to HELCOM, representing all major industries in the Baltic Sea, among others.
4. RSCs are data heavy cooperation – and while nationally countries will always have the finer and more precise data – RSCs can offer a regional view based on quality assured and harmonized datasets for transboundary MSP considerations.

In reality each nation decides on its own political priorities and trade-offs in MSP.

Each nation is also obliged to follow the existing legislation in MSP, including for marine environment protection, however it is not so straight forward to do it in practice.

There is an interest among the countries to work out common approaches and methods for ecosystem approach in MSP and utilize the wealth of existing knowledge of the marine environment ecosystems and human activities and pressures at sea. But if the RSCs did not make it possible or easy to integrate this information into MSP, the regional or transboundary dimension would be much more difficult to cater for, which in turn might result in incoherent maritime spatial plans.

For example, it is not enough to say to a planner that a network of marine protected areas has to be ecologically coherent across a marine region, one would also need to specify the species or habitats under threat, which have regional significance, and to have spatially explicit data on their distribution to share, both within and outside MSP.

In the same fashion, regional indicators assessing the distance to good environmental status for specific ecosystem components, under development in RSCs, may not be fully utilized in MSP if they are not clearly linked to pressures and human activities causing these pressures.

Social and economic analysis is to be increasingly incorporated in HELCOM's assessments of ecosystem health, which can be yet another example of the direction to take to increase uptake in MSP.

The developments to increase the usability of data and information products for transboundary MSP are long-term in nature and require close and systematic interaction such as in the Baltic working group.

This has perhaps become the most important single mission of the HELCOM Secretariat in the joint HELCOM-VASAB MSP WG.

If you would like to learn more about the promising data products from HELCOM – take a look at the "Grab the treasure" leaflet.

Thank you for your attention.