

Recommendations of the Baltic Sea Seal and Cormorant Transnational Fisheries Cooperation project

May 2021

Small-scale fishers from the Baltic region have been facing growing direct and indirect impacts of predation from seals and cormorants. Successfully protected by the Habitats and the Birds Directives, the Baltic seal and cormorant populations have dramatically increased over the past decades. However, they have a **significant impact on fish stocks, can damage fish and destroy fishing nets, thus reducing local catches and the profitability of small-scale fisheries.**

The growing seal and cormorant populations' impact on fisheries is sometimes qualified as a "local impact" when it is in fact a reality that is **shared and endured by all small-scale fishers around the Baltic.** This is how it often fails to be addressed by the Member States and the European Union. **An EU level initiative promoting a coordinated action by the Member States is urgently needed.**

To address this situation and find the appropriate mitigation measures, this paper outlines some recommendations identified by the project and at the occasion of the final seminar on 26 May 2021, **to strike the right balance between conservation objectives and small-scale fisheries survival.**

1. Promote dialogue between stakeholders to find sustainable solutions

Problem: The debate regarding the management of cormorants and grey seals populations is often polarising between fishers and environmental organisations. This leads to a deadlock of the discussions on how to tackle the impact of these species' predation on small-scale coastal fisheries and more widely on coastal communities, while maintaining the necessary protection of these species.

Recommendation: The European Commission, Member States, regional and local authorities around the Baltic should **promote dialogue and mutual understanding** between different sectors and stakeholders in order to look for **ecologically, socially and economically sustainable solutions** for the benefits of all in the Baltic region.

2. Invest in seal-proof fishing gears

Problem: Seals remove fish from nets, representing a hidden loss for fishermen. Their presence around fishing gears also scares away fish from the areas. In many fisheries, there are still no alternative seal-proof gear ready to be used.

Recommendation: The European Commission should, through the new European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and other programs, fund further research to **develop and make seal-proof fishing gears available for fishers**, contributing to the socio-economic attractiveness of small-scale coastal fisheries while also contributing to the protection of the region's aquatic biodiversity. This recommendation is however not sufficient alone, as seals can adapt to these new devices over the years and it represents an important cost for fishers. The seal-proof gears and trap nets are also not suitable for all fisheries or all fishing grounds, but most fishers depend on net fishing. It should therefore be considered in combination with the other recommendations below.

3. The need for more ambitious management plans for seals

Problem: The population of grey seals has overall recovered to sustainable levels since 2013, thanks to its protection under the Habitats Directive. Seal predation however results in direct damages to fishing gears and decrease in fish catches, leading to important lost catches and economic impact. In Sweden, the estimated associated costs represent a 50% loss in fishers' incomes.¹

Recommendation: Member States should be encouraged to adopt **more ambitious management plans for seals**, based on **up-to-date data on population** with the support and coordination of the European Commission. They should do so by **considering both socioeconomic and ecological aspects** in seal management as proposed by the Habitats Directive, including their impacts on fisheries and coastal communities and on the continued delivery of locally caught fresh fish to the market. This would also respond to the objective of the Common Fisheries Policy to contribute to a **fair standard of living for those who depend on fishing activities**.

4. Provide incentives for hunters to contribute to management measures

Problem: The current Regulation on trade in seal products prohibits the placing on the EU market of seal products.² Further to a complaint to the WTO, the EU has revised this regulation

¹ Anu Sjögren, *Losses for professional fishermen caused by Baltic Sea seals and cormorants and the legal basis for indemnity*, South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences, May 2018.

² [Regulation \(EU\) 2015/1775 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 October 2015 amending Regulation \(EC\) No 1007/2009 on trade in seal products and repealing Commission Regulation \(EU\) No 737/2010.](#)

to remove the exception of the trade ban for products derived from hunts for the sustainable management of the marine resource.

This, in practice has led to a limited participation in licensed hunts in Member States where quotas have been opened to regulate the population, thus making management plans ineffective. Quotas are opened but not reached due to the costs, ethical concerns and lack of incentives for hunters.

Recommendation: The European Commission should consider formulating a new exemption to the Regulation respecting the WTO ruling as to avoid the practice of simply discarding carcasses resulting from normal, small-scale fisheries management. Alternatively, a joint request from the EU Baltic states should urge the European Commission to find an **appropriate solution to bridge the gap** left open by the revised Regulation. Balanced **incentives should be put in place to encourage hunters to participate in management activities** to regulate the population of grey seals more effectively.

5. The need for a European Cormorant Management Plan

Problem: Member States can ask for a derogation to the protection offered by the Birds Directive “to prevent serious damage to” fisheries.³ Despite the Commission’s non-binding guidance on cormorants, this derogation is interpreted in different ways around the Baltic Sea, leading to legal uncertainty and a lack of effectiveness of measures taken locally and nationally.

Recommendation: The European Commission should develop and adopt a **European Cormorant Management Plan**, at least at the regional Baltic Sea level, as requested by the European Parliament in its 2008 resolution.⁴ Given the high mobility and migration behaviour of cormorants, the problem cannot only be dealt with at the local and national levels by way of derogating to the Birds Directive but **requires the European intervention to articulate, coordinate and harmonise any action** taken to mitigate the dramatic impacts of cormorants on fish stocks.



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³ Directive 2009/147/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November 2009 on the conservation of wild birds, Article 9, §1a

⁴ Towards a 'European Cormorant Management Plan', 2008/2177(INI)