

Agenda Item 8

Any other Business

Information Document 8

**Preventing Bycatch of Baltic Proper
Harbour Porpoise- The Current Situation**

Action Requested

- Take Note

Submitted by

Coalition Clean Baltic



Preventing bycatch of Baltic Proper harbour porpoise – the current situation

The Baltic Proper harbour porpoise population is listed as Critically Endangered by IUCN, and there are only a few hundred animals left today (SAMBAH 2016). The PBR is likely to be less than one animal per year (NAMMCO & IMR 2019).

In autumn 2019 the EC requested scientific advice from ICES, and the special request advice on emergency measures to prevent bycatch of Baltic Proper harbour porpoise was published in May 2020¹. In brief summary, the advice proposes closures of static net fisheries in harbour porpoise MPAs within the range of the Baltic Proper population, and pingers to be made mandatory for static net fisheries in the rest of the population range.

Based on this advice, BALTFISH (the Baltic Sea regional fisheries body, composed of the Member States fisheries directors and invited officials from the European Commission) has been drafting Joint Recommendations under Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) to put in place long-term measures for bycatch prevention. The first joint recommendation² was submitted to the EC in December 2020 and contained measures to prevent bycatch within harbour porpoise Natura2000 sites within the population range. Some areas would be closed for static net fisheries the entire year, and some for part of the year depending on what we know from the SAMBAH project of seasonal distribution of the population. One Natura 2000 site in Puck Bay, Poland, would not be closed to static net fisheries but instead of this pingers would be required in static net fisheries in the entire area.

This joint recommendation was evaluated by the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries of the European Commission in March this year. As expected, there were concerns about the area in Puck Bay not being closed, but the main issue was the lack of measures outside of MPAs. BALTFISH has promised a second joint recommendation to be submitted at the latest in June 2021 that will contain such measures.

However, another issue has recently arisen, namely the concerns from the military forces of some Member States that pingers may interfere with military sonars, compromising their ability to detect submarines and mines in the Baltic. The frequencies of the proposed pingers lay between 50-120 kHz and therefore overlap with frequencies used by the military (Johansson et al. 2013, fig 1). The source level of pingers is quite low, around 145 dB re 1 μ Pa @1m (\pm 5 dB) so the transmission loss will very likely make the pinger sound disappear in ambient noise within a few hundred meters (Fishtek Marine 2021, fig 2), but this is contended by the national military forces of some countries and has caused these countries to state they cannot allow pingers within their respective EEZ. Given that the European Union has no jurisdiction over military issues, this threatens to halt the whole process, leaving the Baltic Proper harbour porpoise without adequate protection or the need for more extensive fisheries closures.

¹ https://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Advice/2020/Special_Requests/eu.2020.04.pdf

² <https://ccb.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/harbour-porpoises-jr.pdf>

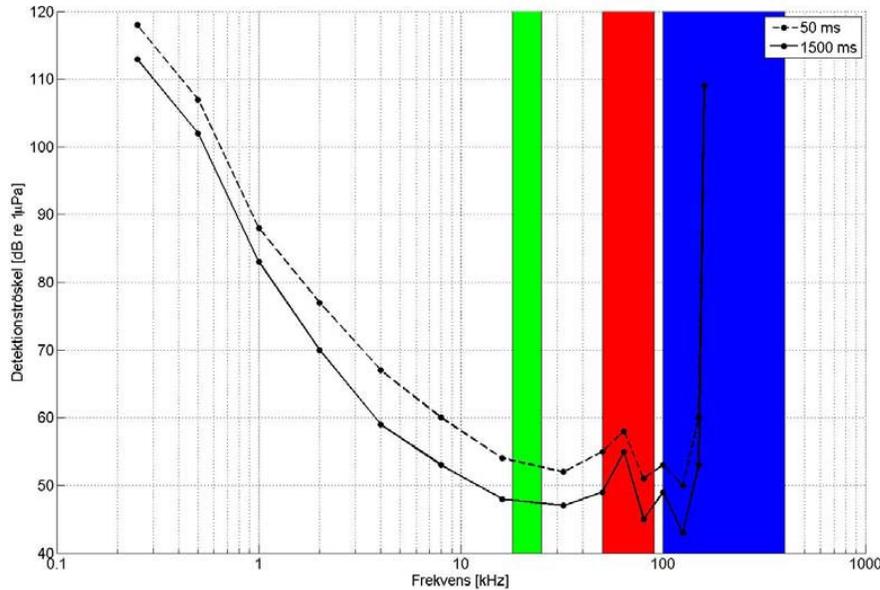


Figure 1. Audiogram for harbour porpoise for two pulse lengths, 50 and 1500 ms, as a function of frequency. The coloured areas shows the frequency ranges of different types of Swedish military sonars; green = VDS (Variable Depth Sonar), red = HMS (Hull Mounted Sonar) and blue = mine hunt. (Figure from Johansson et al., 2013).

Efforts are being made by the EC and others in the Baltic countries concerned, to try to address the issue. However, it is important to understand the scientific basis of the military concerns in order to ensure that there is a common understanding of the potential for pingers to interfere with sonar systems and the probability that this will happen given the source level, duty cycle, number of pingers expected to be deployed, density and distribution of fishing gear. Any scientific assessment should also take into account ambient sound levels and other sources of sound at similar frequencies from fishing, other commercial and recreational vessels. We are not aware of any direct evidence of pingers interfering with sonar systems from other areas where the same type of pingers have been used. Pingers have been used in the North Sea and Celtic Seas for many years. Monitoring equipment to test whether pingers are operational has been developed, but detection ranges were limited to 50m from a vessel with an auxillary engine running (ICES, 2010). We recommend that data from the trials of equipment designed to detect active pingers should be examined with a view to assessing how pingers might interfere with sonar systems under real conditions.

We suggest that the Jastarnia Group makes a clear recommendation to countries to resolve any issues related to the possible interference of pingers on military sonars. If pingers cannot be used large parts of the population range, we see the need for large-scale closures to ensure minimizing harbour porpoise bycatch.

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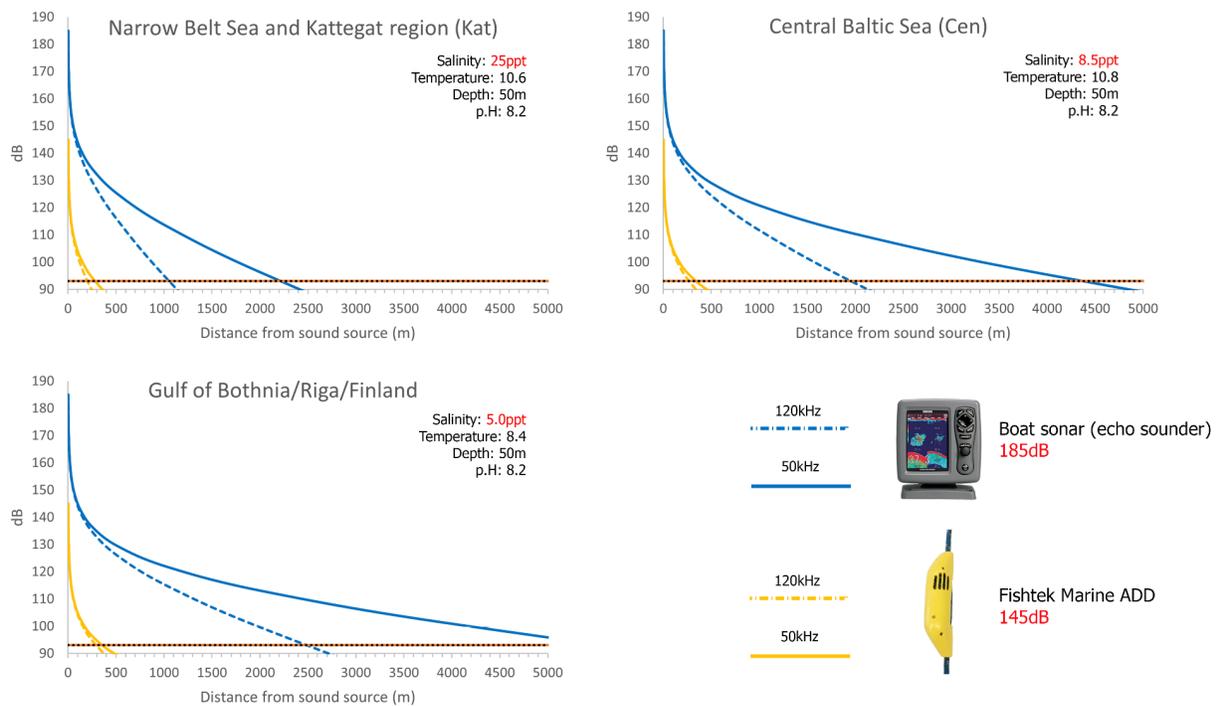


Figure 2. Modelled total Transmission Loss for the Fishtek Marine ADD (solid yellow line = 50kHz, hashed yellow line = 120 kHz) and an echosounder (solid blue line = 50 kHz, hashed blue line = 120 kHz) for five regions in the Baltic. A = Belt Sea and Kattegatt region, B = Central Baltic, C = Gulfs of Bothnia, Riga and Finland. (Figure from Enever, 2021)

References

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