



SUMMARY



A SEA UNDER PRESSURE: BOTTOM TRAWLING IMPACTS IN THE BALTIC

The health of the Baltic Sea is in decline. Urgent, coordinated and far-reaching action is needed to save its ecosystems and achieve Good Environmental Status across the region. WWF's new report, *A Sea Under Pressure: Bottom Trawling Impacts in the Baltic*, examines the numerous impacts of bottom trawling in the Baltic on target species and the entire marine ecosystem.

The report also highlights the current lack of coherence, implementation and coordination in the legislative frameworks intended to safeguard the health of our European waters. The fact is that the harmful impacts of bottom trawling in the Baltic Sea are preventing us from protecting and preserving its seabed habitats and attaining the target objectives of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

Despite the bleak overall picture of degraded ecosystems, declining catches, impoverished livelihoods and unmet commitments, studies show that the Baltic could be restored substantially if trawling were to be reduced and managed.



About 40% of the entire Baltic seafloor, an area of 180 000 km², has been disturbed by maritime activities and in the southern Baltic, the figure rises to 80-100%.

THE IMPACTS OF BOTTOM TRAWLING

Compared to other fishing methods, the heavy trawls used in bottom trawling to scrape over or dig into the sea bottom have the most impact on the environment, both in terms of habitat destruction and carbon emissions.

IMPACTS:

- Serial resource depletion
- Damage to seafloor integrity and habitats leading to changes in fish distribution
- Changing the characteristic balance between species distribution and abundance
- Disrupting biogeochemical cycles and compounding eutrophication
- Affecting carbon storage and reducing carbon sequestration rates
- Impacts of climate change and overfishing



Mismanaged fisheries are a key part of the picture

No regional maritime sector relies more on sustained ecosystem health than fisheries. While some Baltic Sea fisheries are operating within sustainable limits, this is not the case across all fisheries. Bottom trawling is the most harmful part of the sector by far, causing long-term damage to fish stocks and seabed habitats.

In the mid-1980s, nearly 450,000 tonnes of Baltic cod were caught annually. In 2019 the annual catch was below 20,000 tonnes. In environmental terms, bottom trawling is serially depleting the resource base, causing long-term physical damage, altering the characteristic ecosystem balance, affecting biogeochemical cycles, and negatively impacting the ability of the seabed to store and sequester carbon. From a socioeconomic perspective, the resulting situation of reduced yields, poor profitability and high future uncertainty requires urgent action from policymakers.

Baltic governments have done little to implement and enforce laws against bottom trawling. The report reveals that bottom trawling is even taking place practiced within Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Despite a plethora of environmental legislation and policy, which is supposed to safeguard marine biodiversity, there is a lack of cohesion across the multiple policies, programmes and departments, and Baltic governments have done little to implement and enforce laws against unsustainable fishing practices like bottom trawling.

Policy changes are urgently needed to save the Baltic

Governments and fisheries managers have a legal obligation to achieve Good Environmental Status in the Baltic Sea through the application of ecosystem-based management, which considers the whole system and frames strategies accordingly.

The solutions are clear: reduced bottom trawling efforts and smarter management of trawling areas would improve fishery productivity and increase the prosperity of coastal fishing communities, while bringing wider benefits to the Baltic countries, including in the fight against climate change.

WWF'S POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

WWF calls on Baltic Sea governments and the European Commission to step up the implementation of ecosystem-based fisheries management and intensify efforts to achieve Good Environmental Status.

- 1 Ban trawling within the boundaries of all national MPAs** and minimise overall fishing effort in key habitats.
- 2 Restrict bottom trawling in coastal waters** to restore productivity.
- 3 Develop ecosystem indicators** for the cumulative effects of seabed disturbance.
- 4 Improve fishing vessel tracking,** monitoring and control measures.
- 5 Eliminate or reform harmful fisheries subsidies.**
- 6 Work together across governments** to implement and enforce existing maritime laws.
- 7 Establish an ecosystem-based fisheries management system** that is transparent.
- 8 Create fully protected marine scientific reference areas.**
- 9 Form a network of MPAs** supporting representativity, replication and connectivity.

TAKE ACTION

You, the consumer, have a stake in this fight too:

- Help spread the knowledge about the impacts of bottom trawling.
- Share our report, recommendations and story map with fisheries and environmental ministers in the Baltic region to put pressure for them to act.
- Remember to eat sustainable caught seafood and ask where your fish comes from and how it was caught.

Read full report and recommendations:

www.wwf.baltic.org/news/a-sea-under-pressure-bottom-trawling-impacts-in-the-baltic/

Storymap:

<http://url.grida.no/balticbottomtrawling>

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