

February 2023

Necessary measures for the Baltic Sea and fisheries in 2023

The difficult situation in the Baltic Sea

Several species in the Baltic Sea face an acute threat. Cod stocks have collapsed, [nine out of ten pike have disappeared in the 2000s](#), and herring stocks in the central Baltic Sea have declined [by a third in just four years](#). Several other important species show dramatically declining numbers. To recover the important larger herring in the north, fishing pressure in the Gulf of Bothnia would have to be reduced by [80 per cent over decades](#).

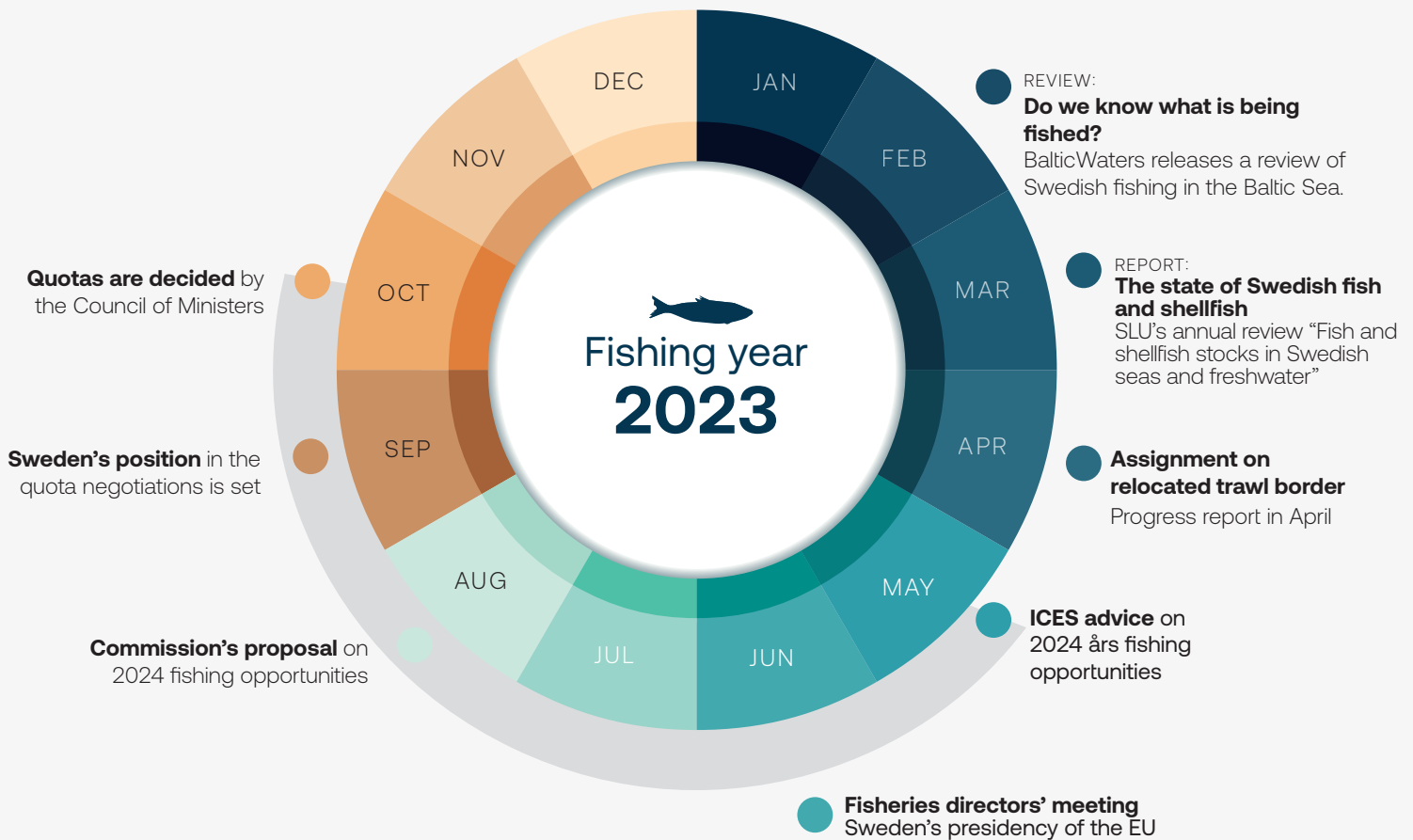
The decline of fish stocks not only affects ecosystems, but also has economic, social and cultural impacts on communities dependent on fishing or fishing tourism. Between 2021 and 2022, over 100 small-scale boats stopped fishing in the Baltic Sea, a loss of a quarter of fishing boats in just one year. Yet almost the same amount of fish was caught, as quotas were set high and the 20 largest vessels fishing for food account for 95 per cent of fishing.

Five fisheries policy measures

In the following pages we summarise the facts about fishing in the Baltic Sea, how it affects the ecosystem, and what measures and studies are needed to reduce the negative impact of fishing on the Baltic Sea environment. The recommended actions for 2023 are to:

- Reducing fishing pressure
- The trawl limit is moved out along the entire east coast
- Improving fisheries control
- Abandon Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) as a management model
- Sweden favours expanded scientific advice

Ten key events in the 2023



Also during the year:

Baltfish-meeting
Baltic Sea countries hold several meetings throughout the year to discuss current issues on stocks, the environment, management plans and fisheries control.

Commission request for stock analysis of herring stocks
Order to ICES to improve knowledge of the age and size structure of the stock.

The quota process

MAY

ICES advice on 2024 fishing opportunities

Every year, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) publishes assessments of commercial fish stocks. For the Baltic Sea, the advice is usually released at the end of May, where they also provide fishing advice according to the MSY model (see glossary).

Comment: The government should already in the first quarter hold bilateral talks at political level to discuss the situation in the Baltic Sea and to create a basis for common positions on this year's quota decisions.

AUGUST

Commission's proposal is released

After ICES has released its stock assessments, they are processed by the European Commission, which, after dialogue with Member States and stakeholders, makes a proposal for next year's fisheries. The Commission's proposal is then used as a starting point

for the countries' negotiations ahead of the Council of Ministers' decision in October. Minister for Rural Affairs Peter Kullgren is the responsible Swedish minister.

Comment: Sverige behöver komma överens nationellt, och med andra medlemsländer i regionen, om hur kvoterna ska sättas för Östersjön. Samtal om att återbygga fiskbestånden och korrigera bristerna i förvaltningen bör föras i god tid med riksdagsledamöter och länder kring Östersjön.

SEPTEMBER

Sweden's position in quota negotiations decided

Before Sweden decides its negotiating position for next year's fisheries, the Ministry of Rural Affairs and Infrastructure receives information from the Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management (SwAM). The ministry conducts stakeholder meetings and then submits a document to the parliament that is discussed at meetings of the Committee on Environment and Agriculture and the EU Council in

September. This gives the parliament the opportunity to influence Sweden's position in the quota negotiations.

Comment: Sweden should develop a research-based, independent position that does not jeopardize the fish stocks of the Baltic Sea.

OCTOBER

Quotas are decided by the Council of Ministers

In mid-October, the countries' ministers responsible will meet to set next year's fishing quotas.

Comment: Experience from previous years' negotiations shows that countries that agree on a common platform ahead of the meeting often succeed in promoting their positions. Discussing common positions early on is important.

More key issues in 2023

FEBRUARY

Review: Do we know what is being fished?

Early this year, BalticWaters released a review of Swedish fishing in the Baltic Sea. The focus is on herring and sprat fishing, which accounts for 97 per cent of Sweden's total catch from the Baltic Sea, where misreporting of species and weight turns out to be widespread. The inaccurate reporting affects researchers' data, leading to incorrect catch recommendations and political decisions that threaten the Baltic Sea's fish populations.

Comment: Action is needed to ensure that catches from the Baltic Sea are properly reported. The government needs to review current legislation, penalties, policies, and control methods.

MARCH

Report: The state of Swedish fish and shellfish

SLU's annual review "Fish and shellfish stocks in Swedish seas and freshwater" analyses the status and trends of the most fished species in the sea and the four large lakes: Vänern, Vättern, Mälaren and Hjälmaren. The report provides an important basis for the management of fish and shellfish stocks, and for evaluating the effects of various management measures. [Previous years' reports are available here.](#)

Comment: The government and authorities need to act on new knowledge and introduce measures needed to restore Sweden's fish stocks.

APRIL

Assignment on relocated trawl border

Although there is a large political consensus behind the proposal to move the trawl limit along the entire east coast, the previous government decided that the trawl limit should be moved, but on a trial basis and in limited experimental areas along the east coast, within the framework of a [scientific project](#). The project, which has many challenges in terms of time, environment,

species protection, areas, and legal aspects, is due to report in April this year. The government has promised to move trawl fishing away from our coasts and still can fulfil this promise by changing the guidelines in the assignment, which can be done both before and after the interim report.

Comment: The government needs to change the assignment to SwAM so that the trawl limit is moved out along the entire east coast and not just within the framework of a limited scientific project.

JUNE

Swedish Presidency of the EU

EU fisheries directors meet once during each EU presidency in the country holding the presidency. The theme of the meeting during the Swedish presidency will be the common fisheries policy. The Commission will present a report containing a review of the common fisheries policy, which will be discussed during the Swedish presidency.

Comment: Sweden should raise the issue of a revision of Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) as a model for managing Baltic Sea fisheries. The facts of the past decades' application show that MSY leads to overfishing. Fishing must be based on a model that takes greater account of risks and uncertainties.

DURING THE YEAR

Baltfish-meetings

The Baltic Sea countries hold several meetings on fisheries during the year, called [BALTFISH](#), where they discuss current issues concerning Baltic Sea stocks, the environment, management plans and fisheries control. There is currently little transparency regarding the issues discussed and the position of the different countries.

Comment: Politicians must get involved at an early stage to give clear political instructions focusing on protecting stocks and the environment to the officials representing Sweden in BALTFISH.

DURING THE YEAR

Commission request for stock analysis of herring

During last year's quota discussions in the Swedish parliament, Sweden asked the European Commission to improve scientific knowledge of the age and size structure of herring in the Gulf of Bothnia and the central Baltic Sea. The Commission is now formulating a request to ICES, which will be published during the year. Consideration for preserving larger and older individuals in the stocks is crucial knowledge for both the environment and coastal fisheries and something that should be included in ICES's advice for all species under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

Comment: The government needs to ensure that the proposal submitted to the Commission is also implemented by Sweden constantly drawing attention to the issue at all levels.

Fisheries and the solutions

Facts about fishing

Unless otherwise stated, the information under the heading “Facts about fishing” is a compilation requested by BalticWaters from SwAM.

Changes in the Swedish fishing fleet

In 2021, 457 Swedish vessels reported catches from the Baltic Sea compared to 348 in 2022, a decrease of almost every fourth boat in just one year. Over 100 of those who stopped reporting catches are small-scale boats under 12 metres. Coastal fishermen have long warned of declining catches due to declining stocks and large-scale fishing for feed, which has resulted [in fewer larger individuals in the stocks](#). Inshore fisheries for human consumption need larger herring, while fisheries for feed do not depend on the larger individuals and are therefore not affected by the changes in the same way as small-scale fisheries.

In the statistics from SaWM, one of the largest boats has also disappeared from the system. It was sold because the owners have invested in a new vessel that is now being built. In the meantime, the vessel’s quota was lent to one of the other industrial trawlers, which meant that a single vessel, thanks to an exemption from SwAM, accounted for over 20 per cent of Sweden’s total pelagic catch in 2022, despite the fact that there is an [upper limit](#) that states that a vessel’s fishing rights may not exceed 10 per cent of the quotas.

Swedish fisheries in figures

As in 2021, the twenty largest boats caught 95 percent of Sweden’s total catch in 2022. In total, 87,500 tonnes of fish were caught in the Baltic Sea by Swedish boats, a slight decrease from 91,100 tonnes in 2021.

Number of boats	2021	2022
>35 meters	13	12
18-35 meters	6	9
12-18 meters	21	18
<12 meters	417	309
Total	457	348

In terms of weight, the main catches were sprat (60%) and herring (37%), followed by sprat (1.4%), vendace (1%) and salmon (0.1%), the majority of which are not eaten by humans. Over 90% of all fish caught in the Baltic Sea in Sweden is used as feed for fish farms, dog and cat food, and mink, pig and chicken farming.

[According to economist Stefan Fölster](#), the economic contribution of large-scale trawlers in the Baltic Sea was estimated in 2020 to be around 22 million a year, while

the cost to taxpayers is hundreds of millions annually in the form of subsidies and grants.

The Swedish fisheries policy

Many commercial fish species have declined sharply in recent decades, but instead of protecting species, policy and management have accepted high fishing quotas and opposed other restrictions on fishing. One reason for the lack of action is that the negative impact of fishing on stocks is often questioned and quotas are often described as ‘sustainable’, even though the available evidence shows a very different picture.

Although environmental factors in the Baltic Sea can also have a negative impact on the species, there is no doubt that fishing is crucial to the current situation. It is not uncommon for fishing to consume around half of a stock in a year, according to ICES figures. This leaves little room for stocks to withstand other pressures such as predation, disease and the environmental effects of climate change and eutrophication. At the same time, there are also major problems with poor fisheries control and incomplete and sometimes misleading scientific information.

Management today takes great account of short-term profit interests, and the lack of action on fishing is often defended on the grounds that there are “[many interests](#)” to consider, or that the knowledge base is incomplete. When [former rural affairs minister Jennie Nilsson](#) was asked about measures for the declining size of herring stocks, she said that fishing could not be restricted until a link between fishing and the shrinking stocks could be demonstrated on a scientific basis. This is despite the fact that the precautionary principle, which is supposed to guide politicians, states that lack of knowledge should not be used as an excuse for inaction - quite the contrary - and despite the fact that scientific modelling shows that industrial fishing has taken almost every [second spawning herring in the central Baltic Sea every year](#) for several years in a row. In the [western Baltic Sea](#), the impact of fishing has been even higher.

Misconceptions about the economic importance of fishing can contribute to short-term management decisions. Fishing is often portrayed as a basic industry, even though its economic footprint in the Swedish balance sheet is currently negative. According to economist Stefan Fölster, large-scale fishing in the Baltic Sea creates [net costs for the state treasury of SEK 239 million per year and net costs for the national economy of SEK 387 million per year](#).

Action: Reduced fishing pressure

The countries around the Baltic Sea have much to gain from lower fishing pressure. Reduced fishing would benefit both the ecosystem and the small-scale fishermen who now have no herring in their nets, as established in the basis for the parliamentary report "[Measures to save fish stocks in the Baltic Sea](#)", but also concretized in [a report from SLU Aqua](#), which has shown that catches must be reduced by [at least 60–80% in the Gulf of Bothnia](#) over decades to maintain a good age and size structure in the herring stock.

Today, the catch recommendations from scientists only take into account the total weight of the stock, although the maintenance of a good size distribution should also be taken into account under the 2008 [Marine Strategy Framework Directive](#). Consideration for maintaining larger and older individuals in the stocks is crucial for both the environment and coastal fisheries, and until this is included in the advice, countries should set low quotas. [Stockholm University's Baltic Sea Centre proposes that the quotas be set at a maximum of half the MSY](#) instead of the full MSY as is the case today, which the government, with the support of the EU Council, can promote in the quota negotiations and the regional body BALTFISH (see also Glossary, Fisheries policy in the EU and Action: Abandon MSY as a management model).

Action: A relocated trawl border

Nationally, the parliament has called on the government to move the trawl border "urgently", which [according to scientists](#) could protect some overwintering herring and make a difference to the ability of herring to reproduce and grow. The [report was published at the end of 2021](#) after a broad consensus in the parliamentary committee on the Environment and Agriculture drew attention to the situation of fish species in the Baltic Sea. Then came a [watered-down decision from the previous government](#) – the trawl border will be moved out, but on a trial basis and in limited experimental areas along the east coast within the framework of a scientific project. During a [parliamentary seminar](#) last year, the project and its many challenges regarding time, environment, species protection, areas and law were discussed.

There are still many uncertainties as to how the administration chooses to design the project – the details of which, according to the agency's plan, must also be approved by the other countries in BALTFISH. Among the risks of the project are that it is too short to be effective, that fishing will only move to the unprotected areas and create greater negative effects there, and that sufficient consideration cannot yet be given to local populations that may be even more affected in the areas where trawling is still allowed.

The conclusion is that the project cannot be seen as a solution for recovering the weak stocks in the Baltic Sea, and that more rapid measures are needed, with

reduced fishing pressure and protected areas along the entire coast. In the [new government statement](#), Kristersson states that the border for large-scale trawling should be moved out, which requires new directives to SwAM and a change in the previous government assignment, which is to be reported in April 2023. It is important that the move is made along the entire east coast and does not protect individual areas while other parts of the coast may continue to be trawled for feed fishing. The government still has every opportunity to correct the content of the previous assignment. You can read more about how the trawl border can be moved [here](#).

Action: Improve fisheries controls

Unfortunately, there are major problems with illegal discards and misreporting of species. A major review in 2019 by the [PI programme Kaliber](#) showed that every second Swedish fishing trawler inspected in Denmark caught more or less fish than they actually declared in their logbook. If vessels misreport their catches, we do not know what is being fished in the Baltic Sea, leading to a lack of knowledge about stocks and the impact of fishing on ecosystems.

Several improvements are needed in fisheries control, including regulatory changes and dissuasive penalties. According to HaV's legal assessment, misreporting of species leads, for example, to a fine of SEK 2,000, while the value of a landing can amount to several million SEK. The shortcomings and necessary measures in fisheries control are developed in [Baltic Sea Brief 42](#) and in a report that BalticWaters expects to release in February 2023.

Fisheries policy in the EU

European fisheries ministers decide how much of the commercial species can be fished each year, including cod, herring, and sprat. The decision is based on a proposal submitted by the European Commission, based on data from ICES.

The basis for quota decisions and scientific advice is the MSY target, which means that each year fishing is based on what scientists believe a stock can sustain without jeopardizing the long-term production of young fish. This has proven to be devastating for commercial fish species in the Baltic Sea. The EU's Common Fisheries Policy is largely designed for large-scale fishing in the North Sea, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, but such management has proven to work poorly in the species-poor inland waters of the Baltic Sea.

To promote biodiversity, sustainable fisheries and maintain the resilience of species, we need to start fishing with a margin of safety to the stock estimates.

● Action: Abandon MSY as a management modell

In practice, MSY means keeping stocks at a low level. This is risky and places high demands on stock estimates and scientific data, which unfortunately are not always accurate. For example, [ICES estimated in 2017](#) that the spawning biomass of herring in the central Baltic Sea was 1.3 million tonnes, while later models showed that the stock was actually less than 0.6 million tonnes. This miscalculation resulted in overfishing that caused the herring stock to decline by a third to historically low levels in just four years.

[SLU Aqua](#) also points out that fishing in accordance with MSY often leads to a shift in the size structure of a fish stock towards smaller sizes as fishing targets larger and older individuals, and analyses show that the proportion of large herring will continue to decline if we continue to fish in accordance with the current MSY targets.

MSY can thus be questioned as a basis for sustainable fishing, and Sweden should work to ensure that a new system is introduced in the EU, particularly as a matter of urgency in the Baltic Sea. The government should instruct SwAM to propose a less risky system that takes more account of environmental aspects, and in the meantime the government should ask the EU for more scientific advice and work to reduce fishing quotas significantly in the quota negotiations.

● Action: Sweden requests enhanced scientific advice

There are several shortcomings in what is required of the scientific advice. The data currently lacks knowledge about how fishing for one species affects other species, even though there is no doubt that the sharp decline of herring affects salmon, cod and seals, for example. Fishing for sprat may also jeopardize herring stocks and fishing for flatfish may have unintended consequences for cod stocks.

The scientific advice also does not take into account the age and size of the fish, despite the fact that this should be included in the advice under the [Marine Strategy Framework Directive](#) from 2008. In an announcement to the government, the parliament has taken the position that Sweden should work through the EU to expand the order to ICES to include ecosystem effects of fishing. The government should request this in 2023, and also work to ensure that advice is given with the aim of preserving different sizes and ages of stocks

For more information

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About BalticWaters

BalticWaters is an independent foundation engaged in efforts to improve the Baltic Sea environment. The foundation conducts large-scale environmental projects with focus on action-oriented measures, and applied research to show which measures can contribute to a healthier sea and viable fish stocks. The projects are carried out on land, along the coast, and in the sea. BalticWaters also develops and disseminates knowledge about the Baltic Sea to the general public, governmental authorities, and decision-makers. The aim is to increase knowledge about the challenges facing the sea and build public opinion so that decisions are taken, and measures are implemented.

Read more at www.balticwaters.org

Glossary of terms

MSY	Maximum Sustainable Yield is the objective of the EU's fisheries policy. In theory, MSY should mean maximizing the catch in the long term without jeopardizing stock recovery. Unfortunately, this does not always work in practice.
F-MSY	The fishing pressure that can provide maximum sustainable yield, MSY, in the long term.
Quota	A fixed amount of a particular fish species that a fishing nation may catch in a sea area during a limited period of time.
BSAC	Baltic Sea Advisory Council Its main task is to advise the European Commission and Member States on issues related to fisheries management in the Baltic Sea.
BALTFISH	The Baltic Sea Regional Fisheries Organisation with the primary objective of improving coordination and cooperation between the Baltic Sea Member States.
HELCOM	The Helsinki Convention, formerly known as the Baltic Sea Convention, is an agreement between the Baltic Sea littoral states to protect the environment of the Baltic Sea.
ICES	International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, an organisation that coordinates and promotes marine research in the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic. Provides recommendations on fishing that form the basis for EU quota decisions.
SwAM	The Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management. Responsible for the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of lakes, rivers and seas.
Stock	The quantity of a fish species in a specific area.