



Young Voices for the Baltic Sea

Reviving the Baltic Sea through Education and Youth Engagement

Policy Brief

April 2025

The Baltic Sea faces unprecedented ecological threats that require urgent and collective action. Despite its importance, ocean literacy among the general public remains alarmingly low, weakening support for sustainable marine policies. In 2024–2025, "Young Voices for the Baltic Sea" organized an educational fair at Stockholm's Baltic Sea Science Centre to raise awareness about marine life, sustainable fishing, and policy frameworks. The experience confirmed significant knowledge gaps but also revealed a strong public interest in learning. Current policies and educational frameworks fail to address these gaps effectively. We recommend targeted reforms, including enhanced marine education, stricter enforcement of EU laws, public awareness programs, and stronger cooperation between schools, the science community, and NGOs to ensure the Baltic Sea's protection and recover

The Baltic Sea is at a critical turning point. The **Baltic Health Index (BHI)**¹ (Blenckner *et al.*, 2021) has made it clear that some areas are struggling more than others, and without immediate and sustained efforts, the health of this unique ecosystem will continue to decline. While certain conservation efforts are in place, progress has been slow, and we must act now to accelerate meaningful change.

A key factor in reversing this decline is improving ocean literacy. Studies show that many people lack a basic understanding of sustainable fishing, marine conservation, and the broader role of the ocean in our daily lives (*Ocean Literacy Headline Report England 2022* (n.d.)). If we want the Baltic Sea to recover, we must empower people with the knowledge needed to make informed choices that benefit marine ecosystems. However, current educational frameworks fail to address this issue adequately. For example, Sweden's new curriculum, "Kunskap för alla" (SOU 2025:19), does not include ocean literacy or marine education, missing a vital opportunity to prepare future generations to understand and protect their marine environment.

This gap in education, combined with limited and sometimes inadequate conservation measures and low public awareness, highlights the urgent need for change. Addressing the crisis facing the Baltic Sea requires a multi-faceted approach that strengthens policies, enhances education, and fosters collaboration across society.

Recommendations:

Integrate Ocean Literacy into Education

Revise national curricula to include ocean literacy and sustainability education, equipping students with the knowledge to understand and protect marine ecosystems.

Expand Public Awareness Campaigns

Launch collaborative awareness initiatives with NGOs and governments to engage citizens in ocean literacy through education, media, and citizen science.

Foster School–NGO Partnerships

Strengthen collaboration between schools and environmental organizations to offer hands-on marine learning experiences and support youth-led conservation efforts.

Enforce EU Fisheries and Environmental Laws

Implement and enforce the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) to combat overfishing, promote sustainable gear, and protect marine biodiversity.

Coordinate Baltic Sea Restoration Efforts

Adopt a multi-sector approach to reduce pollution, restore habitats, and enhance regional cooperation through frameworks like the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan.

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The Baltic Health Index (BHI) is a comprehensive assessment tool that evaluates the health of the Baltic Sea by integrating ecological data with societal goals. Adapted from the global Ocean Health Index framework, the BHI measures progress toward nine key objectives.

Ocean literacy and our education:

Sweden's new school curriculum, "Kunskap för alla" (SOU 2025:19), emphasizes the importance of education for all but lacks direct references to ocean literacy and marine education. This gap presents a missed opportunity to instill knowledge about ocean sustainability, climate change, and marine conservation in young learners. We recommend integrating ocean literacy principles, as outlined in the **Ocean literacy for all: a toolkit** (Santoro *et al.*, 2017), and **NMEA A Handbook for Increasing Ocean Literacy** (Halversen, C. *et al.*, 2021) which provides a structured approach to embedding marine education across K-12 levels. Using this guide as a resource, Swedish schools can enhance students' understanding of marine ecosystems, human impact on the ocean, and the importance of sustainable ocean management.

The public awareness:

Raising public awareness is key to fostering long-term marine conservation. While policy and regulation provide essential frameworks, meaningful change ultimately depends on public understanding and engagement. Governments and NGOs, as they have the necessary tools and resources, must therefore collaborate closely to design and implement educational campaigns, citizen science projects, and interactive outreach programs that translate complex marine issues into accessible and relatable knowledge. Such initiatives not only inform but empower individuals to make more sustainable choices in their daily lives. A notable example is the EU-funded [Sea Change Project](#), which successfully advanced ocean literacy across Europe by combining hands-on educational activities with broad public engagement strategies (CORDIS, 2023). By involving schools, local communities, and the media, Sea Change demonstrated how immersive and inclusive communication efforts can shift public attitudes and behaviors. Expanding and adapting similar models to regional contexts, including the Baltic Sea, can help cultivate a sense of shared responsibility and foster behavioral change that supports marine protection and resilience.

Schools and NGOs:

Collaboration between schools and NGOs is essential for enriching marine education through hands-on, real-world learning experiences. These partnerships bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical environmental action, allowing students to engage directly with the issues affecting their local ecosystems. By connecting classroom concepts with field-based activities and expert guidance, students gain a deeper understanding of marine conservation and develop a personal sense of responsibility. Programs like the EU4Ocean Coalition's Network of European Blue Schools help embed ocean literacy into school curricula while encouraging student-led initiatives that promote local engagement and environmental stewardship (EU4Ocean Coalition | Drive Change Together, 2023). Likewise, the National Marine Educators Association (NMEA) supports global collaboration among educators and researchers to advance innovative teaching tools and methods (National Marine Educators Association, 2024). Strengthening such collaborations through increased funding, support, and shared resources will not only enhance learning but also empower students to take on roles to protect the Baltic Sea and contribute to a sustainable future.

Overfishing and EU law:

Overfishing poses a significant threat to marine ecosystems and the fishing industry itself. Implementing the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) is essential to ensure sustainable fishing practices across EU waters. By enforcing low quotas accounting for the entire ecosystem, promoting selective fishing gear, and expanding marine protected areas, policymakers can safeguard fish stocks and marine biodiversity. A study by Froese et al. (2018) highlights that implementing science-based fishing limits under the CFP has already led to the recovery of certain fish populations in European waters, demonstrating the effectiveness of properly implementing such policies.

Coordinated multi-sector measures:

The Baltic Sea is particularly vulnerable due to its semi-enclosed nature, making it prone to eutrophication, pollution, and habitat destruction. Restoring its health requires a comprehensive approach, including reducing nutrient runoff from agriculture, limiting industrial pollutants, and protecting key marine habitats. The HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan provides a framework for tackling these challenges and has been instrumental in reducing hazardous substances and improving water quality. However, further cooperation in the form of industry change and conservation actions among Baltic states is needed to meet environmental targets and combat emerging threats such as microplastic pollution and climate change.

Conclusion:

The future of the Baltic Sea hinges on our collective willingness to act with urgency, foresight, and cooperation. As our project has shown, there is a clear public interest in understanding marine issues, but the tools and platforms to foster that understanding remain underdeveloped. Ocean literacy must no longer be treated as a niche concern; it is foundational to shaping informed citizens, responsible consumers, and engaged communities. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this brief, enforcing EU law, restoring marine habitats, reforming education, launching awareness campaigns, and building strong school–NGO collaborations, we can begin to reverse the degradation of the Baltic Sea. As young advocates, we believe that a society which lives with the Baltic Sea, rather than one that exploits it in an unsustainable way, is not only possible but necessary. The time to act is now; for the ocean, for our communities, and for future generations.

Young Voices for the Baltic Sea is a group of individuals aged 18–25 from diverse academic and national backgrounds—ranging from marine biology to political science—united by a shared commitment to protect the Baltic Sea. Between September 2024 and February 2025, and with support from the Bank of Åland, BalticWaters, the Marine Education Center of Malmö, and the Baltic Sea Science Centre at Skansen, the group developed and hosted an educational fair in Stockholm.

The event engaged nearly 2,000 visitors in a single day, introducing them to four key themes: **marine biodiversity, fishing practices, policy frameworks, and sustainability certifications**. Interactions revealed a widespread lack of basic ocean literacy, despite clear public interest. Visitors of all ages, from local families to international tourists, displayed limited understanding of fishing methods, policy-making processes, and sustainable consumption. A generational divide was also evident, with older individuals recalling healthier seas and younger ones unaware of past conditions—a symptom of the “shifting baseline” phenomenon. This underscored the urgent need for education and public engagement on marine issues.

Because of this we decided to express our concerns and using our combined backgrounds and our gained knowledge we want to present our recommendations that we believe will lead to a society where we live with the Baltic sea and not live by exploiting it.

Sources:

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