

Inventories and Planning for the Marine Natura 2000 Network in Finland FINMARINET

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FINMARINET is a major inventory project carried out to produce a coherent overview of the EU Habitats Directive marine habitat types in Finland through field inventories. The purpose of the project is to propose implementation and possible extension of the Natura 2000 network in marine areas by producing new information for the Finnish nature conservation authorities. As an EU Life+ programme funded project, FINMARINET held its Final Conference on April 10th in Helsinki.

In his opening speech the Minister of the Environment, Mr Ville Niinistö, pointed out that nature conservation is clearly an information-dependent field of politics. Whenever decisions are taken regarding the establishment of conservation areas, sufficient background information is needed. Underwater nature monitoring is a long neglected sector in environmental information production. This, of course, is due to many technical and historical restrictions. Appropriate data collection methods have been developed only recently; what you don't see is easy to neglect. The long tradition of the freedom of the seas has also prevailed from ancient times. This idea of unlimited maritime space and resources is now coming to an end, however. During the last ten years the role of the seas in international policies has strengthened drastically. Environmental pressures on the seas have increased strongly, which has increased the demands for conservation also. This change has brought science and research of the seas into the focus. Major political actors are globally acting to strengthen their role in maritime policy, and also EU has an increasing tendency to regulate maritime activities in its territories. This will, of course, entail availability and utilization of information about marine underwater nature.

The purpose of FINMARINET final conference was to sum up the results and see what type of expert recommendations the project is preparing to give towards its closing. The conference programme provided a cross-section of the project activities, together with comments from major actors in the field of marine nature, such as NGOs, research consortia, as well as the Ministry of the Environment and HELCOM. The international morning session focused on the major outputs of the project with commentary speeches from two organisations with an approach covering the entire Baltic Sea, HELCOM and BONUS. In the afternoon, a more detailed review of the project activities was done among national actors.

FINMARINET has brought field work and related information production about Finnish marine underwater nature into entirely new dimensions. In the project, more than 22 000 sampling sites were visited, and around 800km² geological and bathymetric survey was done. More than one hundred field workers, researchers and administrators together with twenty crew members of the research vessels' were working in the project. Along the Finnish coastline, six target areas were specified for the field work, and the outputs were produced at the level of marine species, communities and habitats. The maps based on field work and modelling will be placed on an Internet-based map service before the closing of the project.

Regarding rare or threatened species, novel information was received especially in the Bothnian Bay, where only little information had been collected prior to FINMARINET. At the inter-species level, plenty of information was collected from mixed communities of marine and freshwater species. Habitats inventories revealed that in the Bothnian Bay, a lot more sandbanks can be found than previously known. Previously unknown De Geer moraines were found in the Bothnia Sea. It was also noticed that sea currents are relatively strong in the area, revealed by the fact that no sedimentation could be observed in the bottoms. The habitats of the southern rim of the Archipelago Sea were recognized as potential conservation areas, in case Natura 2000 network in the area is revised in the future.

In the commenting speeches, the concept of FINMARINET as a joint forum of the major national marine research organisations was highly appreciated. Both HELCOM and BONUS see continuation of the marine inventory work as a crucial element in sustainable and effective conservation actions of the Baltic Sea. Joint consortia should be formed in the future e.g. through funding provided by BONUS to be carried out under the umbrella of the Baltic Sea Action Plan.

In the afternoon, the justifications of FINMARINET and related activities were discussed, and distinct actions of the project presented. It was pointed out, that refinement of data into information and knowledge is a crucial process that needs to be managed properly till the point of dissemination and decision making. For this reason, training and communications are utterly important in delivering the outputs of any project producing information about biological and geological diversity. During FINMARINET, a new generation of Finnish marine scientists has been trained to further specialize into the research tasks posed by the societal demands around the Baltic Sea.

In the commenting speeches by the Ministry of the Environment and the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation, it was pointed out that inventories and information dissemination regarding marine underwater biota need necessarily to be continued. Furthermore, focusing on conservation areas alone is not sufficient. The future of the Baltic Sea will most probably be solved outside the conservation areas, where intense human activity creates environmental pressures.

In the closing it was noted that the work of VELMU, the Finnish National Inventory Programme on Underwater Marine Nature, has been strongly boosted along with the FINMARINET project. As an especially positive note it was taken that EU funding has brought about such an outstanding work effort in Finland. Finland has an astonishingly rich marine nature. This is facilitated by the unique geographical features of our coasts, the incredibly variable selection of islands of all sizes, shallow bays and steep underwater descents. The biological richness brought by this has given us excellent fishing grounds and landscapes that must be treated as a national treasure.

