

Reflection on impact assessment

According to the EU's so-called Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) directive (2001/42/EC),⁵¹ an environmental assessment should be carried out for plans and programmes that are likely to have significant environmental effects. The SEA protocol of UNECE's EIA convention, also called the Espoo convention, has the same requirements. Both Sweden and Finland have implemented the directive and ratified the protocol.

The SEA directive only concerns plans that meet certain criteria, such as those being prepared or adopted by an authority and being required by law or administrative provisions. Both existing Finnish regional and municipal plans and Swedish municipal plans fall under these criteria, as do Sweden's proposed new national MSP plans. SEAs must also be prepared for certain sectors such as fisheries, town and country planning, or land use. They must also set the framework for the consent of future development projects listed in the annexes to the EIA directive (85/337/EEC).⁵²

Even though maritime planning or maritime uses are not specifically mentioned in the directive, it is likely that any maritime plan will fall under this stricter criteria. A maritime plan will certainly set the framework for the consent of future development projects such as those mentioned above. In addition, environmental effects also include positive effects, which makes it even more likely that an environmental assessment will be deemed necessary for a maritime plan.

The SEA directive has for many years been implemented in Swedish and Finnish legislation and its application has become an accustomed procedure for planners. Performing an environmental assessment for a maritime plan covering new areas and dimensions for planning will be a challenge, however. New concepts and methods will be needed.

Carrying out an environmental assessment means preparing an environmental report and performing consultations, including with other states. The results of the report and the consultations then inform the adoption of the plan. In comparison to a traditional land use plan, a maritime plan should not pose any particular problems in these respects, save for the environmental report.

Due to time limitations and because this project was only tentative in its nature, it was not possible to carry out a proper environmental assessment. Some vital elements, however, were considered, which we explain further below.

Significant environmental effects

The environmental report should include a description of the likely significant environmental effects of implementing the plan and reasonable alternatives. These effects should concern broad issues such as biodiversity, population, human health, and climatic factors, but also material assets and cultural heritage.

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Applying the ecosystem approach, as has been tentatively done in this project, should mean that the conditions for biodiversity, flora and fauna and the effects of various uses on these factors have been considered, depending on the level of knowledge concerning each issue. The earlier chapters comprise such assessments, which would have been more substantial if this project had been a real planning initiative. The recommendations on wind power probably comprise the most significant environmental effects, not only in terms of the transformation of the marine landscape but also on marine habitats. If there had been better knowledge of the effects of wind power on migratory birds, more detailed recommendations for different areas would have been possible.

Assessing effects on the human population generates a special difficulty in MSP, as the planning area is uninhabited. Social impacts – largely meaning economic factors and job creation – could be envisaged for people working in the fishing, shipping, wind power, aggregate extraction and tourism industries. It would not be easy to assess the effects of the plan on these areas. Furthermore, the directive does not require an economic impact assessment.

On the other hand, the effects from wind power installations near the coast on second-home owners would be easier to assess. We should describe the relevant aspects of the environment and its future if the plan is not implemented, the so-called 'zero alternative'. With this plan, the most likely effect would be that the ad hoc and unco-ordinated granting of permits for offshore wind power developments would continue and could result in too many installations in shallow and environmentally sensitive sea areas. Possible alternatives to the plan could either be a more restrictive approach in designating areas of potential natural value, concentrating on the most sensitive areas; It could alternatively take a more extensive approach and assess all the area of the Bothnian Sea, designating it for various uses. Other alternatives could be to have a more restrictive attitude to wind power, or to pose more restrictions on shipping in environmentally sensitive areas.

On consultation

Proper consultations as per the requirements in the EU's SEA directive were understandably not possible given the limited time available and the pilot nature of this initiative. Immediate and open access to all meeting and process documentation, including document drafts, has, however been ensured for all interested parties.

The active participation of representatives from Sweden and Finland, including the Swedish County Administrative Boards and the Finnish Regional Councils, in this process grounded it in the day-to-day work of the national administrations. Swedish municipalities were also explicitly requested to directly comment on a sketch of the draft plan, even if the timetable allowed only a two-week commenting period. The other Baltic Sea states have also been informed on several occasions within the regional HELCOM-VASAB working group.

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