

Emergent vegetation communities on Baltic infralittoral sand

Summary

This habitat, which occurs at the land-water interface in sheltered areas of all the Baltic sub-basins, although less common in the more saline Sound, is dominated by reeds or sedges. The habitat can support a high biodiversity, for example by providing nesting areas for birds, and shelter and spawning grounds for fish, but reeds in particular can also out compete and shade other plant species (including sedges) decreasing local biodiversity.

The expansion of reed belts has been accelerated by anthropogenic eutrophication, postglacial land upheaval and the lack of grazing on coastal meadows and attached shallow water areas, while pollution associated with drainage from farming and forestry, and other sources (like traffic and industry) are threats and deterioration factors. Other pressures arise from shipping, and the construction or enlargement of harbours and marinas in sheltered areas. Changes in the water flow due to hydrotechnical constructions, such as dams, cascades and river bank control, may also have adverse effects downstream. The environmental conditions in river mouths depend highly on inflows from local point sources as well as from the whole catchment area. They are therefore closely related to human activities on land.

In some areas, there is an active programme of reed removal to encourage re-establishment of the sedge dominated biotopes. Improvements in water quality are also beneficial although it should be noted that whereas increased eutrophication leads to reed replacing sedges, a later decrease in eutrophication does not necessarily facilitate a process where sedges come back.

Synthesis

Increases in extent have been evident in this habitat in the last 50 years, though this is mainly due to the increase of reed (*Phragmites australis*) while at the same time sedges have decreased, most likely a response to eutrophication favouring the former. In the case of the sedge dominated biotopes some loss in density/biomass may be occurring but there are no monitoring data to confirm this.

The overall assessment for this EUNIS level 4 habitat has been based on the HELCOM (2013) assessments for the associated HELCOM HUB biotopes. Draft assessments were derived using a weighted approach whereby the HELCOM assessment outcomes were assigned a score. This was averaged across the relevant biotopes. The outcomes were reviewed by Baltic experts to reach a final conclusion. HELCOM (2013) assessed AA.J1A1 and AA.J1A2 as Least Concern (A1). The overall assessment for this habitat type, based on expert opinion is Least Concern for both the EU 28 and EU 28+.

Overall Category & Criteria			
EU 28		EU 28+	
Red List Category	Red List Criteria	Red List Category	Red List Criteria
Least Concern	-	Least Concern	-

Sub-habitat types that may require further examination

'Baltic photic sand dominated by sedges (Cyperaceae)' (AA.J1A2).

Habitat Type

Code and name

Emergent vegetation communities on Baltic infralittoral sand

No characteristic photographs of this habitat currently available.

Habitat description

This is a Baltic Sea benthic habitat in the photic zone where at least 90% of the substrate is sand according to the HELCOM HUB classification. Emergent vegetation covers at least 10% of the seabed and exceeds that of other perennial attached erect groups. The habitat occurs in areas of low to moderate exposure to wave action, typically to depths of about 3 meters. Two associated biotopes with different dominant plant species (at least 50% of the biovolume of the emergent vegetation) have been described. These are 'Baltic photic sand dominated by common reed (*Phragmites australis*)' (AA.J1A1) which is found in shallow water, down to a depth of 3 m and in moderate exposure, and 'Baltic photic sand dominated by sedges (Cyperaceae)' (AA.J1A2) where sedges such as *Schoenoplectus* spp. and *Bolboschoenus maritimus* dominate. The latter is found in shallow water, down to a depth of 1m and in areas of moderate exposure to wave action. Nutrient levels play a part in affecting the balance between the two biotopes with reed dominated areas favoured by conditions of eutrophication.

Indicators of quality:

Both biotic and abiotic indicators have been used to describe marine habitat quality. These include: the presence of characteristic species as well as those which are sensitive to the pressures the habitat may face; water quality parameters; levels of exposure to particular pressure, and more integrated indices which describe habitat structure and function, such as trophic index, or successional stages of development in habitats that have a natural cycle of change over time. There are no commonly agreed indicators of quality for this habitat, although particular parameters may have been set in certain situations e.g. protected features within Natura 2000 sites, where reference values have been determined and applied on a location-specific basis. The overall quality and continued occurrence of this habitat is, however, largely dependent on the presence of the emergent plant species which create the biogenic structural complexity on which the characteristic associated communities depend. The density and the maintenance of a viable population of these species is a key indicator of habitat quality, together with the visual evidence of presence or absence of physical damage. In the case of this habitat the situation is further complicated because the reed dominated biotope is favoured by the deterioration of the sedge dominated biotope under conditions of eutrophication.

Characteristic species:

Phragmites australis, *Schoenoplectus* spp., *Bolbaschoenus maritimus*.

Classification

EUNIS:

The closest correspondence in EUNIS (2004) level 4 is A5.54 Angiosperm communities in reduced salinity and A5.21 Sublittoral sand in low or reduced salinity.

Annex 1:

The relationship between HUB biotopes and Annex 1 habitats has not yet been mapped by HELCOM, however this habitat may appear in the following Annex 1 habitats:

1110 Sandbanks slightly covered all the time

1130 Estuaries

1160 Large shallow inlets and bays

1650 Boreal Baltic narrow inlets

MAES:

Marine - Marine inlets and transitional waters

Marine - Coastal

MSFD:

Shallow sublittoral sand

EUSeaMap:

Shallow sands

IUCN:

9.4 Subtidal sandy

Other relationships:

Level 5 of the HELCOM HUB classification (2013):

AA.J1A Baltic photic sand characterised by emergent vegetation This habitat has two biotopes on HUB level 6; 'Baltic photic sand dominated by common reed (*Phragmites australis*)' (AA.J1A1) 'Baltic photic sand dominated by sedges (Cyperaceae)' (AA.J1A2).

Does the habitat type present an outstanding example of typical characteristics of one or more biogeographic regions?

No

Justification

Sedges as a dominant emergent vegetation along seashores are typical and characteristic of the Baltic Sea. Reeds are one of the most commonly widespread plants on the globe, and are commonly found along shorelines in sheltered bays and estuaries in brackish water all over world including the Baltic. The combined habitat is not a typical characteristic for the Baltic.

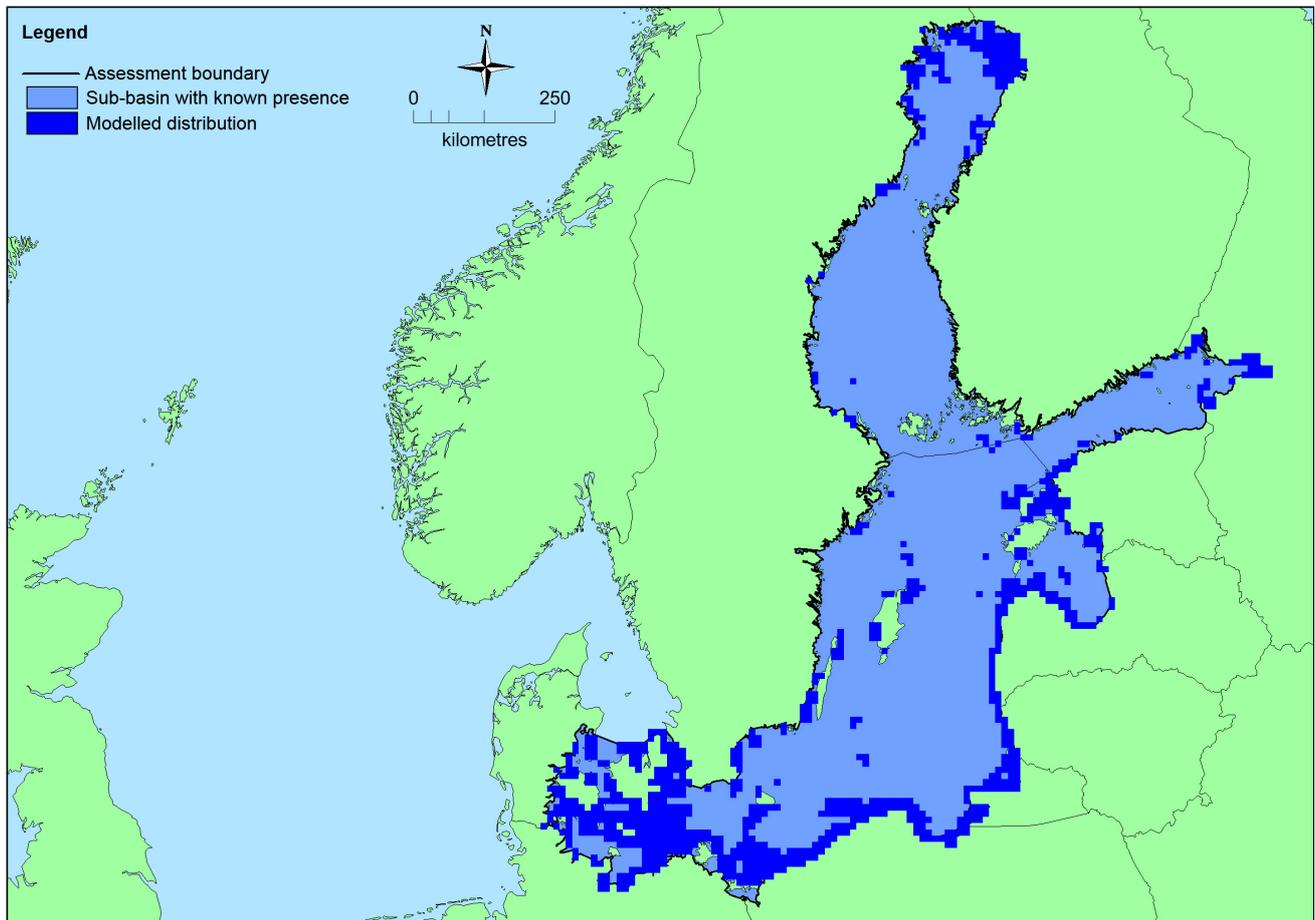
Geographic occurrence and trends

Region	Present or Presence Uncertain	Current area of habitat	Recent trend in quantity (last 50 yrs)	Recent trend in quality (last 50 yrs)
<i>Baltic Sea</i>	Baltic Proper: Present Belt Sea: Present Gulf of Bothnia: Present Gulf of Finland: Present Gulf of Riga: Present The Sound: Present	Unknown Km ²	Increasing	Stable

Extent of Occurrence, Area of Occupancy and habitat area

	Extent of Occurrence (EOO)	Area of Occupancy (AOO)	Current estimated Total Area	Comment
<i>EU 28</i>	>50,000 Km ²	Unknown	Unknown Km ²	This habitat is present in all the Baltic sub-basins however there is insufficient information for accurate calculation of EOO and AOO.
<i>EU 28+</i>	>50,000 Km ²	Unknown	Unknown Km ²	This habitat is present in all the Baltic sub-basins however there is insufficient information for accurate calculation of EOO and AOO.

Distribution map



There are insufficient data to provide a comprehensive and accurate map of the distribution of this habitat. This map has therefore been generated using the modelled data available on EMODnet for EUNIS level 3 habitats in the Baltic Sea (EMODnet, 2010). This means it indicates potential areas in which this habitat may occur, not the actual distribution of this EUNIS level 4 habitat. EOO and AOO cannot be calculated at the present time, although the habitat is known to occur in all the Baltic Sea sub-basins.

How much of the current distribution of the habitat type lies within the EU 28?

This habitat occurs in the EU 28+ (Russia). The percentage hosted by EU 28 is therefore less than 100% but there is insufficient information to establish the proportion. Similar habitats may occur in other European regional seas.

Trends in quantity

This habitat is present in all sub-basins of the Baltic Sea although less abundant in the higher salinity areas of The Sound. Its extent has increased in the last 50 years due to anthropogenic eutrophication and changes in land use (less coastal pastures, less reed cutting). There also appears to have been a changing balance between the associated biotopes with sedge dominated communities declining and reed dominated communities increasing, most likely in response to eutrophication. There are some exceptions. In Estonia, for example there was expansive reed growth from 1950s to end of 1970s whereas in the last few decades growth rates reduced or even ceased. This is believed to be associated with increased storminess resulting in increase of average sea level which has limited the suitable growth zones for the reed weakened by eutrophication. The quantity of this habitat is expected increase in the future in the whole Baltic Sea.

- Average current trend in quantity (extent)
 EU 28: Increasing
 EU 28+: Increasing
- Does the habitat type have a small natural range following regression?

No

Justification

This habitat occurs in all the Baltic Sea sub-basins so does not have a small natural range.

- Does the habitat have a small natural range by reason of its intrinsically restricted area?

No

Justification

This habitat occurs in all the Baltic Sea sub-basins so does not have a small natural range.

Trends in quality

Overall, the quality of this habitat is not considered to have declined although a decline in quality over the last 50 years has been reported in the Quark and Bothnian Bay over the past 50 years.

- Average current trend in quality

EU 28: Stable

EU 28+: Stable

Pressures and threats

The expansion of reed belts has been accelerated by anthropogenic eutrophication, postglacial land upheaval and the lack of grazing on coastal meadows and attached shallow water areas, while pollution associated with drainage from farming and forestry, and other sources (like traffic and industry) are threats and deterioration factors. Other pressures arise from shipping, and the construction or enlargement of harbours and marinas in sheltered areas. Changes in the water flow due to hydrotechnical constructions, such as dams, cascades and river bank control, may also have adverse effects downstream. Other threats can be caused by introduction of non-indigenous, invasive species, unsustainable fisheries and tourism as well as oil spills and construction of breakwaters.

The environmental conditions in river mouths depend highly on inflows from local point sources as well as from the whole catchment area. They are therefore closely related to human activities on land. The maximum growth depth of *Phragmites* (limited by oxygen transportation to the roots) is around 2m therefore sea level rise may lead to changes in extent and shifts in distribution. Some of these activities described above may increase the extent of the habitat or change the relatively dominance of reeds or sedges. For example, dredging of the tributary rivers of the Kasari delta, Estonia, in the 1920s-1930s caused a rapid seaward colonisation of the reed bed along the dredged channels by the dispersal and reburial of fragmented rhizomes at the channel banks and on the shallow sea bottom of Matsalu Bay.

List of pressures and threats

Pollution

Pollution to surface waters (limnic, terrestrial, marine & brackish)

Nutrient enrichment (N, P, organic matter)

Input of contaminants (synthetic substances, non-synthetic substances, radionuclides) - diffuse sources, point sources, acute events

Natural System modifications

Modification of water flow (tidal & marine currents)

Dykes, embankments, artificial beaches, general

Sea defense or coast protection works, tidal barrages

Climate change

Changes in abiotic conditions

Wave exposure changes

Sea-level changes

Changes in biotic conditions

Habitat shifting and alteration

Conservation and management

In some areas, there is an active programme of reed removal to encourage re-establishment of the sedge dominated biotopes. Improvements in water quality are also beneficial although it should be noted that whereas increased eutrophication leads to reed replacing sedges, a later decrease in eutrophication does not necessarily facilitate a process where sedges come back.

List of conservation and management needs

Measures related to wetland, freshwater and coastal habitats

Restoring/Improving water quality

Restoring/Improving the hydrological regime

Measures related to marine habitats

Other marine-related measures

Conservation status

Annex 1:

1110: MBAL U1

1130: MBAL U2

1160: MBAL U2

1650: MBAL U2

HELCOM (2013) assessments:

1110 VU C1

1130 CR C1

1160 VU C1

1650 VU C1

HELCOM (2013) have assessed associated biotopes AA.J1A1 and AA.J1A2 as LC(A1).

When severely damaged, does the habitat retain the capacity to recover its typical character and functionality?

Phragmites is a pioneer species and a strong competitor therefore there is considered to be a good capacity for recovery at least for the reed dominated biotope.

Effort required

10 years
Naturally

Red List Assessment

Criterion A: Reduction in quantity

Criterion A	A1	A2a	A2b	A3
EU 28	0 %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %
EU 28+	0 %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %

There have been different trends in the extent of this habitat depending on which of the associated biotopes is considered. Sedges have declined, quite significantly in some areas, possibly due to the expansion of, and competition with reed. The latter benefits from the nutrient enrichment associated with eutrophication. As a consequence sedges, former considered ecologically typical of sheltered areas in the Baltic are being replaced by another biotope due to a deterioration of the environment (i.e. eutrophication).

Overall this habitat is believed to have been stable or possibly increased in extent over the last 50 years. It has therefore been assessed as Least Concern under criterion A for both the EU 28 and EU 28+.

Criterion B: Restricted geographic distribution

Criterion B	B1				B2				B3
	EOO	a	b	c	AOO	a	b	c	
EU 28	>50,000 Km ²	Unknown							
EU 28+	>50,000 Km ²	Unknown							

Present in all Baltic Sea bays therefore EOO exceeds 50,000km² however with no quantitative data on habitat extent or area, accurate calculation of EOO or AOO is not possible at the present time. This habitat is therefore Data Deficient under criterion B.

Criterion C and D: Reduction in abiotic and/or biotic quality

Criteria C/D	C/D1		C/D2		C/D3	
	Extent affected	Relative severity	Extent affected	Relative severity	Extent affected	Relative severity
EU 28	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %
EU 28+	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %

Criterion C	C1		C2		C3	
	Extent affected	Relative severity	Extent affected	Relative severity	Extent affected	Relative severity
EU 28	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %
EU 28+	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %

Criterion D	D1		D2		D3	
	Extent affected	Relative severity	Extent affected	Relative severity	Extent affected	Relative severity
EU 28	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %	unknown %

Criterion D	D1		D2		D3	
	Extent affected	Relative severity	Extent affected	Relative severity	Extent affected	Relative severity
EU 28+	unknown %	unknown%	unknown %	unknown%	unknown %	unknown%

Experts consider there to be insufficient data on which to assess Criteria C/D.

Criterion E: Quantitative analysis to evaluate risk of habitat collapse

Criterion E	Probability of collapse
EU 28	unknown
EU 28+	unknown

There is no quantitative analysis available to estimate the probability of collapse of this habitat type.

Overall assessment "Balance sheet" for EU 28 and EU 28+

	A1	A2a	A2b	A3	B1	B2	B3	C/D1	C/D2	C/D3	C1	C2	C3	D1	D2	D3	E
EU28	LC	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD
EU28+	LC	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	DD	LC	DD	DD	DD	DD

Overall Category & Criteria			
EU 28		EU 28+	
Red List Category	Red List Criteria	Red List Category	Red List Criteria
Least Concern	-	Least Concern	-

Confidence in the assessment

Low (mainly based on uncertain or indirect information, inferred and suspected data values, and/or limited expert knowledge)

Assessors

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Contributors

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Reviewers

T.A Haynes.

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21/12/2015

References

HELCOM, 2013. *Red List of Baltic Sea underwater biotopes, habitats and biotope complexes*. Avellan, L. (Ed). Helsinki, Finland.

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