Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas

**Recommendation**

WWF calls on the Environment Ministers of the Baltic and North-East Atlantic to agree to take concerted action within the framework of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to promote the Baltic Sea, the Barents Sea and the waters of Western Europe*, as Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas (PSSA) along with appropriate protective measures.

*The waters of Portugal, Spain including the waters to the Straits of Gibraltar, France, and to the west and east of Ireland and the UK, including the Irish Sea and relevant parts of the North Sea.

**Background**

Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas (PSSAs) are areas of the seas and oceans that need special protection through action by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) because of their ecological, economic, cultural or scientific significance and their vulnerability to harmful impacts from shipping activities. To date 5 PSSAs have been designated globally and the 6th off the coast of Peru is in the pipeline. The most recently designated site, the Wadden Sea, is the first PSSA in European waters.

PSSAs can help coastal nations prevent accidents, avoid habitat damage and stop intentional pollution by regulating the passage of ships through or away from sensitive areas. The identification of PSSAs also serves to inform mariners of the need to take special care when approaching a sensitive area.

In 1998, the OSPAR Environment Ministers adopted a new Annex to the OSPAR Convention on the Protection and Conservation of the Ecosystem and Biological Diversity of the Maritime Area. Within Annex V a commitment was given in relation to action concerning maritime transport. The Annex stipulates that where it was desirable, the Commission should draw the attention of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to the need for action. In addition, the Contracting Parties should work co-operatively within the IMO to achieve an appropriate response, including action at a regional or local level. In a comparable but more specific way, Article 8 of the 1992 Helsinki Convention, in conjunction with its Annex IV, provides the basis for Baltic states to work co-operatively at regional level and within the IMO to prevent pollution from shipping.

**Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas**

PSSAs can benefit valuable ecosystems such as coral reefs, intertidal wetlands and important marine and coastal habitats. They are also important for migrating seabirds, dolphins, seals or other marine species, as well as feeding grounds for valuable fish stocks. In addition, they can benefit marine areas of particular importance for tourism, recreation, traditional subsistence, science or education. And if any of the above are close to shipping lanes, suffer from bad weather, have narrow passages, shallow depths, or submerged reefs, or are otherwise sensitive to shipping impacts, then they may need PSSA assistance to protect them.

For foreign ships not calling on local ports, international law limits the ability of coastal nations to impose and enforce their own environmental and navigation regulations. Within their 12-mile territorial sea, coastal nations may neither “impair” a transiting ship’s right of innocent passage, nor impose new construction, design, equipment or manning standards. Beyond the territorial seas, in the Exclusive Economic Zone or equivalent extending out to 200 nautical miles from the shore, coastal states can only adopt regulations for transiting ships that have been previously approved by the IMO. Thus it can be difficult to impose uniform regulations applicable to all ships to protect discrete areas of the marine environment that are particularly sensitive. However, through PSSAs, area-specific rules can be matched to local needs and conditions.

**Protective measures suggested for the Barents Sea PSSA:**

* Establishment of mandatory ship routes in a safer distance from the shore - dependant on availability of tug boats
* Mandatory reporting of traffic in and through the area
* Areas to be avoided
* Requirement for double hulls on ships carrying hazardous substances.

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Furthermore, the identification of a PSSA also serves to inform mariners of the need to take special care when approaching a sensitive area.

**PSSA Wadden Sea**
The Wadden Sea is Europe’s largest coastal wetland and one of its last natural areas. It is a shallow sea extending from Den Helder in the Netherlands, along the entire northwest coast of Germany to Esbjerg in Denmark. The Wadden Sea met the criteria for designation as a PSSA in terms of ecological sensitivity, social, cultural and economic importance and its importance scientifically and for educational purposes. It experiences around 260,000 shipping movements a year making it one of the most frequented seas areas world wide and in the German ports alone, 171.5 million tons of cargo were transferred in 1999.

**Designating a PSSA**
Within the IMO it is now acceptable to propose a PSSA alongside the existing protective measures. Furthermore, it is possible to introduce a PSSA submission and over the following two years bring forward the associated protective measures or further associated protective measures. Once the area is designated as a PSSA along with the appropriate protective measures, it remains possible to introduce further protective measures if these are deemed appropriate to the management and protection of the PSSA.

**Draft Text for the Ministerial Declaration**
The Ministers agree to take concerted action within the framework of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to promote the Baltic Sea, the northern Norwegian coast and the waters to the west of Portugal, Spain, France, including the Bay of Biscay and to the west and east of Ireland and the UK, including the Irish Sea and relevant parts of the North Sea as a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) along with appropriate protective measures. (for boundaries see Fig 2)

**Further reading**


WWF (1999): Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas - a precautionary tool to protect the world’s sensitive marine ecosystems from shipping impacts such as oil spills, ship groundings, anchor damage and rubbish. WWF UK. Godalming.


Fig. 1: WWF-Spain demonstration in Madrid at the Neptun fountain of Plaza de las Cibeles. “Neptun is in mourning. No more Prestiges” Credit: © WWF-Canon / Isaac VEGA