

Learning Diary

During the last ice age, the Baltic Sea was completely covered by the ice sheet, after that, it came back to life as a lake that later became a semi-enclosed sea. It would be a mesmerizing and unique history if, in recent decades, our Baltic Sea had not been turned into a dump for 85 million people. It takes 30 years for water in the Baltic Sea to exchange and renew, however, we are constantly replenishing it with waste, hazards, excessive nutrients, and, as a result, the Baltic Sea is dying.

All the activities in countries surrounding the Baltic Sea influence its health, because everything from land goes to the rivers, and from there reaches the sea. The catchment area of the Baltic Sea is almost four times larger than the sea itself. Thus, all the 85 million people, all the agriculture, and all the industries inside this area affect the sea. The Baltic Sea is semi-enclosed, thus, whatever enters it, stays there for a really long time. As a result, nutrients act like poisons. They cause intense eutrophication that leads to algal blooms which in turn leave bottom waters without oxygen.

Because of eutrophication, a quarter of the Baltic Sea is a “dead zone” and one-third has very low oxygen concentrations. Oxygen depletion is the biggest stressor that can affect an organism. We, people living on land, sometimes lack food or drinking water but never the oxygen. Maybe that's why we sometimes don't understand how much the Baltic Sea and its ecosystem suffer. We should not forget that our well-being and economy also depend on the state of the Baltic Sea. It provides us with socio-economic benefits like jobs for people, food, leisure activities. However, due to eutrophication people in its region have to face problems like toxic algal blooms, fewer food resources, and loss of 4.4 billion euros annually, mostly due to decreased tourism. If we want to improve the ecosystem and economy of our region, we must maintain the health of the Baltic Sea.

I am a student from Lithuania. I have heard since childhood that we live in a country of forests and agriculture and that we have had a strong connection to nature throughout our history. However, now I know that agriculture is a root cause of eutrophication, and I see that what we do with our soil is not sustainable at all. Intensive agriculture damages both our land and sea and now that I know, I feel a responsibility to talk about it and spread this message to people. Among nine countries surrounding the Baltic Sea, Lithuania has the shortest coastline, but it does not mean the least responsibility, it means that we may care even more because people tend to appreciate things, they don't have much.

However, to save the Baltic Sea, talking is not enough. And empowering the youth will not solve the problems alone. I believe that collaboration is a key to success. Middle-aged and older people are also extremely important because they have huge knowledge. Cross-generational balance is much more sustainable because it allows people to learn from each other. However, not only age matters. Great decisions are made when people from different fields collaborate together. Students, scientists, experts, institutions, politicians, and NGOs - all should be involved, all should communicate, and demand that their recommendations would be implemented. The Baltic Sea cannot tackle human-caused problems anymore, it needs our help, and every single person is important here.

Due to collaboration between different countries, people and institutions, we can already see the improvement in the state of the Baltic Sea. Nutrient inputs are decreasing, also, there are fewer hazards and oil spills. However, the Baltic Sea is still suffering from eutrophication and is not in good condition. It will take a lot of time for the environment to recover because we have been polluting our sea for decades. Not to mention that while we were looking for ways to cope with these known problems, new ones such as microplastic or pharmaceutical pollution have emerged. Thus, fighting for our environment is more like a journey, we might never solve all the problems, but we still must set ambitious goals and keep trying for a better future.

After all, we all are responsible for our planet's ecosystem. Thus, we should forget the boundaries. There are no boundaries in the Baltic Sea, and there should be no boundaries for collaboration between its states. Pollutants from all nine countries do not stay near their shores, they spread and harm the whole sea. That is why we must look for solutions not as separate countries but as one big and strong unity of the Baltic Sea region.

The life below the sea,
The one we cannot see
Is suffering and cannot breathe
Because of nature we deplete.

The youth is calling for the change
Choose sustainable blue way,
Countries, come collaborate
Because actions cannot wait.