

WE LOVE WHAT WE KNOW – AND PROTECT WHAT WE LOVE



Engaging young adults in biosphere
work and sustainable development.

We love what we know and protect what we love

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WE LOVE WHAT WE KNOW – AND PROTECT WHAT WE LOVE

Engaging young adults in biosphere work and sustainable development. Lessons from the project *Biosphere for Baltic – Future Generations*.

A cooperation between biosphere reserves around the Baltic Sea, financed by the Swedish Institute.



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Foreword

Across the Baltic Sea region, UNESCO biosphere reserves have collaborated through the Biosphere for Baltic network since 2017. Over recent years, young people have emerged as committed and creative voices for environmental action. In our biosphere reserves human activity meets natural processes.

Young people have shown that, when given trust and responsibility, they bring energy, insight, and purpose. This was clearly demonstrated in the project *Biosphere for Baltic – Future Generations*.

This book builds on those experiences, bringing together lessons from twelve biosphere reserves in eight countries working to strengthen youth participation. One message stood out clearly across the project: young people feel a deep connection to the Baltic Sea.

During the *Waves for Change* Youth Forum in Kristianstads Vattenrike, participants learned from experts and from one another, explored shallow coastal waters, painted shared visions, and created a collective Call to Action addressed to decision-makers. Their films, discussions and creative work showed how place-based engagement can nurture long-term commitment. Biosphere reserves are living laboratories making it possible!

A key lesson from the project is that when young people from different countries and cultures share experiences and actively shape a common vision, they do more than exchange ideas—they help chart a shared path forward. This approach aligns closely with the Hangzhou Strategic Action Plan (2026–2035) for UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme.

This book invites biosphere reserves, municipalities, schools and organisations to recognise young people not as future leaders, but as leaders already shaping environmental action.

Johanna MacTaggart

*National Coordinator, Swedish Biosphere Programme
UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB)*



INTRODUCTION

Why relationships matter

This book begins where engagement begins: with connection. The chapters that follow explore why relationships between people and place matter, and what that means for those working to involve young people in environmental action.

What does the Baltic Sea mean to you?

We asked this question of participants at the *Waves for Change* Youth Forum in Kristianstads Vattenrike Biosphere Reserve in June 2025.

“ It has always been my favourite place for walking, watching the sunset or a storm. It inspires me, it calms me. Nature is powerful but also fragile. I care deeply about the Baltic Sea and I want future generations to be able to explore the same beauty as I have. ”



“It is a part of our national identity. It symbolises connectivity, openness and freedom of nations.”

“To me the Baltic Sea means home, workplace and happiness.”

“It is a big part of me. It is where I find my inner peace.”

“What I like best is its wonderful life under water. It has to be protected.”

The answers speak of home, identity and belonging. For these young people, the Baltic Sea is not merely a body of water – it is a place that has shaped who they are.

This observation forms the starting point of this book. When people feel an emotional connection to a place, they are more willing to act to protect it. Research on place attachment confirms this, and our own experience points in the same direction.

The human–nature relationship

In 1968, Senegalese forestry engineer Baba Dioum addressed the IUCN General Assembly with words that are still widely quoted:

“ In the end, we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; and we will understand only what we are taught. ”

More than fifty years later, these words still resonate, but they also invite a gentle refinement. We do not always need to be taught first. Experience itself can spark curiosity: a walk along the shore, the sound of waves, the sudden appearance of a seal. Such moments often make us care—and that care draws us toward deeper understanding.

Scientific studies consistently demonstrate a strong link between people's sense of connection to nature and pro-environmental behaviour (Whitburn et al.). The IUCN's *Love. Not Loss.* campaign illustrates what this means in practice: communication framed around guilt and loss tends to discourage engagement. Approaches that celebrate what people care about, create opportunities for experience, and pair emotion with clear pathways to action are more effective.

For those working with youth engagement, the implication is clear: begin with connection.



The aim of this book

This book is a practical guide for anyone working to engage young people in environmental action. It tells the story of the project *Biosphere for Baltic – Future Generations*, which brought together twelve biosphere reserves across eight Baltic Sea countries.

The lessons shared here are grounded in a project that produced concrete outcomes:

- a Call to Action circulating in policy discussions
- paintings that evolved into a travelling exhibition
- a Bladderwrack Evening activity carried out simultaneously in several biosphere reserves
- a network of young people whose connections have influenced career choices, fostered friendships, and deepened their relationship with the sea

Together, these outcomes illustrate how youth engagement can move from experience to influence.

Connection to international frameworks

The project connects local action to several international frameworks. UNESCO's roadmap for the Man and the Biosphere Programme, *The Hangzhou Strategic Action Plan (2026–2035)*, places youth at its core. Target 20 of the action plan calls for broad and sustained youth participation in biosphere reserve governance by 2035.

When participants in this project called for ocean literacy in national curricula and more inclusive decision-making processes, they echoed priorities expressed by other global initiatives. Beyond the Hangzhou Plan, the project aligns with the UN Decade of Ocean Science, the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and HELCOM's Baltic Sea Action Plan. Together, these frameworks situate local initiatives within a wider international effort to protect and restore the Baltic Sea.

What follows is both a narrative of what we learned and a set of practical tools for those who wish to apply a similar approach in their own contexts.

We do not always need to be taught first. Experience itself can spark curiosity: a walk along the shore, the sound of waves, the sudden appearance of a seal.



FROM VISION TO ACTION

The project

This section tells the story of what the project actually did. It brings together the experiences, methods and outcomes that emerged when twelve biosphere reserves across eight countries set out to engage young people around the Baltic Sea.

Biosphere for Baltic – Future Generations: The project

The project grew out of a shared observation: biosphere reserves around the Baltic Sea face many of the same environmental challenges, and they also share a challenge in engaging young people in meaningful and lasting ways.

Funded by the Swedish Institute's Baltic Sea Neighbourhood Programme, the project involved twelve biosphere reserves across eight countries:

Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany and Denmark. Its objectives were to develop new approaches for strengthening youth participation and to establish a transnational network of young adults connected by their relationship to the Baltic Sea.



The project consisted of three interconnected components:

1. a webinar series for sharing experiences and methods among biosphere reserves
2. the *Waves for Change* Youth Forum, hosted in Kristianstads Vattenrike in June 2025
3. an ongoing process of translating insights into local activities, network-building initiatives, a travelling exhibition, and this publication

Together, these components formed a learning process that moved between dialogue, practice and reflection at both local and transnational levels.

ABOUT BIOSPHERE FOR BALTIC

Biosphere for Baltic is a network of UNESCO biosphere reserves around the Baltic Sea, initiated in June 2017 during the UN Ocean Conference. The network connects reserves across the region to share knowledge, exchange good practices, and find new areas for collaboration. Its work focuses on two themes: Source to Sea — addressing how human activities on land affect coastal and marine ecosystems — and Learning and Ocean Literacy, building understanding of the connections between people and the sea. The network highlights how biosphere reserves contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG 14: Life Below Water.

The Waves for Change Youth Forum

During four days in Kristianstads Vattenrike Biosphere Reserve in Sweden around 30 young adults took part in lectures, workshops, field visits and a creative process based on the method *The Future We Want*. The forum was designed as a sequence: first building relationships, then deepening understanding through experience and lectures, and finally translating insights into shared visions and action.

Participants worked in groups to paint collective visions of a sustainable Baltic Sea, each anchored in one of four themes: biodiversity, sustainable usage, source-to-sea perspectives, and ocean literacy.

The forum culminated in a Call to Action presented to representatives from HELCOM, the Swedish National Commission for UNESCO, the Swedish Institute for the Marine Environment, Kristianstad Municipality and Kristianstad University. The full document is reproduced at the end of this book.





Participants described the forum in their own words.

“ It has been fantastic to participate. I have met new people, listened to inspiring lectures and felt a strong sense of community. We have learned a lot and can do something great together going forward. ”

“ Waves for Change has been both educational and fun. I have gained new knowledge about the sea, tried things in practice, and made contacts with young people from different countries. ”

Key lessons from the project

The reflections in this section are based on what we observed as organisers and facilitators, and on what participants themselves told us. Together, they confirm existing research while adding practical detail.

Relationships come first

Across the project, one conclusion was clear: engagement begins with relationships. When young people met peers from other countries—including biosphere reserve staff, researchers and practitioners—the exchange fostered hope and a sense of agency. Trust grew through shared activities, informal conversations and the experience of being taken seriously.

These reflections echo research on constructive hope, showing that hope grounded in agency and collective action supports long-term engagement (Ojala).

Why place based experiences matter

Research shows that repeated contact with nature is one of the most influential factors shaping long term environmental commitment later in life (Tanner; Chawla). Our project suggests that this also holds true for young adults.

Introductory films, in which participants recorded short reflections on their own stretches of coastline, grounded discussions in lived experience.

Field visits and hands on activities created shared experiences that deepened participants' sense of connection to place and to each other. Subsequent indoor sessions provided space to reflect, discuss and translate these embodied experiences into understanding.

It was this combination of shoreline and conference room that made the learning process particularly effective. For biosphere reserves, this reinforces the value of using their landscapes as active learning environments.

WHAT MOTIVATES YOUNG PEOPLE

Participants described being motivated by several interlinked factors:

- a sense of agency: knowing that their actions matter.
- being taken seriously: having their opinions acknowledged and acted upon.
- community and belonging: feeling part of a group that shares values and concerns.
- tangibility: the opportunity to do something concrete, here and now.
- enjoyment: the simple pleasure of being outdoors and spending time with others who care about the same place.

These motivations reinforce one another. Engagement deepens when young people experience both emotional connection and practical influence.

Biosphere reserves as learning sites

A biosphere reserve is a place rich in biodiversity, where people live, work and study. The challenge of balancing human wellbeing with ecological integrity unfolds here. UNESCO describes them as “living laboratories and learning sites.”

These characteristics make biosphere reserves especially suited for youth engagement. They offer concrete examples of sustainability challenges and solutions. Young people can see how decisions affect landscapes, livelihoods and ecosystems—and how collaboration enables change.

Kristianstads Vattenrike, which hosted the Waves for Change Forum, has several decades of experience working with young people through biosphere classrooms, camps with junior assistant leaders, citizen science programmes and university collaborations. Other biosphere reserves around the Baltic Sea have comparable experiences, and the project's webinar series created space to share these practices across borders. While contexts differ, the underlying principles are transferable.

Connecting local action to global frameworks

Working within a biosphere reserve also makes it possible to link local action to international commitments. For example, when young people participate in a Bladderwrack Evening, wading into shallow water to scrub rocks so that bladderwrack can re-establish, they are contributing to local coastal restoration while also supporting global goals under frameworks such as the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the Hangzhou Strategic Action Plan.



Participants said that feeling part of something larger was a key source of motivation. Local actions that might otherwise feel small or symbolic gained significance when they were clearly connected to broader efforts to protect and restore the Baltic Sea.

The role of storytelling and creative expression

The forum used foresight, storytelling, and creative expression as core methods for engagement. The starting point was *The Future We Want*, a facilitated visioning process that invites imagination rather than focusing on problems, while still leading to tangible next steps toward participants' own visions.

Participants painted collective visions of a sustainable Baltic Sea. Working side by side with brushes and paints laid the ground for conversation, reflection and shared meaning. One group explained why tears in their painting represented both grief and hope; another described hands reaching across borders; a third placed underwater life at the centre of the image. One group chose to work primarily in writing, developing ideas that later formed the project's Call to Action.

Combining future oriented thinking, creative expression, and collective ownership helped participants articulate what they want to move toward, rather than cataloguing problems or responding to predefined agendas.

For organisers the lesson is clear: creative expression is not an add on, but a practical way to build shared direction and ownership.

It was this combination of shoreline and conference room that made the learning process particularly effective.

HOW TO ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE

A practical guide

The experiences described above inform the practical guidance that follows. This chapter translates project lessons into concrete suggestions for planning and carrying out youth engagement activities. The guidance is offered in a spirit of sharing rather than prescription and can be adapted freely to different contexts.

4 principles for engagement

These principles envelop all activities described in this book.

1. TRUST

Young people can tell the difference between a genuine invitation and institutional box-ticking. Trust means involving youth in both the design and execution of activities. In this project, young people co-planned the forum, acted as speakers and workshop leaders, and contributed to follow-up initiatives. They also set up shared communication channels and helped coordinate actions such as the Bladderwrack Evening.

2. CO-CREATION

The most successful elements of the forum were those shaped by participants themselves. The visions, the paintings, the Call to Action emerged from their priorities. Instead of passively consuming a programme, participants co-created both the process and its outcomes.

3. AUTHENTICITY

Authentic engagement means meeting young people where they are and offering opportunities to go deeper. This requires honest communication, meaningful roles, and space for expression in forms that feel natural—through art, discussion, film, or hands-on activities.

4. CONTINUITY

Every event needs a built-in follow-up structure. In this project, continuity was supported through shared digital platforms, reunion webinars, and tangible actions such as the Bladderwrack Evening. A clear outcome, like a Call to Action, provides a foundation for future collaboration.

Key insights from the project

Start with hands-on experience

Bring people outdoors, into the water, onto the shore. Let participants engage with a place through their senses before introducing theory or policy. Embodied experience creates openness and curiosity, providing a foundation for learning.

Create community

When young people discover that others share their love for the Baltic Sea and their concern for its future, something shifts. Shared experiences foster trust, belonging, and motivation. A cultural exchange evening, for example, can spark curiosity and deepen mutual understanding.

“ Getting to meet people from different countries and biosphere reserves and hear their experiences. ”

A sense of belonging is central to lasting engagement. People do not just need to know that a community exists—they need to feel part of it.

Offer concrete actions

Abstract goals like “save the planet” can feel overwhelming. Tangible activities like a Bladderwrack Evening or beach clean-up offer a clear entry point and build motivation through shared effort.

Lead with what is possible

The Baltic Sea faces serious challenges, but hope combined with agency is more motivating than fear alone. Present solutions alongside problems and create opportunities for participants to contribute to those solutions.

Work across languages and cultures

This adds complexity, but it also enriches the experience. Participants valued the diversity of perspectives and the feeling of being part of something larger than their own region.

Create pathways for continued involvement

After the forum, participants had the opportunity to stay connected through shared digital platforms and follow-up webinars. Simple, low-cost tools can help sustain momentum and keep networks alive.

Safe, inclusive, low threshold participation

For many young people, the first step is the hardest. While most participants already had some connection to environmental engagement, the forum was designed to keep thresholds low. Activities required no prior knowledge, no special equipment, and no particular social confidence.

Starting with what is social, enjoyable, and immediate allows deeper involvement to grow over time.

Practical tools and formats

This section presents methods and formats tested in the *Biosphere for Baltic – Future Generations* project. Together they form a flexible toolkit that can be adapted to local conditions while retaining core principles of participation, creativity, and agency.

The Youth Forum model

A three-to-four-day format works well. It allows time to build trust, explore complex topics, and produce creative meaningful outcomes. Alternate between lectures, discussions, outdoor activities, and hands-on or creative sessions.



Producing something tangible is essential. In this project, the Call to Action continued to shape discussions long after the forum ended, reinforcing the sense that participants' work mattered beyond the event itself.

The Future We Want

The Future We Want is a guided visioning method that formed the basis for both the Call to Action and the collaborative paintings. Participants begin by reflecting on present conditions and are then guided through a facilitated journey toward a sustainable and just future. What if...? questions are generated and clustered into themes, and each group develops concrete next steps within its theme.

In this project, the method was expanded through collaborative painting. Working side by side added emotional depth and surfaced new insights. The strength of the method lies in its mix of future-oriented thinking, visionary co-creation, and collective ownership.



Facilitating a Call to Action

A Call to Action gives participants a shared voice and a platform for continued engagement. Structuring recommendations across individual, local, national, and international levels helps clarify how change can happen and ensures relevance for different audiences.

Planning in advance how and where the document will be presented increases its impact and strengthens the link between participation and influence.

Webinar series

The webinar series connected staff from biosphere reserves across borders to exchange experiences. Webinars proved to be a low-cost yet effective format. Sessions lasting sixty to ninety minutes worked best, typically structured around a concrete case followed by open discussion.

The Bladderwrack Evening

Developed by Kristianstads Vattenrike, the Bladderwrack Evening illustrates how a simple local action can contribute to larger environmental goals. Participants wade into shallow water and scrub rocks to create surfaces where bladderwrack become re-established. As a habitat-forming species, bladderwrack plays a crucial role in Baltic Sea ecosystems but struggles to recover due to eutrophication.

Because the activity is easy to replicate, it has spread to other biosphere reserves and became the first initiative to grow directly out of the Call to Action.





FURTHER ACTIVITY IDEAS

- Bioblitzes and citizen science surveys
- Creative exhibitions in public spaces
- Guided nature walks
- Creative workshops using art, film or storytelling
- Activities linked to international days such as World Ocean Day or World Cleanup Day
- Network strengthening formats such as reunions, digital meetups and shared communication channels

From action to influence

A Call to Action carries the message further

Since June 2025, the Call to Action has circulated throughout the Baltic Sea region. It has been discussed within the Swedish MAB Programme and shared across the Biosphere for Baltic network. Presentations at EuroMAB and to Finnish local government are planned, extending its reach further.

The paintings from the Youth Forum are being developed into both a digital and a physical exhibition. Together with the Call to Action, they carry participants' messages into new contexts and to new audiences.

The document resonates because it is concrete, authored by young people themselves, and aligned with recognised sustainability frameworks. Decision-makers are more likely to respond when proposals are specific, solution-oriented, and grounded in lived experience.

Working with municipalities and decision-makers

Biosphere reserves operate at the intersection between communities and governance. In many cases, they are closely embedded in municipal structures, creating channels through which young people's perspectives can reach decision makers.

The project identified several practical ways to strengthen this connection:

- inviting local politicians to youth events as listeners
- presenting youth-generated outputs within existing political forums
- using the biosphere reserve as a bridge between young people and formal policy processes

Clear documentation of outcomes supports decision makers to act on youth proposals. Outputs such as Calls to Action, exhibitions, or short policy briefs translate young people's ideas into formats that fit institutional contexts.

Sustained youth engagement also depends on institutions' willingness to listen, respond, and provide long-term opportunities for continued involvement. Participation builds trust only when it leads to visible impact.



THE NETWORK PERSPECTIVE

The Biosphere for Baltic network provides infrastructure across the Baltic Sea region, facilitating exchange between biosphere reserves which operate in different national contexts. The EuroMAB network extends this exchange further, connecting more than 300 biosphere reserves across 41 countries.

Youth participation within EuroMAB has grown in recent years. Young adults joined the EuroMAB Steering Committee in 2022, and a dedicated Youth Conference was held in 2024. The EuroMAB Youth Network now maintains its own communication channels, including a newsletter.

The project model described in this book is rooted in and relevant to broader networks in civil society, where collaboration across organisations, sectors and places is essential. Its core principles are therefore not limited to biosphere contexts, but can be applied across a wide range of network-based initiatives:

- start with relationships
- create opportunities for place-based experience
- support co-creation
- build structures for sustained connection
- invest in coordination

Transnational collaboration

When young people from different countries gather around a shared sea, national boundaries become less important. Participants discovered that they shared many of the same concerns about, and the same attachment to, the Baltic Sea.

“ The forum gathered young people, gave new ideas and laid the foundation for a future network. ”

The Baltic Sea does not respect national borders. Building relationships across those borders is therefore an investment in the collaborative governance the region will need in the future.

The infrastructure of sustained engagement

All meaningful youth engagement depends on people. One of the clearest conclusions of this project is that sustained engagement requires coordinators with time, a mandate, and resources. Without coordination, networks fade; with it, momentum grows.

In practice, this means:

- a named person in each biosphere reserve with youth engagement as a core responsibility
- a youth focal point within each national MAB programme
- long term funding structures

Project-based funding tends to produce project-based engagement. Youth networks, however, need support that extends beyond individual projects and allows relationships to develop over time.

Reflections

Some spontaneous comments following the final day presentations at *Waves for Change*:

Katja Laingui, admin and finance coordinator for the Protect Baltic Project at the Helcom Secretariat:

“Overall, what I saw was positivity and an optimistic outlook on what the future could look like, which made me very happy. One word that stood out to me in the presentations was *diversity* — not only in the biological sense, which is extremely important, but also among people. We have different perspectives and we come from different countries, and I believe that is the most valuable aspect of a community like this: that we come together to share our knowledge and our perspectives with one another.”

Helena Björck, programme coordinator, The Swedish National Commission for UNESCO:

“This has been inspiring for me, both on a personal and a professional level. It’s been amazing to see how enthusiastic you have all been. I’ve heard so many great ideas for the future — about how to become more sustainable and how we can take better care of the Baltic Sea.”

Kajsa Tönnesson, head of The Swedish Institute for Marine Environment:

“You presented some truly great solutions for the future that I will take home with me. You spoke about changing perspectives and the need to shift mindsets. You talked about ocean literacy, research, and solutions — and you wrote, *‘We love what we know, and we protect what we love.’* You are the ocean heroes.”



When young people discover that others share their love for the Baltic Sea and their concern for its future, something shifts.

TOWARDS A SHARED FUTURE

The responsibility
now lies with us

This final section steps back from the practical to ask the larger question: what does it take to sustain what has been started? It reflects on the conditions — structural, institutional, and human — that allow young people's engagement to grow into something lasting.

The Baltic Sea is changing. Its ecosystems are under pressure, and the communities around its shores face uncertain futures. Yet throughout this project, it has become clear how deeply young people care for the sea, and that care is rooted in lived experience.

When young people are given opportunities to learn about a place, spend time there, and build relationships around it, knowledge grows into attachment. That attachment, in turn, becomes motivation to act. This project shows that when learning, connection, and action are woven together, engagement becomes meaningful.

Through *Waves for Change*, participants shared experiences, created visions, and articulated concrete proposals for change. Their Call to Action demonstrates what happens when knowledge is grounded in experience and combined with trust, creativity, and collective responsibility. It aligns personal connection with scientific understanding and policy goals.

At the same time, creating engagement is only the first step. How to sustain that engagement, through changes in personal circumstances, shifting priorities, and the natural end of project cycles, remains an open question. It is a challenge shared by many working with youth participation, and one that deserves continued attention, curiosity, and collective problem-solving.

If we want young people to help protect shared environments like the Baltic Sea, we must invest in the conditions that allow them to know it, care for it, and help shape its future. This requires long-term structures: coordinators with time and a mandate, spaces for participation, and networks that sustain relationships across borders.

The young people involved in the *Waves for Change forum* have shown what is possible when these conditions are in place. The responsibility now lies with institutions to ensure that this commitment can be met—and carried forward into the future.



Checklist for organising an international youth forum

BEFORE THE EVENT

- ☐ Secure funding for travel, accommodation and facilitation.
- ☐ Choose a suitable and inspiring venue.
- ☐ Plan for a sufficiently long event (3-4 days).
- ☐ Appoint a coordinator in each biosphere reserve.
- ☐ Recruit participants locally and allow enough time for recruitment.
- ☐ Ensure travel insurance, accessibility and dietary needs are covered.
- ☐ Co-create the programme with young people.
- ☐ Define a focused task with concrete and realistic outcomes.
- ☐ Clarify expectations, roles, and levels of influence.
- ☐ Plan follow-up and continuity from the start.

DURING THE EVENT

- ☐ Start by building connection and trust.
- ☐ Use small groups and participatory methods.
- ☐ Include outdoor and hands-on activities.
- ☐ Make space for cultural exchange.
- ☐ Provide quiet and private spaces.
- ☐ Collect written consent to be in photos.
- ☐ Document processes and outcomes.
- ☐ Share experiences on social media.
- ☐ End each day with reflection.

AFTER THE EVENT

- ☐ Send follow-up and evaluations within a week.
- ☐ Create a maintained and shared digital space.
- ☐ Plan a reunion (online or in person).
- ☐ Connect participants to local and regional activities.
- ☐ Share outcomes to relevant target groups and credit participants clearly.
- ☐ Assign long-term responsibility and resources for the youth network.
- ☐ Show participants how their contributions are being used.

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APPENDIX: CALL-TO-ACTION

A call to action from youth around the Baltic Sea from the Waves for Change Youth Forum 16-19.6.2025.

During the forum in Vattenriket, Sweden, youth from 6 countries and 10 biosphere reserves around the Baltic Sea gathered to learn and discuss the current state and future of the Baltic Sea. Organised by Kristianstads Vattenrike Biosphere Reserve, the Waves for Change Youth Forum aimed to gather active youth to hear their voices and form a message to share with individuals, organisations, municipalities and countries.

Common actions for a better future

Based on our visions for a better future we, as the youth from biosphere reserves surrounding the Baltic Sea, formed guidelines for common actions we want to see implemented from individual to local, national and international level. This document expresses the change we want to see to reach a balance between the sea and the communities around it. We list suggestions, recommendations and concrete actions on all three levels that arose from the workshops and discussions during the conference. We challenge everyone from individuals to nations to change their ways to ensure the Baltic Sea with its people has a future.

A better future for the Baltic Sea is formed with these key actions:

- Integrate ocean literacy into education and public awareness to build knowledgebased action.
- Foster behavioral and mindset change through emotional connection and systemic thinking.
- Base all development on scientific knowledge, innovation, and nature-based solutions.
- Protect, restore, and enhance biodiversity and ecosystems in the Baltic Sea region.
- Ensure sustainable, circular, and fair use of Baltic Sea resources.
- Strengthen inclusion, communication, and collaboration across all levels of society.

The next pages follow with more detailed description of the key actions we want to see implemented from everyday life to national and international collaboration.

1. Ocean literacy

“What if ocean literacy was included in national curriculums?”

All action should start with knowledge based on Ocean literacy. Education, with raising and spreading awareness of problems and possible solutions for the Baltic Sea, should be the



starting point of a more sustainable future. For this we recommend finding inspiration in already existing knowledge, solutions and expansion to new innovations. We want to see more collaboration, cooperation and networking between schools, universities, municipalities and NGOs to share ideas, good practices and innovations.

We also want access to relevant information for everyone. Scientific information and research should be made open and easy to understand for all. Communication from universities and institutions outside the academic community and other organizations should be lifted to a central role in their work. Open sharing between stakeholders needs to increase.

Individual:

- Share inspiration and knowledge with family, friends etc.
- Educate yourself on biodiversity and support it in your local area by restoring ecosystems in your own garden or land, or participating in local projects of restoration.
- Connect to the ocean. Visit the Baltic Sea and form experiences and new memories.

Local:

- Organize more approachable events: think about diverse target groups and their needs to be able to participate.
- More community gatherings for sharing information and skills: Teach people your knowledge and skills; for example, fixing, sewing clothes, farming food for your own needs or gardening that supports biodiversity.
- Make science more accessible and communicate about it in an understandable manner; use local news outlets to inform and motivate people. Spark their interest in ocean literacy!
- Create more opportunities for networking, collaborations and internships.

National & international:

- We want to see ocean literacy included in national curriculums, so it becomes a basic skill like reading or writing.
- Compulsory ocean literacy training for politicians, policy makers and businesses.
- Share information: Interinstitutional and -governmental cooperation, networking and seminars. Learn from other countries, good practices, local results and research data to prove sustainable practices work and why they are beneficial.
- Collaborations with nature conservation organisations and NGOs.

2. From blue values to sustainable behavior

"What if we cared for the well-being of the Baltic Sea as much as for ourselves?"

The next step is to change our mindsets by including systemic thinking and taking consequences into account. Future perspectives should be central to all planning, decisions and actions. We recommend getting there



by learning by doing. Getting practical experience strengthens personal and emotional connection to the ocean and opens new skills to tackle the problems. What we know, we want to protect. Through this connection we can change our mindsets and behaviors towards more ecological ones. We need to deepen our understanding that humans and the ocean are fundamentally interconnected.

Reflecting on our own values, choices and behavior first is rudimental. Even the smallest actions matter. No matter how small, everyone can do something. All actions contribute to the better future for the Baltic Sea we want to see preserved. The youth around the Baltic Sea calls everyone to take part in the shared responsibility to care for our ocean.

Individual:

- Stay curious: first think about your actions and their consequences. What causes harm for the environment? Change your behaviour and mindset to a more sustainable direction.
- Keep trying and trust the process: the results won't necessarily be visible right away. But every action matters!
- Visit the ocean in all seasons and talk with locals, business owners, scientists and share your experiences with your loved ones.

Local:

- Launch campaigns for sustainable projects and awareness, such as beach clean-ups, workshops, open theme days or challenges that are practical, informative and easy to participate in.
- Invite others to work with you. Schools, universities, NGOs can contribute to educating people.
- Lift success stories and learning sites.

National & international:

Future perspectives and consequences to the Baltic Sea should have a central role in politics, development and businesses. Include the perspective of consequences in planning and decision-making and see how your decisions and actions affect the Baltic Sea.

3. Development based on science

"What if we had multifunctional solutions based on science and nature as well as sustainably developed urban areas that supported the Baltic Sea?"

Research and multifunctionality lead to innovation and sustainable solutions. We need scientific knowledge to better understand the multifaceted problems the Baltic Sea faces and how to tackle them while maintaining balance in water, on land and in our societies. By

combining knowledge from different academic fields, local and traditional knowledge as well as what we can learn from nature, we can find multifunctional solutions that solve problems on many levels.



We want to see nature-based solutions and innovations through biomimicry, that will be used in coastal and urban areas surrounding the Baltic Sea. What happens on the surrounding land will reflect in the ocean. Due to climate change we face new problems. We want resilient and multifunctional town planning, that takes changing and extreme weather conditions into consideration. We want to see future urban areas planned and developed based on both green and blue values.

Individual:

- Change of mindset: Whenever possible, use public transportation, reflect on consumption, water usage and recycling. How sustainable are your everyday actions?
- Use your voice and demand more sustainable policies, infrastructure and choices from your municipality or the state.

Local:

- Green city planning: green areas and environmental compensation for the new land areas used for urban construction. We want green walls and roofs and broader biodiversity in urban areas.
- Functional and cheaper public transportation that also connects rural areas to cities. We want innovative blending of private transportation and public transportation, such as offering cheaper bus or train tickets to people who leave their cars outside the city and switch to public transportation when entering cities and central areas.

National & international:

- Funding for science and especially for collaboration across institutions and fields of expertise.
- Incentives to use recycled and sustainable materials and/or choices in developing and building urban areas or homes.
- Compulsory solar panels for new buildings as well as other greener options for power.
- Resilient cities and urban planning: buildings that withstand extreme weather conditions, such as floods, rain and heat. Find solutions for this especially in biomimicry and nature-based solutions.

4. Biodiversity and restoration

"What if biodiversity in the Baltic Sea was thriving?"

Biodiversity in the ocean and on land cannot decrease any longer. We want to see healthy, thriving habitats and coastal areas that support life under the surface. Ecosystems between land, the water cycle and the ocean need to be studied and seen as an interactive, holistic system. We also need to reflect on how humans interact with this system and fix all unsustainable ways of coexisting.

We want to see immediate action on restoring and creating new habitats in the Baltic Sea. This means habitats underwater as well as on land by the coast, such as wetlands. More of the Baltic Sea needs to be protected and restricted in commercial and recreational use.

Individual:

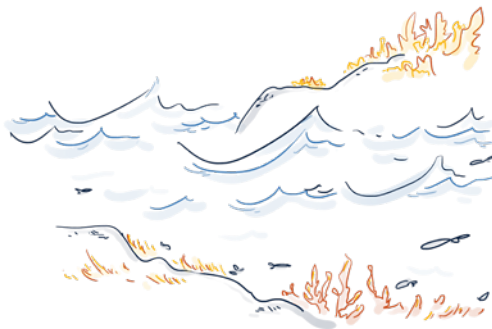
- Participate in citizen science or local restoration projects, like volunteer groups making wetlands.
- As a landowner, be informed and seek out knowledge on how to maintain and increase biodiversity on your land or water area.
- Use invasive species as a food source or participate disposing them.

Local:

- Restore habitats: we want more structural plates to harbor and develop underwater areas, new eelgrass meadows planted and corridors cut in reeds for fish to spawn.
- Slow down waterways and stop run-off of nutrients to the sea.
- Create opportunities for more meandering, grazing and other nature-based solutions to take care of coastal areas.
- Information and collaboration: Communicate on the problems and how to fix them. Involve school classes and collaborate with biosphere reserves and universities on education and participation. Involve youth and young adults in citizen science projects.

National & international:

- Create sustainable water cycles that do not leak nutrients to the sea. We want to see clever ways for reusing water and sustainable use of fresh water.
- We want to see more funding for science, cooperation with other countries and international projects to understand and fix problems in the whole area of the Baltic Sea.



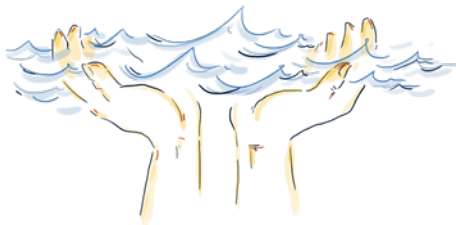
5. Sustainable use

"What if it was more desirable to choose what is good for the Baltic Sea?"

Resources and ecosystem services in the Baltic Sea are not infinite. We need to shift towards a circular economy that does not overuse resources from the ocean or land areas.

Sustainable use should be a focus for all commercial and recreational use of the Baltic

Sea to keep the balance between use and regeneration of natural resources. The Baltic Sea region needs more legislation to prevent ecological catastrophes and support sustainable development of communities, businesses and culture in the region.



To achieve these goals we want to see lower taxes implemented for sustainable choices, such as materials and ways of using ecosystem services provided by the Baltic Sea. By funding and choosing local and small-scale businesses and taxing globally we can support regional livelihoods and increase more conscious choices. We also demand accountability from businesses around the region and on an international level. We want greenwashing and environmentally harmful business models, like fast fashion, banned. We challenge everyone to find better alternatives.

Individual:

- Make conscious choices to buy locally produced food or products.
- Boycott companies that harm the sea and support sustainable choices. Demand change from unsustainable businesses.
- Share information and spread awareness within your own networks.

Local:

- Don't collaborate with businesses that hurt the environment.
- Buying a lot of food? Go local! Use your local businesses and restaurants for conferences, school food, parties, etc.
- Educate people about locally based products; for example organize day tours to local farms or fisheries. Promote local and sustainable choices to tourists.
- Create and implement environmental projects together with locals.

National & international:

- Lower taxes for sustainable choices and materials.
- Ban greenwashing and enforce open reporting of how business models affect the Baltic Sea.
- Ban discharge of bilge water and septic tanks into the sea and create legislation to enforce this.
- New legislation for businesses to compensate communities for the loss of aesthetic and cultural values in their surroundings.
- Programmes for local businesses and produce: create economic initiatives for local businesses as well as support to promote and communicate about them.
- Laws on onsite purification of the most harmful substances to lessen the impact of a potential leak.
- Exchange experiences and compare situations on the most effective solutions and then implement them internationally.

6. Inclusion and collaboration

"What if everyone was heard and included while creating new policies, developing areas and planning projects?"

The youth around the Baltic Sea want to be included in planning, decision making and communication of new policies, planning of projects and development of the region. The Baltic Sea with its problems will be inherited by us, so we want to be heard and included



in shaping a better future for humans as well as nature. We want to see more interactive and open communication, as well as more opportunities to come together from different positions to truly be able to discuss, collaborate and take action.

For these goals we want to see more funding for inclusive projects that are open to diverse target groups, such as local communities and youth. Collaboration between schools, universities, NGOs, municipalities and locals will open new possibilities for untapped knowledge, resources and creativity. Projects and research done together will increase a sense of agency and knowledge of the current state of the Baltic Sea. The Baltic Sea needs everyone from all walks of life to tackle the multifaceted problems of today.

Individual:

- Practice active listening as much as talking about the Baltic Sea.
- Communities need to share more and compete less about resources, information and skills. Help your neighbors and create a system for sharing resources that works for you and your social circles.
- Get to know the biosphere reserves in your state or in the Baltic Sea region. If possible, participate in events, seminars and projects. Volunteer to help out in their work or share about biosphere reserves in your own networks.

Local:

- We need more forums for getting people to come together – create possibilities for youth to participate.
- Communication between different groups and institutions: share positive and sustainable examples and practices, as well as inform openly about current planning, projects or opportunities to participate.
- Organisations should work with different stakeholders to increase collaboration and raise the voices of e.g. scientists and youths in lobbying.
- Create more opportunities for citizen science and collaboration between local communities, NGOs and academic institutions.

National & international:

- Allocate funding for citizen science and intersectional projects that include multiple groups and institutions.
- Use biosphere areas as a tool to activate and bring together locals and institutions for true collaboration. We need more biosphere reserves around the world.
- National and international networks: we need funding for active youth to participate and be heard in meetings and conferences.

Knowledge-based action, together

We call upon everyone to reflect, change ways and act for our shared environment and future.

We need to better understand how closely our lives are tied to the ocean and as individuals and societies make necessary changes all the way from the grassroots to the systematic level. The youth from the Baltic Sea region is eager to see and participate in the collaboration and necessary actions to ensure the balance between the Baltic Sea and us humans. These actions needs to start today, together.

Sincerely,

The youth from biosphere reserves surrounding the Baltic Sea



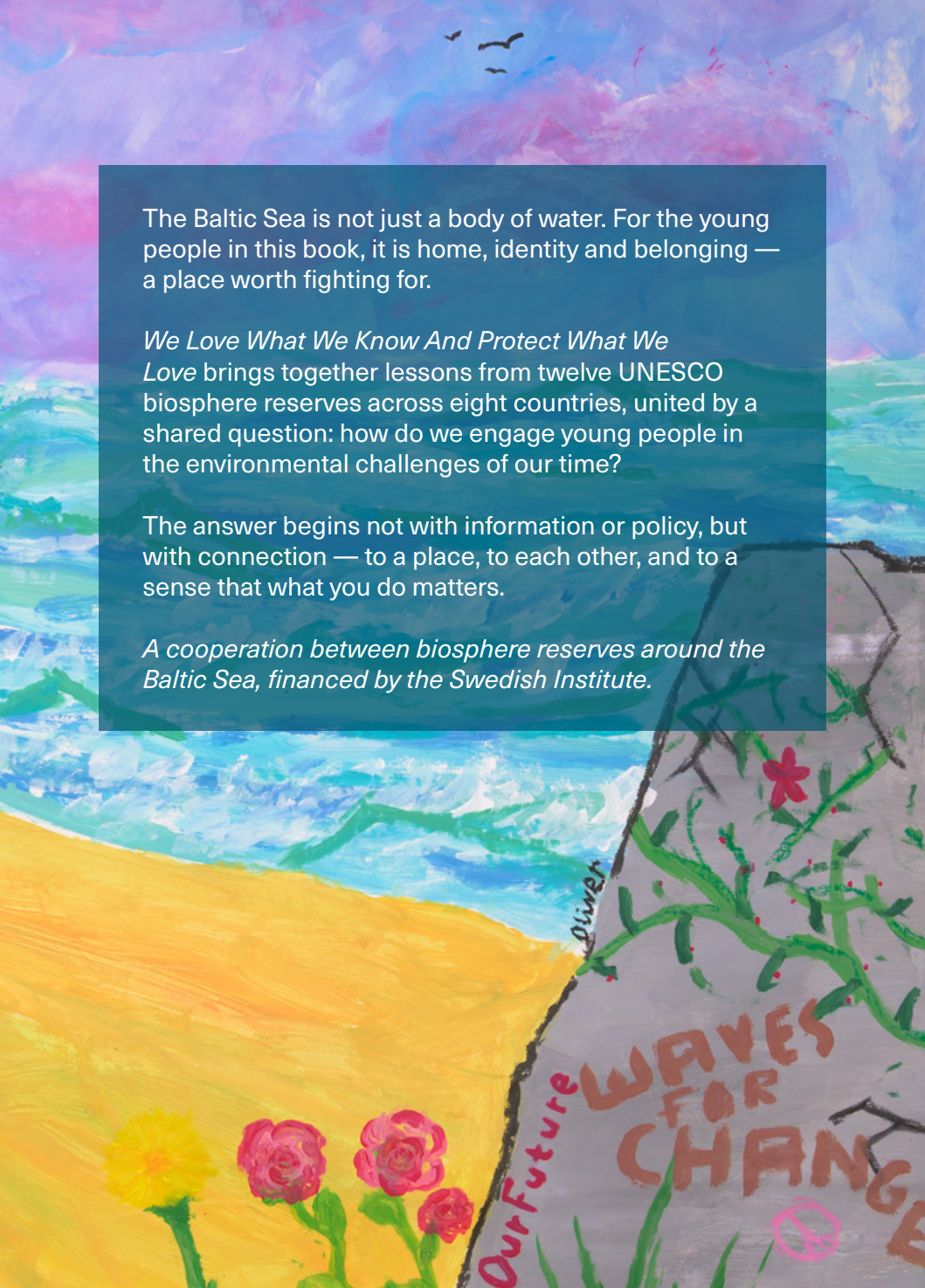


A cooperation between biosphere reserves around the Baltic Sea, financed by the Swedish Institute.



Biosphärenreservat
Südost-Rügen





The Baltic Sea is not just a body of water. For the young people in this book, it is home, identity and belonging — a place worth fighting for.

We Love What We Know And Protect What We Love brings together lessons from twelve UNESCO biosphere reserves across eight countries, united by a shared question: how do we engage young people in the environmental challenges of our time?

The answer begins not with information or policy, but with connection — to a place, to each other, and to a sense that what you do matters.

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Our Future
WAVES
FOR
CHANGE