Raising environmental awareness in the Baltic Sea area: results and experience gained from the SPA Project

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Abstract: In the 1990s, the countries in the Baltic Sea catchment area were undergoing many changes on the political, economic, social and cultural levels. The development of democracy in the previous Eastern Block countries and the enlargement of the European Union to include Sweden and Finland have also created a new framework for international, regional and sub-regional cooperation in the field of environmental awareness. Many new actors working in this field have appeared at international and local levels.

The SPA report carried out by the Finnish Environment Institute in cooperation with the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (HELCOM) aimed at providing useful background information, findings and action proposals for raising environmental awareness in the Baltic Sea catchment area. It was intended to serve the European Union, HELCOM and other numerous regional, national, local and sectoral actors in their activities related to environmental awareness and public participation.

Keywords: Environmental awareness; environmental information; Baltic Sea.

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1 Introduction: concept of environmental awareness

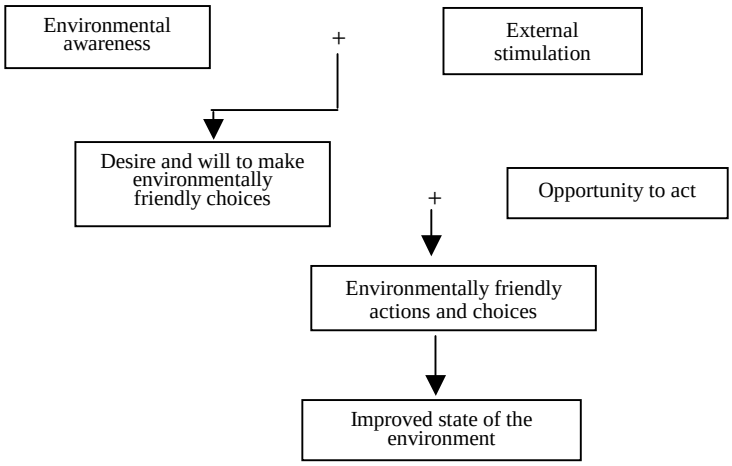
In this project the concept of environmental awareness is defined as a combination of three elements, i.e. motivation, knowledge and skills. A high level of environmental awareness enables conscious choices to act in an environmentally friendly way. Having

resources available may also enhance an individual's ability to act in such a way. On the other hand, a lack of resources does not necessarily hinder using effective low-cost and no-cost sustainable actions and methods.

When the environmental awareness of an individual is combined with external stimulating conditions, the result can be a will to make environmentally friendly choices (see Figure below). Based on the individual's knowledge and skills, and according to the existing opportunities to act, this may take the form of environmentally friendly actions and choices in the individual's private and professional life, or show through environmental political choices. This, in turn, will have directly and indirectly a positive impact on the state of the natural environment.

Measuring the environmental awareness of an individual, a group or a society is proving to be a difficult task, since there is a lack of a widely approved method. However, two different approaches are possible while studying the level of environmental awareness. One is based on investigating the three elements of environmental awareness – motivation, knowledge and skills – by interviews, questionnaires and tests among individuals, organisations' staff or the general public. The other way is to concentrate on measuring the concrete environmentally friendly actions and practices of individuals, groups, organisations or societies as a whole. For instance, it is possible to study and measure the use of waste recycling facilities, environmental management practices in business, or resources that societies allocate to environmental matters.

It has to be stressed that environmental awareness influences several spheres of an individual's life. The level of an individual's public environmental awareness affects choices in private life. Professional environmental awareness exerts an impact on actions in working life and political environmental awareness has an influence on voting habits and political activities. For this reason, environmental information is one of the most important aspects of raising environmental awareness which should be addressed separately to different target groups. The main groups embrace, among others, the general public, which tends to be passive as a recipient; professionals, who are often motivated actively to seek out relevant environment information needed for their work and politicians, who need refined information as a raw material for their proposals and as a basis for their decisions.



2 Stages of environmental awareness development

An attempt was made in the SPA project to describe the possible stages of environmental awareness development. It was assumed that environmental awareness starts to develop when people notice that some unfavourable and threatening changes are emerging in their surroundings, and that these effects cannot be easily corrected. This in consequence, might shake the belief that the human is a master of nature. Realising that environmental damages threaten human existence and need a long time to be recovered might stimulate further development of environmental awareness.

In the first stage, the motivation for improving environmental knowledge and skills is usually based on a growing concern over threats to health. People and organisations realise that the state of the environment needs to be improved but they are unable to consider themselves active actors in such a process. The prevailing way of thinking is that somebody else, for instance, scientists, environmental NGOs or international organisations should focus on or solve environmental problems. Environmental matters are perceived separately from other spheres of life and professional activities. Since the possibilities of acting in an environmentally friendly way are usually rather limited and environmental information is difficult to obtain, a feeling of helplessness and frustration seems to be dominant.

People's knowledge about the state of the environment in their home country is insufficient. Therefore, it is difficult to compare their situation with other countries or areas. People are generally unconscious of the effects their personal choices and actions pose on the environment. They also lack skills such as how to use energy and water efficiently, or how to sort out their waste. Environmental facilities and systems are underdeveloped and suffer from financial restrictions. The environmental monitoring system does not work.

In the second stage, the decision makers at all levels of society gradually realise that the state of the environment can be influenced. This fact increases the feeling of responsibility and the motivation to take action, although the hope for external help remains rather strong. An external stimulus or pressure often seem to speed up advantageous changes. Environmental awareness starts to be an integral part of professional and public awareness.

In the third stage, a holistic view, a recognition and a responsibility for the environment start to cross professional, sectoral and national borders. It is clear that the development of a welfare society depends on the state of the environment – the deterioration of the environment is considered too high a risk for society. As a result, legislation and administration, monitoring and other facilities for environmental purposes are well developed and in a process of dynamic change and integration. Since environmental problems are perceived globally, the need to support other countries in environmental activities becomes very important.

In the fourth stage, environmental awareness becomes an integral part of professional skills and everyday life choices. The values of individuals or society are no longer based on growing consumption of natural resources, but they aim at the general well-being of individuals. The environment is no longer perceived from the human-centric point of view. Life becomes sustainable. At the moment, the characteristics of the fourth stage can be traced only in some rare individuals or in the programs of some organisations.

3 Research method

In the period between May and July 1998, over 700 copies of the project questionnaire were sent directly to experts and about 200 copies were distributed through couriers. Moreover, the questionnaire was available on the internet. The language of the questionnaire was English. However, it was possible to answer in Russian and the answers were translated into English. Due to the relatively poor response numbers from Poland, the questionnaire was translated into Polish, and 70 additional copies were distributed.

Up to November 1998, 138 questionnaires were returned to the Finnish Environmental Institute. The answers to the fixed choice questions were analysed statistically. The analysis of the open-ended questions also included about ten responses which were returned later as well as the personal interviews performed by the project group in St. Petersburg in November 1998 in order to compensate for the relatively small amount of responses from this area.

The SPA project questionnaire was targeted to several key experts from the 14 countries of the Baltic Sea catchment area. The questionnaire focused on the following issues:

- What is the availability and need for environmental information in different countries and the different fields of work?
- What is the importance of different means of disseminating information, i.e. newspapers, television, seminars, discussions, the internet, etc, in different countries and within various target groups?
- How does environmental awareness vary in the countries of the Baltic Sea catchment area?
- What can the countries around the Baltic Sea, the European Union, and different organisations and actors do in order to increase the level of environmental awareness in this area?
- How to motivate people to search for and to use environmental information in their work?
- How could the main actors in this area disseminate environmental information more effectively?

In order to analyse the answers to the questionnaires the respondents were classified according to their country of residence, and their affiliation to a professional/occupational group. The groups were as follows:

- academic researchers
- environmental education staff at universities
- school teachers
- business, industry, trade
- national administration

- local administration
- environmental non–governmental organisations
- farmers and farmers' organisations
- journalists
- politicians
- international organisations

In the courses of the analysis it turned out that there were clear similarities in the answers of the respondents from certain countries. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to combine them into the following sub-groups:

- sub-region 1: Russia (information originating from the Leningrad oblast), Belarus, Ukraine
- sub-region 2: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia
- sub-region 3: Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden

4 Availability of environmental information

There are many factors which determine the accessibility of environmental information in the Baltic Sea catchment area. One of them signalled by the questionnaire respondents is the lack of comparable, reliable and relevant environmental data. The existing data is often uncomparable because of different monitoring systems. For this reason, the task of harmonising the monitoring and assessment systems as well as delivering the data obtained to various interest groups has been very demanding for the environmental actors in the Baltic Sea area.

Another problem lies in the fact that the existing environmental information is unequally available in the sub-regions concerned. Even though the development of technology offers new opportunities, such as better telecommunication and the integration of multimedia, financial difficulties faced by some of the countries reduce the chances of buying and using expensive equipment, or purchasing printed materials from abroad. Moreover, some of the respondents, especially from the sub-region 1, complained that restrictive administrative and political practices made environmental information difficult to obtain.

The respondents stressed that some new and relevant environmental information has been excluded from the public domain and discourse because of the so-called 'knowledge competition' between some public research and profit-oriented institutions. Moreover, in all the countries considered, a new trend has appeared – research institutes or public administration, which are generally financed by the taxpayers, charge fees nowadays for previously free information and data.

The respondents pointed out that the accessibility of environmental information in the Baltic Sea area is also determined by existing language barriers. The working language of most of the international organisations in this area is English and documents are issued in English, too. This creates an obstacle for many people, even though English-language skills have lately improved considerably in this area. Research and reports produced in

local languages are usually difficult to trace, obtain and utilise by interested parties from abroad.

5 Need for environmental information for professional purposes

Most of the respondents claimed to need more environmental information in their field of work. Quality of information as opposed to quantity was emphasised. In particular, the experts from the sub-region 3 pointed out the information overload problem. This phenomenon present among urban and well equipped professionals from all the regions made them emphasise – along with the quality of information – the possibility of autonomous search and selection of the material.

According to the respondents, the quality of information depends on its:

- *reliability*: e.g., scientific sources, independence of producers and distributors
- *perceptibility*: e.g., professional processing, editing, visual effectiveness, freshness, easy accessibility
- *applicability*: e.g., direct relationship to receiver's own activities, concrete and competitive with other information

The respondents expressed their opinion on the factors that increase the need for environmental information. Such a need is considered by all the professional groups to be increasing, especially because of the influence of the EU. The answers reveal, however, that the influence of other factors on the need for environmental information is perceived differently by various professional groups. The preferences are listed below:

- *academic researchers:* EU and other international cooperation, the wish to stay professionally up-to-date
- *teachers*: EU cooperation, saving resources, health reasons
- *business, industry, trade:* staying up to date, EU cooperation, changing legislation, saving resources, changes in production processes
- *administration*: EU cooperation, staying up to date, saving resources
- *NGOs:* staying up-to-date, EU cooperation, health reasons, customer demand
- *journalists*: health reasons, EU cooperation, staying up to date, policy changes

According to the respondents, disharmonious legislation, information overload, together with too many things to cope with, and bureaucracy are the most important factors decreasing the ability and motivation to use more environmental information in their field of work. In addition, the respondents pointed out that low priority of environmental issues at work, lack of knowledge in their own or other organisations, corruption and lack of competition are important or relatively important factors decreasing the use environmental information.

6 Channels and forms of information

The results of the questionnaire analysis showed that professionals follow the mass media – mainly newspapers, magazines, TV news and documentaries – for news and general information. Professional information is received through different occupational channels. It seems, therefore, most effective to utilise such channels for disseminating environmental information to the professional target groups. Professional and personal contacts allow the possibility of clarifying or verifying different pieces of information, and estimating how essential it is at work. The respondents pointed out the following channels of information as the most efficient in reaching them:

- influential colleagues through personal communication, i.e. speeches, discussions, communication via the internet
- professional magazines, bulletins, mailing lists
- visits and excursions connected to work
- the internet

Information is valued when it is authorised by the professional context and adjusted to meet the needs of the group in question. However, each professional group represented by the respondents tended to favour some particular channels of information:

- *administration*: conferences, professional publications, scientific and legislative channels
- *academic researchers and teachers*: other researchers, professional publications and seminars
- *school teachers*: direct personal experience, i.e. visits, excursions, personal contacts, professional training, newspapers, magazines
- *business*: colleagues, personal communication, newspapers and professional publications, visits
- *journalists*: independent information from many channels, the internet
- *farmers*: newspapers, magazines, field advisors, handbooks, farmers' unions
- *politicians*: direct contacts, administration, researchers, magazines
- *international organisations*: the internet, other international organisations, news agencies, international media
- *non-governmental organisations*: colleagues, professional events and publications, newspapers, magazines, the internet.

The importance of using and developing electronic forms of communication was underlined by most of the questionnaire respondents. The internet was considered one of the fastest, most effective and relatively inexpensive ways of communication throughout the Baltic Sea area. However, its use is to some degree limited for financial reasons, such as the cost of equipment, modems and phone bills. Nevertheless, the internet seems to attract many people because of its speed, global reach and independence. This places the

internet among the most important future media for distributing environmental information among professionals and the general public.

7 Results

Based on the findings of the SPA project, the proposals for improving environmental awareness were created for different action levels. These levels include: regions, sub-regions, national, local, or sectors of society which were represented in the study. Some practical suggestions that might be useful while carrying out the proposals were also given.

1 Regional action level: the Baltic Sea catchment area

1.1 Launching a network of actors for Baltic Sea environmental information

1.1.1 Initiative for creating the core of the network; steering meetings

1.1.2 Creating and documenting visions for raising environmental awareness

1.1.3 Recognising and defining the need for backbone information around the Baltic Sea. Backbone information is the most essential information concerning environmental issues and enabling environmentally friendly actions

1.1.4 Different actors choosing their roles including clearing house functions

1.1.5 Inviting other participants to the network; they choose their roles for the provision of information, including adaptation to local languages and conditions

1.2 Information on the application of the Århus Convention; making information available that is public in accordance with the convention

1.3 Developing international measurement methods for assessing the level of environmental awareness; performing assessments in the Baltic Sea countries

2 Sub-regional action level

2.1 Utilising the motivation from applying for EU membership and from other international cooperation in the work on environmental awareness

2.1.1 Sub-region 1: cooperation in trade including environmental standards and certificates; various organisations planning and implementing environmental awareness projects and initiatives

2.1.2 Sub-region 2: preparing and harmonising legislation that defines environmental awareness activities and actors responsible for them

2.1.3 Sub-region 3: including criteria for environmental awareness in financial instruments also (TACIS, PHARE, etc) which are targeted to the other sub-regions

2.2 Cooperation in environmental awareness issues between different sub-regions

3 National action level

3.1 Linking policies and actions in environmental awareness raising at the regional and national level

3.2 Environmental multi- and bilateral cooperation concentrating on the fields of activity that are in need of the strongest development

3.3 Formulating functional roles of various national and local actors in environmental issues

3.4 Improving environmental information production and distribution by local and professional networks

3.5 Increasing environmental awareness among the key administrative and political decision makers

3.6 Strengthening the electronic distribution of environmental information

3.7 Developing the technical infrastructure enabling distribution of environmental information for professionals and for the public through libraries (sub-region 1 and 2)

4 Local and municipal level

4.1 Linking main environmental objectives, partners and local actors

4.2 Improving the motivation and skills of individuals to adopt environmentally friendly patterns of behaviour

4.3 Active public participation in local decision making

4.4 Promoting cooperation among local actors

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