

SUCCESS STORY

The sea has no borders. Its protection can't stop at them.



BLUE CRESCENT created a practical pathway towards shared offshore marine protection in the South Baltic

PARTNERSHIP

Lithuania • Poland • Sweden

DURATION

September 2024 – February 2026

FOCUS

Sustainable use of water and the blue economy

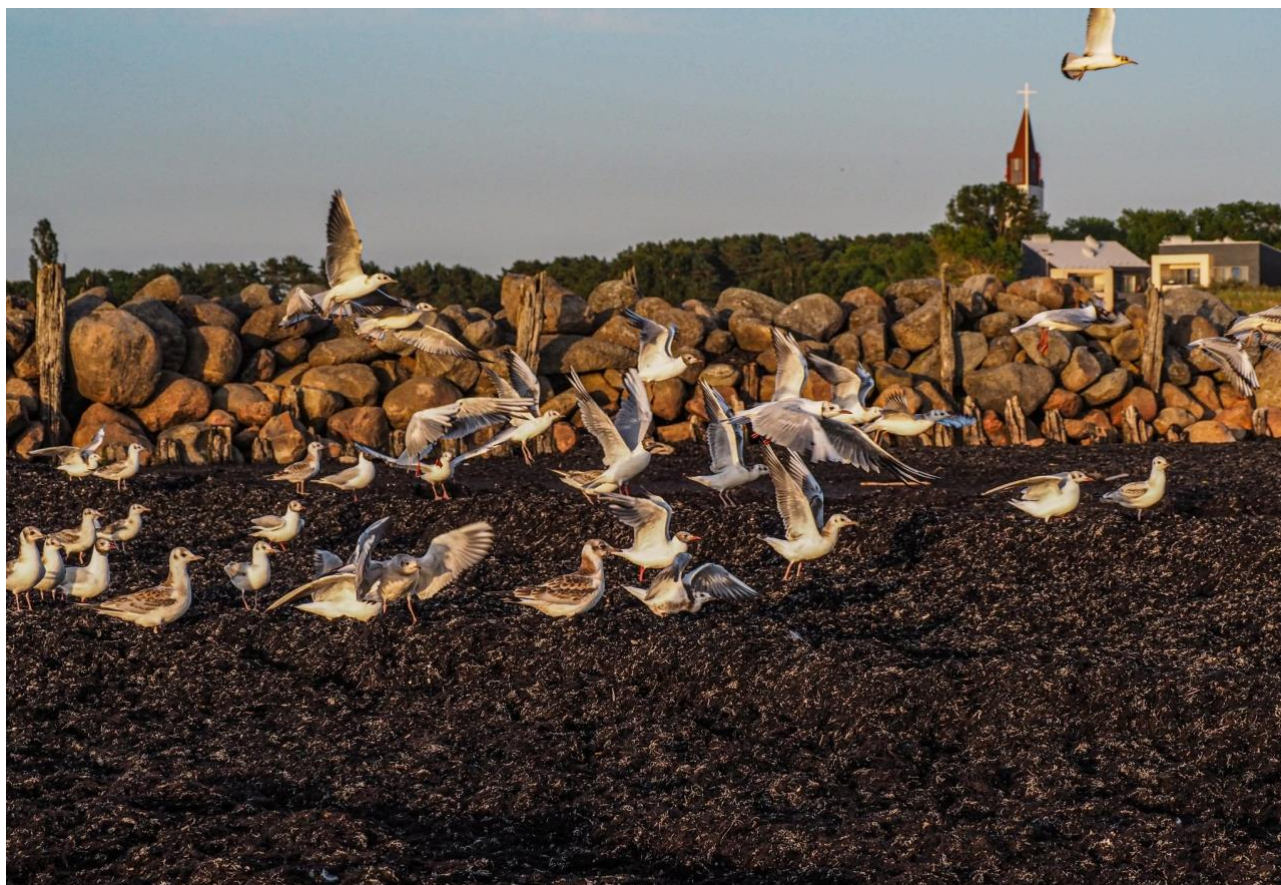
Marine species, currents and threats move freely across national waters. BLUE CRESCENT brought Lithuanian, Polish and Swedish organisations together to create the evidence, methodology and governance options needed for countries to protect one connected offshore ecosystem.

One ecosystem, three jurisdictions

The Southern Gotland Basin is ecologically connected but administratively divided. Migratory species, fish stocks, seabed habitats and water processes extend across national maritime borders, while protection and planning remain largely national. The area is also under pressure from shipping, fishing,

offshore energy development, underwater cables and pipelines, dumped chemical munitions and marine litter.

The project's environmental assessment placed these pressures in a wider South Baltic context. It described a connected transition zone stretching from the Danish Straits through the Arkona and Bornholm basins towards the southern and eastern Gotland Basin. It also highlighted the legacy of approximately 40,000 tonnes of chemical munitions dumped in the Baltic after the Second World War, containing an estimated 15,000 tonnes of chemical warfare agents whose precise locations are still not fully known.



This fragmentation makes it harder to build a coherent network of marine protected areas and to contribute to the global goal of protecting 30% of marine areas by 2030. Separate protected sites cannot fully safeguard ecological corridors or address pressures that cross borders.

From a shared challenge to a shared method

BLUE CRESCENT set out to improve the conditions for conserving marine biodiversity while supporting responsible use of the sea. The project did not formally designate a new marine protected area. Instead, it completed the preparatory work needed for an offshore transboundary marine protected area shared by Lithuania, Poland and Sweden.

The partnership connected four organisations with complementary expertise: the Administration of Lithuania Minor Protected Areas, the Ecological Club “Žvejėnė”, the University of Gdańsk and the World Maritime University. Together they combined protected-area management, marine ecology, maritime spatial planning, law and international maritime knowledge.

Three deliverables, one practical solution

All three planned technical deliverables were completed and designed to work as one knowledge package:

- D1 — A Comprehensive Report: Marine Ecosystems, Species Diversity, Habitat Types, and Anthropogenic Threats in the South Baltic Marine Area. It mapped the ecological structure of the South Baltic, identified priority areas and knowledge gaps, and set management and monitoring priorities for habitats, fish, birds and marine mammals.
- D2 — Comprehensive Methodology to Set Transboundary Zoning, Management Principles, and Rules for Establishing Offshore Transboundary Marine Protected Areas. It proposed a multiple-use protected seascape with highly protected core zones, ecosystem-based management, common monitoring, stable financing and joint enforcement.
- D3 — A Comprehensive Report with Proposals for Modification of Laws and Regulations for Establishing an MPA. It compared international, EU and national rules, competent authorities and maritime jurisdictions in Lithuania, Poland and Sweden, and identified opportunities for legal and institutional harmonisation.

Together, these results connect the ecological case for protection with the legal, institutional and management steps required to move from an idea towards implementation.

A nine-step route from evidence to action

The central project result is the 2026 Comprehensive Methodology to Set Transboundary Zoning, Management Principles, and Rules for Establishing Offshore Transboundary Marine Protected Areas. It translates a complex international ambition into nine connected steps:

- Justify the ecological and policy need.
- Select the offshore area and conservation category.
- Agree on a common conservation framework and objectives.
- Assess legal coherence and cross-border gaps.
- Identify critical habitats, draw boundaries and define the conservation regime.
- Prepare a cross-border, ecosystem-based management plan.
- Involve partners, authorities, communities and other stakeholders.
- Establish monitoring, evaluation, enforcement, financing and risk management.
- Build long-term stakeholder engagement and education.

The methodology also contains a South Baltic case study and a preliminary map of a potential protected area. This makes it useful not only as a conceptual document but also as a structured starting point for future technical studies and political dialogue.

For the overall conservation model, D2 recommends an IUCN Category V Protected Seascape combined, where necessary, with stricter Category Ia or IV core zones. This approach is designed to balance biodiversity protection with sustainable maritime uses. It also sets Good Environmental Status as the long-term management goal and stresses that without surveillance, staff, compliance mechanisms and stable funding, a protected area risks becoming a 'paper park'.

A flagship for a sea that must be protected together

The Baltic harbour porpoise helps explain the need for cross-border action. This small and elusive cetacean is the only whale species resident in the Baltic Sea and has become a symbol of a healthy marine ecosystem. Project communication highlighted an estimate that only around 500 individuals remain in the Baltic Sea proper, although monitoring such a rare animal is difficult and population estimates remain uncertain.

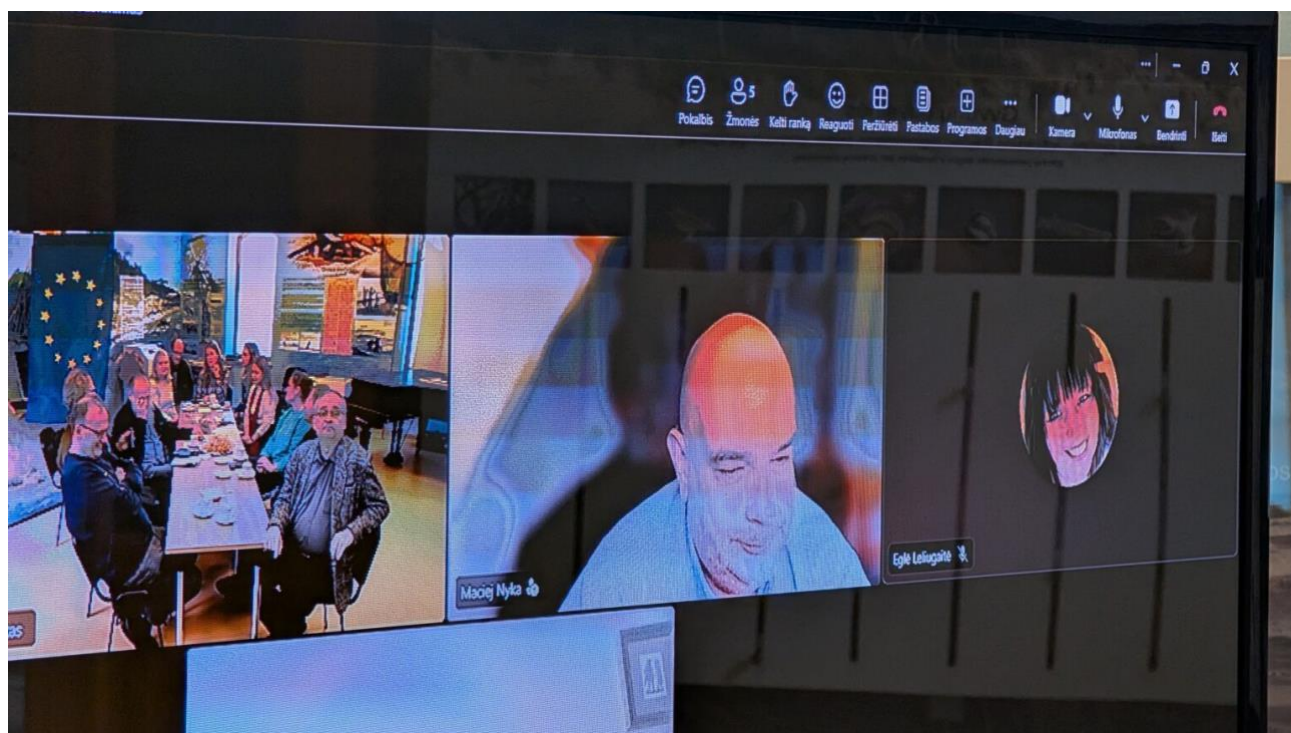
Its survival is threatened by accidental capture in static fishing gear, especially bottom-set gillnets, as well as underwater noise, declining fish resources and wider habitat deterioration. Newborn harbour porpoises develop hearing exceptionally quickly, making acoustic disturbance from shipping and other offshore activity particularly relevant to conservation planning.

Protecting the species requires more than isolated breeding sites. A coherent system must also cover feeding areas, migration corridors, social and nursing habitats, and places where animals can pause during movement. The project's 'Save the Moršwin' outreach proposed building such a network around existing protected areas near Hoburg Bank and the Northern Midsea Bank, the Southern Midsea Bank shared by Sweden and Poland, and a deep-water migration corridor extending towards ecologically important areas in Lithuania and Latvia.

By presenting the harbour porpoise as a flagship species—much as pandas or tigers represent conservation on land—the project made a technically complex discussion more understandable to the public. Protecting one migratory species also means protecting fish stocks, seabed habitats, water quality and the wider ecosystem on which coastal communities and the blue economy depend.

Science, law and stakeholders at the same table

The project combined ecological evidence with maritime spatial planning and a comparative review of national legal systems. Stakeholder dialogue involved public authorities, researchers, conservation organisations, communities and representatives of fisheries and aquaculture.



BLUE CRESCENT was presented at the National Maritime Law Conference and discussed through lectures, educational activities and sectoral meetings. Marine spatial planning suggestions were submitted to the Polish Maritime Office. At the Academy on the Beach in Sopot, the need for a shared marine protected area was explained to a general audience during an event attended by more than 400 people over three days.

The final hybrid meeting on 27 February 2026 connected Karklė, Gdańsk and Malmö. Protected-area managers, scientists, local communities and public institutions discussed the methodology, legal options and the importance of avoiding protected areas that exist only on paper.

What changed?

Before BLUE CRESCENT, the ambition of protecting this offshore ecosystem was spread across different national systems and areas of expertise. The project created a common vocabulary, a shared sequence of actions and a clearer view of where laws and institutional mandates align—or still need work.

Its most important lesson is that international rules already offer many tools for cooperation. The harder barriers are often political will, sovereignty concerns and fragmented responsibilities. The project therefore explored realistic governance options, including an inter-state agreement, a joint Protected Areas Council and the use of HELCOM mechanisms, while recognising that enforceable protection ultimately needs national legal foundations.

D3 showed that Lithuania, Poland and Sweden interpret the main principles of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in broadly compatible ways, even though their maritime zones, administrative structures and planning systems differ significantly. Together, their exclusive economic zones cover nearly one quarter of the Baltic Sea, giving coordinated action by the three countries substantial influence on regional marine governance.

The next stretch of the BLUE CRESCENT

The project's three deliverables provide authorities and organisations with a common starting point for further research, planning and negotiations. They can support more detailed data collection, boundary discussions, management planning and stakeholder engagement without requiring future partners to begin from zero.

The partnership is already looking beyond the small-scale project. The partners submitted a follow-up BLUE PLAN application to continue the work from methodology towards more detailed planning and implementation. Although the application was not selected for funding, it received a positive assessment and confirmed that the project idea has a strong foundation. The partners intend to refine the proposal, respond to the evaluators' feedback and submit it again in a future call. BLUE CRESCENT has therefore built more than a set of reports: it has created a committed partnership and a bridge from shared environmental ambition to coordinated action across the South Baltic.

Project partnership

Administration of Lithuania Minor Protected Areas (Lead Partner) • Ecological Club “Žvejoniė” • University of Gdańsk • World Maritime University

Programme acknowledgement

BLUE CRESCENT was implemented within the Interreg South Baltic Programme 2021–2027 and co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund.

Editorial note for final verification

This narrative success-story draft follows the official South Baltic storytelling structure: context, problem, idea, solution, how it works, proof of success and future vision. It contains no attributed or invented interview quotations.

Confirm before publication

- Named authors and public links for all three deliverables.
- Whether any authority or network has formally taken up the methodology or legal recommendations beyond the documented submission in Poland.
- Approved wording on the BLUE PLAN assessment and planned resubmission, including any score that partners wish to publish.
- Approved photographs, maps, captions and credits.

Principal sources

- BLUE CRESCENT project application, STHB.02.02-IP.01-0001/24.
- Supplementary Application Form and Appendix 1: Physical Progress.
- D1 — A Comprehensive Report: Marine Ecosystems, Species Diversity, Habitat Types, and Anthropogenic Threats in the South Baltic Marine Area (2026).
- D2 — Comprehensive Methodology to Set Transboundary Zoning, Management Principles, and Rules for Establishing Offshore Transboundary Marine Protected Areas (2026).
- D3 — A Comprehensive Report with Proposals for Modification of Laws and Regulations for Establishing an MPA (2026).
- Minutes of the final hybrid meeting, 27 February 2026.
- Save the 'Moršwin' presentation by Prof. Dr. Habil. Ramūnas Povilanskas.
- Project agendas, presentations and dissemination materials.
- Interreg South Baltic storytelling guidance: The Story Behind the Success—Communicating Your Project Impact.