

# Save the Baltic Sea!

**JULY 1976.** I remember it as if it was yesterday.

I am eight years old. Mum, Dad, my brother and I are in our little boat. It's summer, and there's endless glorious sunshine.

We spend four weeks in the beautiful Finnish archipelago. Nothing beats it, I mean nothing.

We visit friends in the islands. Everyone has their little summer place. Nature pure and simple. No electricity. Only a radio, which keeps us updated about the weather forecast.

We swim every day. The Baltic Sea is beautiful, clean and clear.

My brother and I sit at the front of our boat, as it ploughs through the sea at a lazy pace. We gaze at the bottom, and try to count the fish.

"Pappa, watch out! There is a rock on the starboard side." We avoid it, and sail on.

**Thirty years on,** I am back in the archipelago with my children. I tell them stories of my childhood summers.

I hear a seagull in the distance. A sailboat passes by. I look down at the sea and I can't see the bottom. I feel sad.

I tell Emilie, 5, and Oliver, 2, that when I was their age, I could see the bottom of the sea from here.

"What bottom?" my daughter asks, as she stares at the green gunk. I try to explain that the sea, much like a bathtub, has a bottom. If you are tall enough, or if you know how to dive, you can touch it. If you are lucky, you can see it.

Emilie looks puzzled. "But Pappa, why can't we see the bottom?" she asks. "Because we, the big people, have neglected the sea for many years. It's been polluted. We have made it dirty," I answer.

Silence. Suddenly Emilie looks at me and asks: "But Pappa, I thought it was only babies that did *kakka* in the bath tub." I look at her, and nod without giving an answer....

**If you are sitting** by the airplane window, look down. Chances are you might see the Baltic Sea. At the height of summer you will see an island of

algae. In the autumn you will see a greenish brown mass of water. It is not a pretty sight.

The Baltic Sea is not doing well. It is sick. At an average depth of only 58 metres (compare that to the Mediterranean which has an average depth of almost 2 kilometres!) it is extremely vulnerable.

Its only connection with the Atlantic Ocean goes through the narrow Danish straits. It takes 30 years for a drop of water to move in and out of the Baltic Sea.

All the waste dumped to the Baltic Sea stays there. One accident of an oil tanker and that is it: goodbye marine life, goodbye swimming.

**"Our Mare Nostrum is sick and we must do something about it."**

**Throughout history** the Baltic Sea has been a uniting factor in the region. Dating back to the days of the Hanseatic League, cultural and economic interaction in the region has been intense, to the benefit of all involved.

After the 2004 enlargement of the EU the Baltic Sea became an internal sea of the Union – a "Mare Nostrum." Apart from Russia, all the other eight countries on the shores of the Baltic Sea belong to the EU. A window of opportunity is now open. We should seize it.

The Mediterranean region has its own strategy. It receives almost one billion euros of EU funding a year. The Baltic Sea needs its own EU strategy as well. The focus should be on the environment, economy and transportation.

Let us start by making the Baltic Sea a priority of the European Union. Life is more about experience than nostalgia. Should we give up in despair and just live with a dirty Baltic Sea? Absolutely not. There is a lot we can do. Don't you want to go for a swim in the Baltic? ■

**Alexander Stubb is a member of the European Parliament who wants to continue swimming in the Baltic Sea.**

