

# School children performing on marine issues related to the Baltic Sea and the Arctic

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It is widely accepted that interest in science, especially among young Europeans, is declining. This decline results in confusion between science, pseudoscience and “junk science”. Given increased public participation in decision-making, limited understanding of science can compromise – in the long run – evidence-based decision making. It is possible to increase understanding of science through mobilization activities, and – as the recent communication paradigm calls – through active participation of the general public “in” science.

However, before adequate empowerment strategies are developed, it is necessary to reconstruct current perception of a given scientific phenomenon. In this study, we present the results of such a reconstruction in relation to marine environment of the oceans, with a special emphasis on the Gulf of Gdansk, region of the southern Baltic. We have developed the competition for primary and junior high school students (children aged 7-13) of this region. “I live by the Baltic seaside” was the overarching competition theme, and three editions involved three different visual arts, i.e., posters and sculpture, movie making, and theatre. In the third edition climate change in the Arctic was added as an additional topic.

In each edition, teams of students were asked to explain – using the selected media – what living by the Baltic Sea (or alternatively what climate change) means for them, and what they find important in this ecosystem. They were also requested to prepare a short presentation on their work, and present it in front of a jury, comprising both natural scientists and artists, as well as teachers and fellow-students.

Some of the issues touched in all three editions included: Overfished oceans and seas; How to behave on the beach; Biodiversity and invasive species; Melting glaciers in the Arctic; We are sailing to the North Pole, what should we expect? Prior to each edition a number of meetings with scientists were made for the students. During these meetings kids were educated on various sea related issues. We learnt that setting the theme and giving full freedom of expression to kids was a very successful approach in comparison with previous contests, when participants had to follow strict rules. Having school teachers involved was a very helpful element of the entire project since they know their kids and were able to assist them in making the right choices for their presentations. Kids out of natural curiosity made research on the topic and were able to provide very detailed information on e.g. invasive species in the Gulf of Gdansk, a potentially serious problem for the regional biodiversity, which, however, is not very widely “promoted” among general public. Additionally, it was very interesting to see how many great ideas they had in e.g. making films on the beach or creating plots for the theater plays.

Overall, it was a mutually very valuable experience, which provided important contribution for future collaboration with schools and life marine educational programs. In recent years social media have entered the scene, and recent studies indicate that being mentioned on Twitter might further amplify the impact of having interactions with reporters.