Protect Baltic – Generation Sea Meeting

Date: 9 October 2025

Location: Virtual (Online Meeting)

Organized by: PROTECT BALTIC

Led by: Katja Laingui and Paul Trouth

Meeting objectives and purpose

This meeting was convened under the *Protect Baltic* project to gather youth perspectives and integrate their insights into the project's ongoing and future protection initiatives. Youth have been identified as an integral stakeholder for the project.

Specifically, the session aimed to:

1. **Introduce the project** to a youth audience, highlighting its objectives, scope, and importance for the Baltic Sea.
2. **Engage young professionals**, identifying their views on marine conservation, their emotions about the sea, and how they see their role in addressing the challenges faced by the Baltic.
3. **Explore innovative strategies** for youth engagement in the project, awareness-raising and outreach.
4. **Collaboratively brainstorm actionable solutions** through dialogue to address key issues such as ineffective marine protected areas (MPAs), biodiversity loss, and eutrophication.

Attendees and participants

20 youth attended the workshop, from five different high schools in Helsinki. Their ages ranged from 16 to19 years. The schools represented were Munkkiniemi Secondary School, Lauttasaari Secondary School, Kulosaari Secondary School, Helsinki Coeducational School and Helsinki New Coeducational School.

Agenda and detailed summary

Welcome and introductions

The session began with a warm welcome from Katja and Paul, who showed the programme to the participants and explained the aim of the workshop.

A brief introduction to the schools taking part in the workshop was held.

Interactive quiz

As an icebreaker to enhance participant knowledge and engage them in the meeting's content, Paul hosted a quiz on the Baltic Sea's unique characteristics and the challenges it faces. This was conducted through Mentimeter.

Some key facts that were discussed included:

- **Geography**: The Baltic Sea spans nine countries, with a catchment area that homes 90 million people, and is geologically young (12,000 years old).
- **Biodiversity**: Home to over 5,000 species (including microspecies), and its brackish nature with saltwater coming in from the North Sea and freshwater from river inflows leaving space for a wide array of biodiversity calling the sea home.
- **Other key issues**: Overfishing, eutrophication, and habitat degradation as key pressures on the sea.

Participants noted how the Baltic's unique environmental conditions amplify the impacts of human activities, underscoring the urgency of the project.

Introduction to Protect Baltic

Current state of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)

The Baltic Sea already has a significant network of MPAs, with 17% of its area designated as protected—a notable achievement, as it was the first region globally to reach 10% MPA coverage. However, Katja acknowledged some significant shortcomings:

- The existing MPAs have not resulted in noticeable improvements in the Baltic Sea's ecological status.
- Designation is often nominal, with limited management, monitoring, and enforcement.

Drivers, activities, pressures, and impacts

The project framework analyses the interactions between human drivers, activities, and their ecological pressures, with Katja using fishing as an example. Katja illustrated this with the DAPSIM model depicting how activities and pressures are interconnected.

- We have the driver that humans need to eat, and therefore they fish, but overfishing creates pressure on the environment and leads to a reduced environmental status.
- This in turn can lead to impacts, such as food chains collapsing.
- Measures are a way to limit activity, which reduces pressure on the environment, and lowers impact.

Since this was a younger audience, the DAPSIM model was simplified with a concrete example which the audience could relate to.

Katja also highlighted the complexity and interwovenness of human activities and pressures.

A global context

Katja raised the common challenges we all face, specifically the triple planetary crisis. Solutions to the crisis were mentioned, such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy, and the Baltic Sea Action Plan. The emphasis was on the biodiversity targets and goals that feature in all these solutions, especially the 30% protection target by 2030.

Project overview

As a segway from regional solutions, Katja introduced the *Protect Baltic* project, explaining its purpose and significance in addressing the Baltic Sea's environmental challenges. She explained the key points about the project: 5-year project duration, funded by the EU, with 19 different partners.

Katja explained that HELCOM's coordination role, with access directly to countries and their ministers, allows it to bridge the gap between scientific research and policy, facilitating regional coherence in conservation efforts.

Topics covered in PROTECT BALTIC

Since the audience was high school students, instead of going into detail about the project's different work packages, Katja detailed the various topics that are covered and how they relate to MPAs.

Modelling

- Modelling is a key component of the project, as without the models we will not be able to predict where species and habitats are found, and what the best next area is to protect

Connectivity

- No MPA is an island!
- Katja introduced the concept of an MPA network and how it is important to ensure that MPAs act together rather than in isolation.

Ecosystem services

- The project will not only look at the importance of biodiversity when considering the designation of new MPAs
- Services provided by the environment that are important to humans will also be considered – these include services that are culturally, historically and provisionally important.

Governance of MPAs

- What guidelines, goals and targets need to be set, so that governments can efficiently manage the MPAs in their waters

Management of MPAs

- What do MPA managers, who are the 'feet on the ground', need to manage the MPAs under their care

Monitoring of MPAs

- Without monitoring the status of an MPA, the health of the species, water quality and other factors, there is no way of knowing whether an MPA is effective or not
- Monitoring is a key component of ensuring that protection is happening and having a positive effect on biodiversity

Restoration of ecosystems

- Restoration of ecosystems is an important tool to contribute to the improvement of overall environmental status
- This can be done both actively (by planting eelgrass) or passively (by leaving a habitat alone to recover)

Legal stuff

- Without a common, regional understanding of how protection works in the individual countries, it will be difficult to create a regional legal framework that will guide the countries of the Baltic Sea on how best to manage a transboundary, regional MPA network

MPA Portal

- A lot of data and information will be collected during the project, with the aim to centralise it all to one place, the MPA Portal
- The portal will be available to anyone who has an interest and wants to learn more about Baltic Sea MPAs
- It will also serve as a 'one stop shop' for MPA managers where they can update information about their own MPAs and learn about approaches that other MPA managers are taking to enhance the protection within other MPAs

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Youth perspective on the Baltic Sea

Participants were asked to engage in a series of reflective and interactive discussions to share their perspectives on the Baltic Sea. Using Mentimeter, several key questions were posed to gather insights into participants' emotions, aspirations, and concerns regarding the sea.

1. What is the ideal future for the Baltic Sea?

Participants were first asked to envision their ideal future for the Baltic Sea. Their responses revealed a shared aspiration for a healthier, more sustainable ecosystem:

- Key themes:
  - **Health**: A sea that is clean, free of pollution and eutrophication and can support life, balanced
  - **Biodiversity**: A home for animals and other species, restored
  - **Safe**: A sea that is safe to swim in and supports cultural practices, a place of peace

Figure 1: What is the ideal future for the Baltic Sea? (n=16)

2. When you think about the Baltic Sea, how do you feel?

This question aimed to explore participants' emotional connections to the Baltic Sea, uncovering a range of sentiments:

- Emotions expressed:
  - **Hope and determination**: The majority felt hopeful and optimistic about the Baltic Sea, which was encouraging to see
  - **Hopelessness and sadness**: Some expressed concern about biodiversity loss and felt anxious about the current state of the Baltic Sea.
  - **Beauty of nature**: Positive thoughts about the beauty of nature, and how it feels like home

Figure 2: When you think about the Baltic Sea, how do you feel? (n=17)

3. Which environmental issues worry you most?

Participants were asked to list the environmental issues that concern them most about the Baltic Sea. The discussion revealed deep awareness of the challenges:

- Top concerns:
  - **Biodiversity loss:** loss of species and endangered animals ranked high on the list for this group
  - **Pollution:** Various forms of pollution, such as chemical and plastic, were a concern
  - **Climate change:** the global challenge of climate change was a cause for worry for some
  - **Lack of attention:** there was a feeling of hopelessness that the state of the Baltic Sea and the issues it faces was not on the top of the political agenda – a feeling that nobody cares.

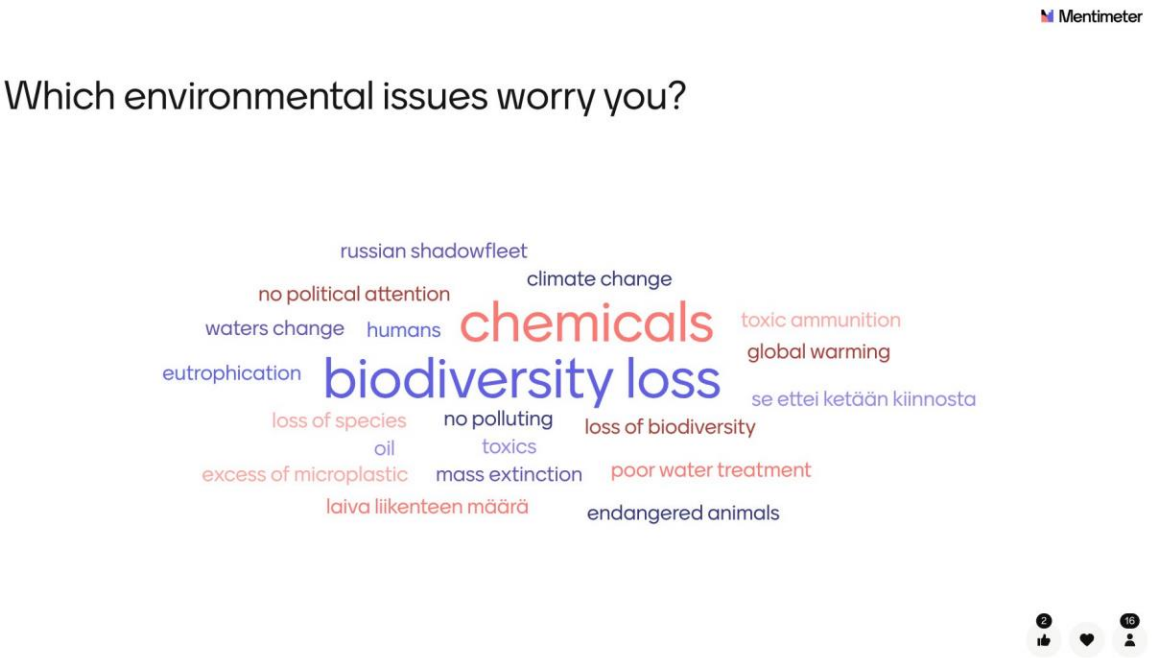

Figure 3: Which environmental issues worry you? (n=16)

4. What can you do to be part of the solution?

Participants reflected on their personal roles in protecting the Baltic Sea, offering a variety of responses rooted in their personal experiences:

- **Spreading awareness:**
  - Many acknowledged that they can play a role in spreading awareness about the Baltic Sea and the issues that the sea faces
- **Personal action:**
  - The concept of 'its starts with me' was a common thread, with several participants coming up with practical ideas, such as:
    - Doing cleanups
    - Recycling
    - Donating money to organizations that try and solve these issues
    - Influencing decision-makers through campaigning and protesting
    - Collaborating with other like-minded youth

Key takeaways:

1. **Invested interest:**
   The participants showed that they were interested in the future of the Baltic Sea and finding solutions for the challenges it faces.
2. **Prioritization of issues:**
   The key concerns that the participants raised were biodiversity loss, climate change and combating pollution.
3. **General optimism:**
   While there certainly were feelings of anxiety and sadness about the state of the Baltic Sea, the majority did still have optimism and hope for solutions.
4. **The importance of agency and advocacy:**
   Participants understood that they have an important role to play, by spreading awareness and engaging with their peers about the Baltic Sea and leading by example.

Brainstorming

Ocean Literacy (OL) Kit

One of the deliverables of the PROTECT BALTIC project is an Ocean Literacy Kit, specifically aimed for MPA managers, who will use it to raise awareness about MPAs in the Baltic Sea. Since youth, like the participants in this workshop, are a key target audience for this kit we asked the participants three key questions.

1. What kind of information would make you more curious about marine protected areas?

Key takeaways from the answers received from the participants:

- **Species information:** the vast majority mentioned that they would like to know more about the species that lived in an MPA, specifically fun facts and species protection status.
- **Protection measures:** a few expressed interest in learning about how the MPA is protected and what measures are taken to protect the ecosystems.
- **Sustainability:** some expressed interest in finding out about the bigger picture in the region, and how political, economic and societal pressures affect the Baltic Sea.

One participant also added that the information should have an optimistic tone to it so that there can be a hopeful outlook towards the future of the Baltic Sea.

2. How would you like to access this information?

Participants were asked about the way this information should be accessible.

- **Social media:** many mentioned that social media is a powerful communications tool for them, and that they would prefer this as a way to find out more information
- **Visual media:** videos as a visualisation tool was ranked highly, in addition to other suggestions such as a dedicated website and articles
- **Printed media:** a few participants suggested leaflets or pamphlets about MPAs, which could be easily distributed at schools, as well as stickers as an educational tool.

3. How should the information be presented to grab your attention?

Participants had a variety of responses to this question, with an emphasis on visual and interactive content. There was a strong sentiment from several participants that AI should not be used to create any of the content for the OL kit.

- **Art**: A few participants mentioned art as a way to grab attention, such as through murals and other medium.
- **Graphics**: information represented in graphic form was mentioned more than once, with an emphasis on the use of colour and clear, understandable text
- **Interaction**: many felt that having a real person speak about MPAs is impactful, including at events they might attend. Attention grabbing activations, such as a flash mob was also mentioned.

Demographic and engagement questions

Participants were asked some final questions in relation to, suitable age categories for youth and young professionals, their age, location, social media use and desire to continue engaging with the project. The results of these are outlined below in figures 4-12.

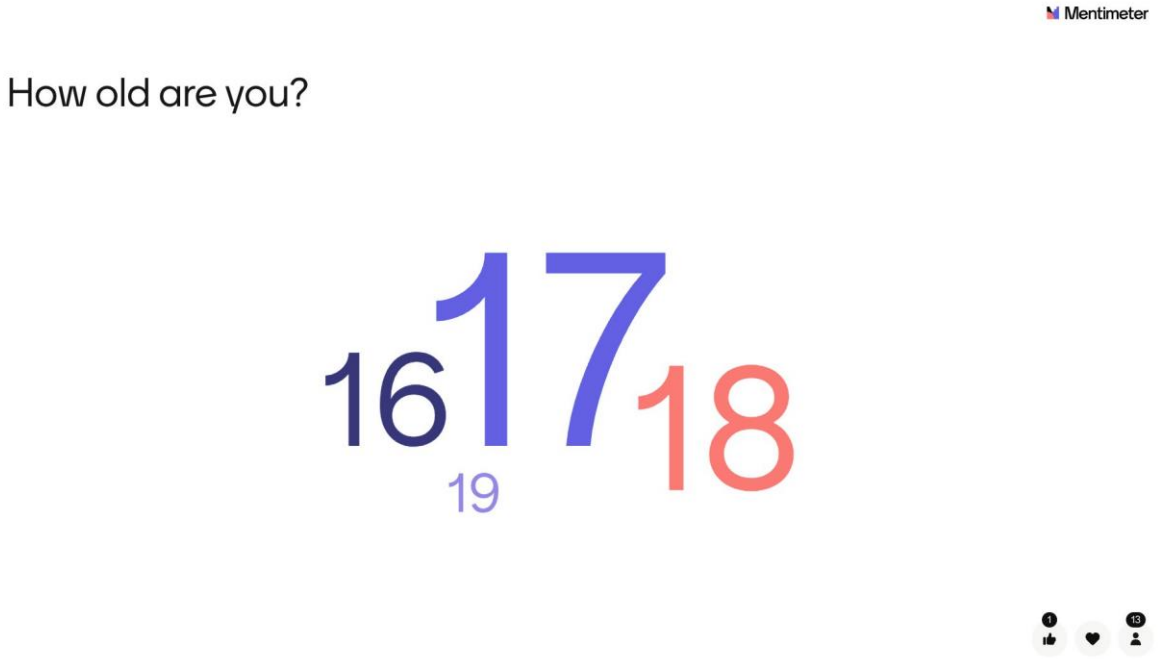

Figure 4: How old are you? (n = 13)

Figure 5: Where were you born? (n=14)

Figure 6: In which city do you live? (n=14)

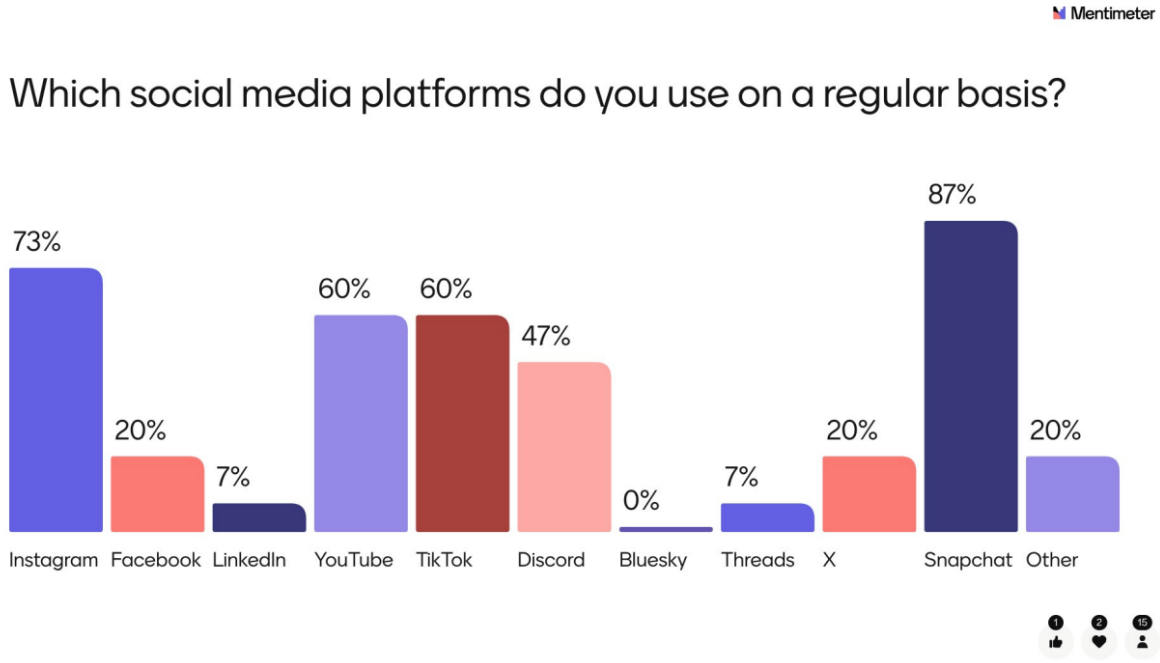

Figure 7: Which social media platforms do you use on a regular basis? (n=15)

'Other' category included: irc-galleria, Telegram and Jodel.

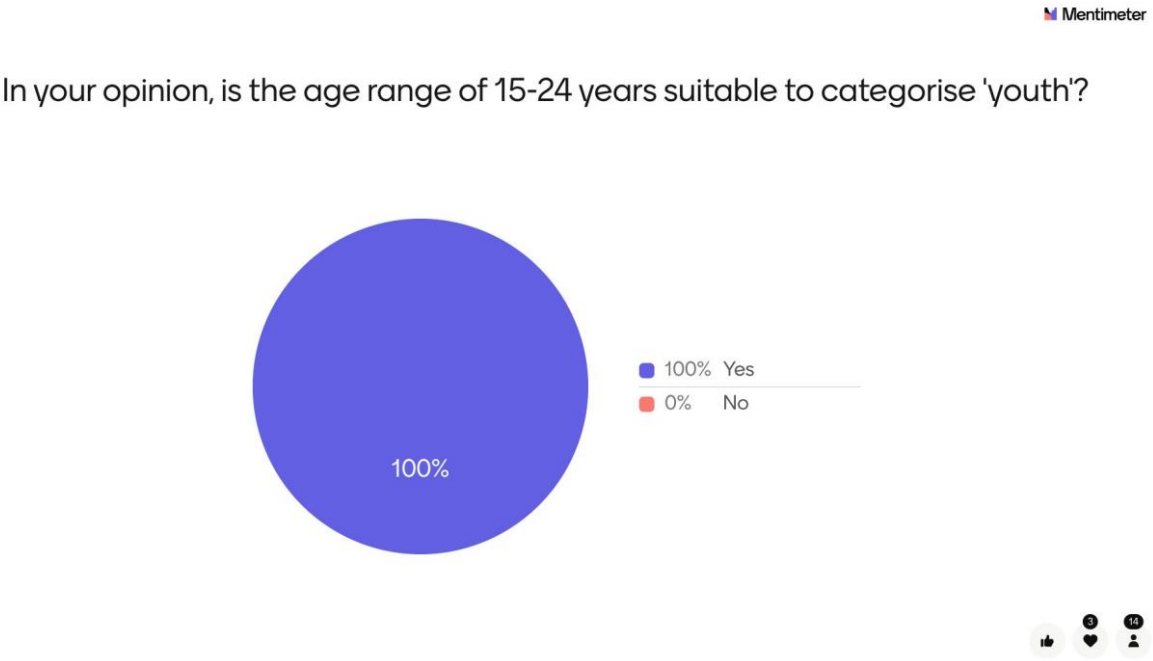

Figure 8: In your opinion, is the age range of 15-24 years suitable to categorise 'youth'? (n=14)

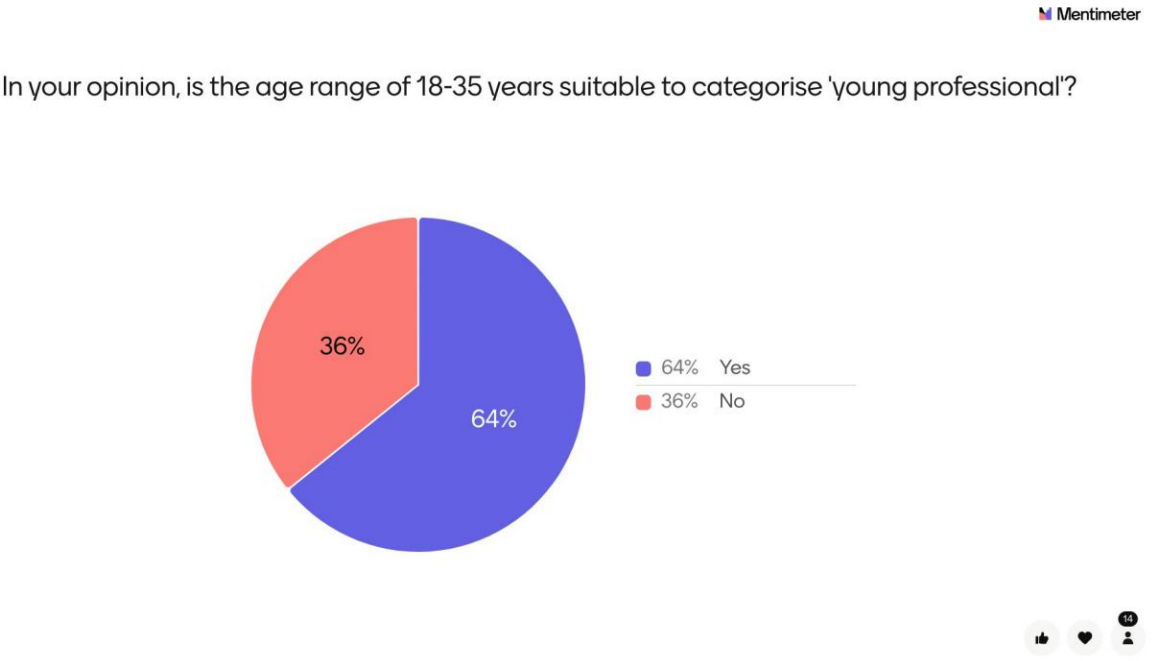

Figure 9: In your opinion, is the age range of 18-35 years suitable to categorise 'young professional'? (n=14)

Some of the participants that answered no to the 'young professional' age range question elaborated that the maximum age should be lower. Suggestions of a maximum age of 29 or 30 years were given.

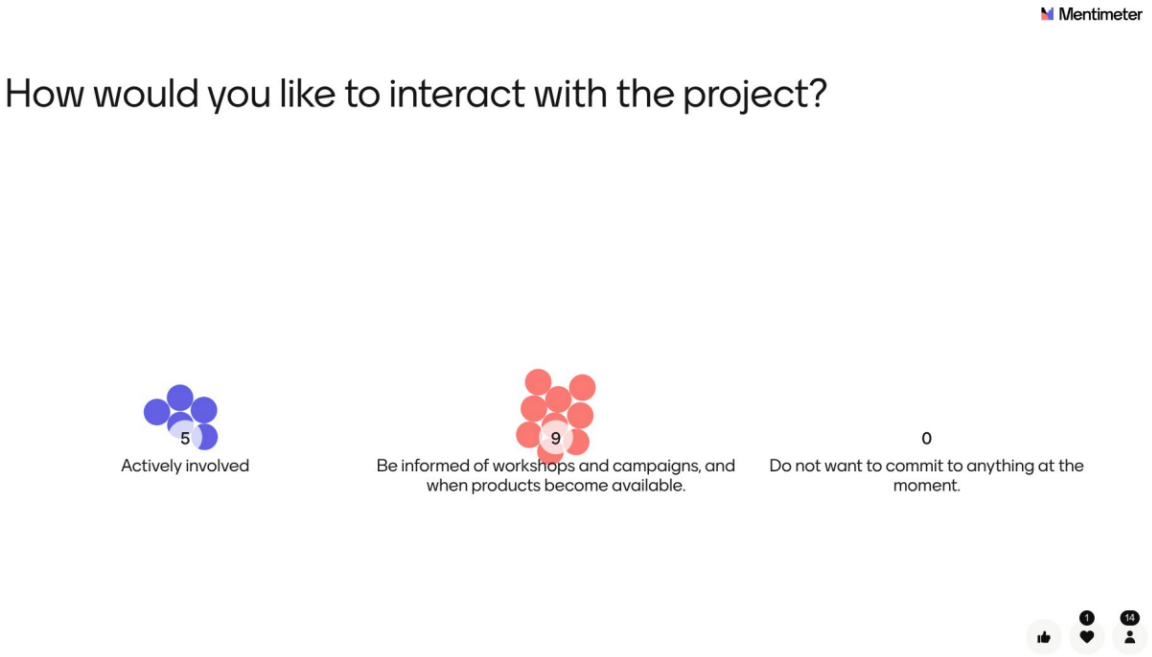

Figure 10: How would you like to interact with the project? (n=14)

Figure 11: What is your main takeaway from this workshop? (n=13)

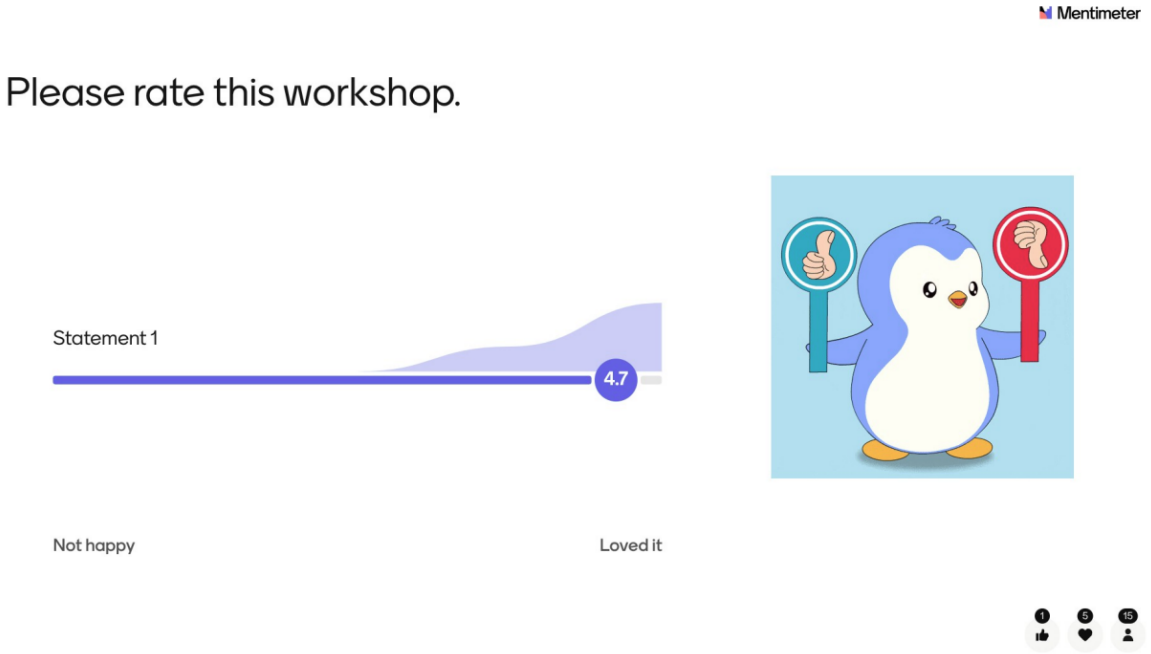

Figure 12: Please rate this workshop. (n=15)

Conclusions

Key action points for youth engagement

1. **Establish direct youth channels for decision-making:**
    - The interest is there to contribute actively, but avenues are needed to make this possible.
    - Formalize bottom-up approaches by integrating youth representatives into regional planning and governance structures.
    - Create youth advisory panels to provide ongoing input on MPA management, restoration priorities, and policy coherence.
2. **Enhance digital and educational outreach:**
    - Social media is the main avenue that youth get information from.
    - Develop **interactive digital platforms** and social media campaigns tailored to youth interests, including informative reels, gamified learning, and success stories.
    - Launch **ocean literacy toolkits** for schools and youth organizations, emphasizing actionable insights on marine protection and sustainability.

3. **Amplify youth advocacy through storytelling:**
    - Youth are aware of the importance to be advocates for the environment and that they have power to influence their peers.
    - Highlight personal narratives of young activists and professionals working on Baltic conservation efforts to inspire broader participation.
    - Use multimedia formats to showcase the historical, cultural, and ecological importance of the Baltic Sea.
4. **Support capacity-building initiatives:**
    - Provide access to workshops, internships, and mentorships in marine conservation for youth.
    - Engage youth in marine conservation work to inspire them for future career paths.
5. **Align with formal education systems:**
    - Collaborate with Baltic Sea schools to enhance the awareness about the wonders of the Baltic Sea, and the challenges it faces.
    - Act as support for potential new Blue School applications in the Baltic Sea region.

By adopting these actions, Protect Baltic can ensure meaningful and sustained youth participation, leveraging their passion and innovative potential to address the Baltic Sea's ecological challenges.