

Green groups pitch plan to reduce damage in Benguela system

CAPE TOWN — A plan to reduce the impact of commercial fishing fleets within southern Africa's Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem (BCLME) was released yesterday in Cape Town.

Experts have hailed it as a clear and practical way of implementing an "Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries" (EAF) policy in place would reduce the impact of commercial fishing on vulnerable species.

It is estimated that more than 33 000 seabirds and 4 200 turtles are killed each year by longline fishing fleets in the ecosystem, which covers the area of the At-

lantic Ocean from SA to Angola.

"Ecological Risk Assessment: A Tool for Implementing an Ecosystem Approach for Southern African Fisheries" was launched jointly by the conservation organisation WWF-SA and the BCLME programme.

The BCLME programme is a multinational initiative involving the governments of Angola, Namibia and SA and is aimed at managing and protecting marine resources and the environment in the waters off the subcontinent's west coast.

Both SA and Namibia committed themselves — at the World Summit on Sustainable Develop-

ment five years ago — to implement an EAF by 2012.

WWF-SA and the BCLME programme said fisheries in the region have traditionally been managed by "single species" techniques, where the main aim was to maintain the target species at commercially viable levels.

"This narrow management approach has been held responsible for the current poor state of our global oceans and declining socioeconomic returns for those that depend on it.

"The new approach (EAF) refocuses fisheries management on maintaining the overall health of the marine ecosystem that

sustains commercially important species," said the organisations.

Recent workshops had identified the main ecological risks to southern Africa's marine resources as:

- the impact of fisheries on top predators such as seabirds, sharks and tuna through the removal of fish they would normally feed on;

- the impact of fishing gear on vulnerable and slow-breeding species, such as turtles, seabirds and sharks; and

- the impact of heavy fishing gear on the sensitive sea life on the bottom of the ocean.

BCLME programme chief

technical adviser Dr Michael O'Toole said the report gave "a very clear and practical plan of how we can go about implementing an Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries in southern Africa".

WWF fisheries programme manager Samantha Petersen said there was willingness and commitment among stakeholders to implement an EAF, but confusion on how to go about it.

"The report shows how to turn willingness into action," she said.

According to the report, development of an EAF is "highly dependent on voluntary support from the fishing industry and other stakeholders having an

impact on marine ecosystems".

The joint press release noted that implementing an EAF could see changes to fishing regulations. "Implementation might mean changing fisheries regulations to reduce impacts on the ecosystem, creating new governance structures to allow for effective participatory decision making, or initiating new research to allow a better understanding of the ecosystem."

Asked if enforcement of such a new policy was feasible, given the government's battle to control poaching, Petersen said this was "a concern for everybody".

Recent workshops had

highlighted the need for an environmental affairs' Marine and Coastal Management branch to "increase their capacity and enforcement", she said.

Environmental Affairs and Tourism Minister Marthinus van Schalkwyk said recently that the government faced a "very difficult balancing act, making sure we allocate rights in a way that will be sustainable and ensure that a specific fishery will survive over the longer term".

While overfishing was a huge problem along SA's coast, the reality was also that for many people fishing was their only source of income, said Van Schalkwyk. *Sapa*

