

# Plan to protect ocean, not just fish species

## SA, Namibia and Angola in new approach

By **JOHN YELD**

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South Africa and its west coast neighbours Namibia and Angola are pioneering a new approach to fishing that is aimed at protecting the whole ocean and not just individual fish species.

A pilot project involving eight major commercial fisheries in South African and Namibian waters over the past two years has proved highly successful, scientists and officials reported yesterday.

Now it will be applied to more fisheries both in these waters and those off Angola that together make up the highly productive Benguela Current marine ecosystem.

It's called an Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries – or EAF for short – and aims to take into account the huge complexity of the ocean ecosystem, instead of just concentrating on single commercial species.

The goal is to have it used as the basis for all three southern African nations' fisheries by 2010, in terms commitments made at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002.

"(The pilot project) is a cutting edge scientific effort that is stirring up a lot of interest internationally," said Dr Johann Augustyn, head of research in the Marine and



Coastal Management branch of the national environment department.

Dr Deon Nel, manager of WWF-SA's marine programme, explained that the process defined "ecosystem" in the broadest possible sense to include social, economic and fisheries governance systems.

"We cannot disentangle all these systems, they are all interlinked – we're going to trip ourselves up if we look too narrowly at the ecosystem," he said.

Nel was speaking at a function in Sea Point yesterday to launch a new report, "Ecological Risk Assessment: A tool for implementing an ecosystem approach for Southern African fisheries" that is the blueprint for giving effect to the new EAF approach.

The report, a joint effort by WWF-SA and the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem (BCLME) research programme, provides a detailed plan for reducing the impacts of fishing on the marine ecosystems in the Benguela system.

"Traditionally, fisheries have been managed by means

of the so-called 'single species' techniques whereby the majority of management protocols were aimed at maintaining the populations of target species at commercially viable levels," explained Dr Mick O'Toole, chief technical adviser to the BCLME programme.

"Little consideration was given to the impacts of fishing on other components of the marine ecosystem.

"But this narrow management approach has been held responsible for the current poor state of many of the fisheries of our global oceans, and for the declining socio-economic returns for those that depend on them."

The Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries refocused fisheries management on maintaining the overall health of the marine ecosystem that sustained commercially important species, he added.

While the pilot project had been developed to take this approach further, it would now be up to the inter-governmental regional fisheries commission to take it further, O'Toole said.

"It's not going to happen overnight," he warned.

The pilot project involved the demersal trawl (hake), small pelagics (anchovy and pilchard), large pelagic (swordfish and tuna), West Coast rock lobster and squid fisheries in

South African waters, and the hake, horse mackerel and small pelagic fisheries in Namibia.

It also considered the impacts on the marine ecosystem of inshore diamond mining and oil and gas extraction.

The new report includes the results of ecological risk workshops attended by more than 150 marine scientists, fisheries officials and industry representatives.

Some of the main risks they identified included:

- Impacts of fishing on top predators such as seabirds, sharks, turtles and tuna, through the removal of their normal prey.

- The impact of fishing gear on vulnerable or slow-breeding species, such as turtles, seabirds and sharks.

- Impacts of heavy fishing gear on the sensitive sea life on the ocean floor.

The report offers a blueprint containing 22 operational objectives for fisheries managers to implement in order to achieve an EAF regime.

Asked which other important fisheries were next in line for this management approach, Nel said:

"What stands out glaringly for me is the linefish industry. That's the next one to tackle, and it's going to be very difficult with lots of impacts and lots of (competing) interests."

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