

High death toll of sharks from fishing a worry

CAPE TOWN – More than seven million sharks and skates are killed every year as an unintended consequence of longline fishing off the west coasts of South Africa, Namibia and Angola, a World Wildlife Fund (WWF) report states.

The environmental group also claims about 34 000 seabirds and 4 200 sea turtles a year die in the area known as the Benguela Ecosystem, according to the report compiled in association with conservation body BirdLife.

“The majority of albatross and sea turtle species and many shark species are listed as threatened with extinction by the IUCN (World Conservation Union), with fisheries impacts cited as a major cause,” the WWF report stated.

The creatures get caught on baited hooks put out on long lines by fishing boats. “The report shows us the by-catch is substantial; it is a huge concern,” Samantha Petersen, manager of the BirdLife and WWF Responsible Fisheries Programme, said.

“Yet there is a lot of will to resolve the issue and there are win-win solutions,” she said.

These include use of bird-scaring lines – scarecrow-like ropes cast alongside fishing lines to stop albatrosses and other seabirds from diving onto baited hooks set by fishing vessels.

The use of such lines was compulsory in South Africa, but compliance was low, Petersen said.

WWF Sanlam Marine Programme manager Aaniyah Ouardien said such steps not only helped preserve fragile ecosystems, but also aided fishermen: time saved on unhooking unwanted catches, less damage to gear, and reducing bait loss. – *AFP*

