

The deadly harvest of longline fishing

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CAPE TOWN: In a shocking report released yesterday, it was revealed that 33 850 seabirds, 4 200 sea turtles and seven million sharks were killed every year on the hooks of longline fishing vessels off the west coast of South Africa, Namibia and Angola.

The report was released by Birdlife South Africa and World Wildlife Fund South Africa, the first time an assessment of the effect of longline fishing had been carried out on these vulnerable creatures in the Benguela Current ecosystem.

Most albatrosses and sea turtles killed on the fish hooks are listed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources as threatened species, and many of the shark species are also threatened.

Samantha Petersen, manager of the Birdlife and WWF responsible fisheries programme, said yesterday the survey had taken three years and looked at the impact of pelagic longlining, where lines were set close to the ocean surface, and demersal longlining, where lines were set on the bottom of the ocean.

"Turtles, seabirds and sharks have similar life-history characteristics. They grow slowly and breed slowly. The wandering albatross lays one egg every two years, so they don't have the ability to

recover, unlike many fish species. They also move over great distances and come into contact with fisheries from many countries, so this is not a problem that one country can solve," she said.

The study area was restricted to the Benguela Current ecosystem from Cape Town north to Angola. South Africa undertook at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 to implement an ecosystem approach to sea fisheries by 2010. This ensures that an entire marine ecosystem is healthy.

Discrepancy

Sea turtles caught include the critically endangered leatherback turtle. Of the seabirds killed, about 500 were killed by South African longliners and 30 850 by Namibian longliners.

Petersen said the discrepancy was due to the combination of Namibia having no regulations to reduce bycatch and that there were many more Namibian longliners at sea.

The report also provides recommendations on how to reduce the impact of longlining.

Deon Nel, WWF Aquatic Unit Manager, said the report was about helping to build a more responsible fishery. Johann Augustyn, of Marine and Coastal Management, said: "We take these recommendations seriously."

