The Benguela Current : Namibia's marine resource receives a massive boost

A sulphur eruption off the coast of Namibia.The BCLME programme recognises the need for regional action to address problems like these in the Benguela region. (Picture courtesy of Ocean Space)

By Claire Attwood

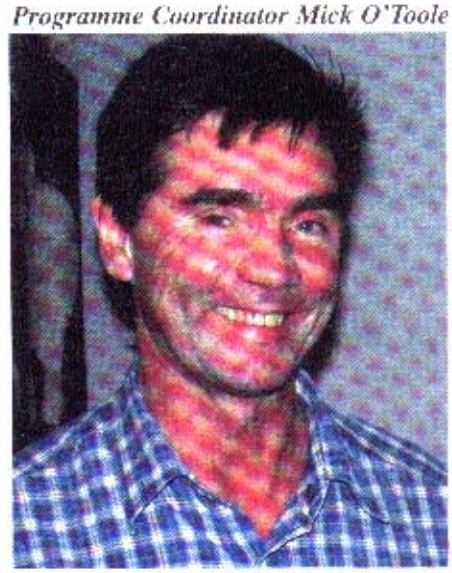
Namibia's coastal waters form part of a vast ocean area known as the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem (BCLME); this stretches from 5°S (Cabinda Province, Angola) to just east of Port Elizabeth, in South Africa; thereby including the full extent of Namibia's marine environment. The Benguela Current is in reality a complex system of water movements, with deeper waters often moving in the opposite direction to currents on the surface. It is one of four major current systems in the world.

The BCLME Programme is an initiative by Namibia, Angola and South Africa to facilitate the sustainable management and protection of the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem. It is primarily aimed at improving the structures and capacities of the three countries to deal with problems and issues which occur across national boundaries, in order that the ecosystem may be managed as a whole. The Programme is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), with the United Nations Office for Programme Services (UNOPS) as an executing agency. The three member countries provide further financial assistance and in-kind contributions.

The BCLME Programme is now preparing to award nine project contracts, worth an estimated US $450, 000 (N$3.6 million), which will assist scientists and fisheries managers in Namibia, Angola and South Africa, to understand better, monitor more efficiently and even predict the occurrence of red tides and low oxygen events in the Benguela upwelling system. The launch of an initial nine projects by the BCLME Programme will be followed by the development and funding of 70 more projects in the fields of environmental variability, marine living resources, biodiversity, ecosystem health and pollution.

According to the co-ordinator of the BCLME Programme, Dr Mick O'Toole, over the next four years an estimated 80 projects will be supported by the Programme, with the aim of developing baseline scientific and economic information on what is known about the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem, how this is changing over time and how the transboundary management problems associated with fishing, mining, oil exploration, coastal development, biodiversity and pollution can best be addressed across the entire Benguela region.

Programme Coordinator Mick O'Toole



Capacity building and information transfer form an important part of the BCLME Programme.

The BCLME Programme's current focus on low oxygen water and red tides - or Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) as they are more correctly known - is prompted by the recognition that collective regional action is required to address these problems in the Benguela region, says Dr O'Toole.

Low oxygen water events are one of the best documented but least understood phenomena in Benguela fisheries. Events such as the catastrophic mortality of hake off Namibia in 1994 and 2000, and the mortalities of rock lobster in 1994, 1997 and 2002 in the southern Benguela, demonstrate the importance of understanding the causes and propagation of low oxygen events and their interaction with fisheries.

Namibia, Angola and South Africa all face similar problems in terms of the assessment and management of HABs, and their impact on the fishing and seafood industries.

The nine project contracts were approved by the BCLME Programme Steering Committee in April and will be awarded by the Programme's executing agency, UNOPS, in July and August. The projects cover a variety of study areas, such as the design of a simulation model for low oxygen water in the BCLME region - which will provide the basis for an early warning system – and an investigation into the diversity and distribution of cysts of HABs within the BCLME.

The awarding of the initial nine project contracts by the BCLME Programme will be followed by the advertisement of seven priority projects in the fields of commercial and artisinal fisheries in the Benguela region.

"The process of advertising projects, assessing tenders and awarding project contracts takes time, but once this process is complete, the real work of the BCLME Programme can begin in earnest," says Dr O'Toole.

The Programme Coordination Unit of the BCLME Programme is situated in Windhoek, while three Activity Centres - one in each of the participating countries – have been established as the main mechanisms for the implementation of the BCLME Programme. The Activity Centre for Marine Living Resources is located in Swakopmund, within the National Marine Information and Research Centre (NatMIRC) and is headed by a director, Dr Hashali Hamakuaya. The Environmental Variability Activity Centre is located in Cape Town, South Africa, while the Activity Centre for Biodiversity, Ecosystem Health and Marine Pollution is located in Luanda, Angola.

The Activity Centres function as the "headquarters" of the Advisory Groups, which are tasked with ensuring, among other things, that the transboundary elements are properly addressed by the BCLME Programme. The Centres also provide capacity strengthening and networking for their respective activities.

For more information on the BCLME Programme visit: www.bclme.org

Namibia's fishing industry, which is well known for its high-quality whitefish products, will benefit from the BCLME Programme's focus on transboundary environmental issues and problems