

Why do South Africa, Namibia and Angola need to work together for the benefit of the Benguela region?

■ By Dr Mick O'Toole

The Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem (BCLME) is one of the world's most productive marine environments, supporting a rich marine life, including numerous fish, seabirds and marine mammals. It stretches from Cabinda Province, in the north of Angola, to just east of Port Elizabeth in South Africa.

Although fisheries have become an economic mainstay of the BCLME region - accounting for 10 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in Namibia, 4 percent in Angola and 0.37 percent in South Africa (where fisheries provide an important source of livelihoods in rural and semi-rural communities) the BCLME is also rich in other natural resources.

The continental shelf contains petroleum, natural gas and mineral deposits - notably diamonds, for which prospecting and development activities are underway - while tourism heralds potential, capitalising on the area's exceptional natural beauty, biodiversity and cultural attributes.

Facing the threats

In contrast to coastal environments in other parts of the world, the integrity of the BCLME is still largely intact. However, the ecosystem faces accelerating threats which, if left unchecked, threaten vital economic and ecological values.

The primary threats to the ecosystem include habitat loss and pollution, particularly in areas adjacent to urban centres; the lack of a co-ordinated management framework for the exploitation of straddling fish stocks; and the potential threat of pollution posed by oil and gas exploration and production, and mining in and around sensitive marine areas.

These problems are compounded by increasing environmental variability in the Benguela system, which is triggered by global environmental changes and manifests in fluctuations in the abundance and distribution of marine resources, including commercially important species.

Policies for prevention

The trans-boundary nature of these real and potential threats means that regional co-operation will be essential to their mitigation and prevention. There needs to be

harmonisation of policies and management protocols for fisheries, for mining of diamonds, for oil and gas exploration and extraction, for mariculture and for coastal litter and pollution of natural bays and harbours.

Over the next three-and-a-half years, the BCLME Programme will support an estimated 80 projects which will contribute to the development of baseline scientific and socio-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.

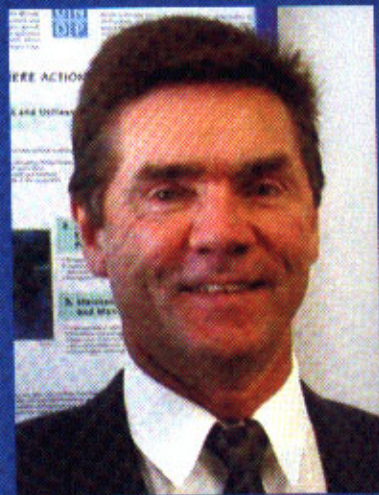
Funding

The BCLME Programme is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) which has contributed \$15.2 million (R106 million) through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for the regional initiative. The GEF's funding complements an investment of \$16 million (R112 million) by the three countries and over \$7 million (R49 million) from other sources such as the Benguela Environment Fisheries Interaction Training Programme (BENEFIT).

One of the major goals of the BCLME Programme is to finally establish a Benguela Current Commission which will enable the three countries to engage constructively and peacefully in resolving the transboundary issues that threaten the integrity of the BCLME.

An Interim Benguela Current Commission (IBCC) will be set up within a few years and it is anticipated that the IBCC will complement the work of the South-East Atlantic Fisheries Organisation (SEAFO) and ICCAT, regional fisheries organisations regulating high seas and tuna fisheries in the Benguela region.

The BCLME Programme is a concrete and constructive initiative which clearly addresses and supports some of the overall goals of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). It is a country-driven initiative that will address some of the most pressing environmental issues in the Benguela region



Dr Mick O'Toole is the chief technical advisor of the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem (BCLME) Programme. He has over 30 years of experience in oceanographic research and marine resource management.

He holds a PhD in zoology from the University of Cape Town and has worked in the Benguela region since 1972, first as a research officer at the Sea Fisheries Research Laboratory in Swakopmund, and later as the head of the demersal fisheries division of the National Marine Information and Research Centre (NATMIRC) in Namibia.

From 1995 to 1997 he played a key role in the development of the Benguela Environment Fisheries Interaction and Training Programme (BENEFIT). In 1997 Dr O'Toole was appointed regional co-ordinator of the BCLME Programme and he went on to develop a successful submission to the Global Environment Facility on behalf of Angola, Namibia and South Africa.

He took up his position as Chief Technical Advisor of the BCLME Programme in May 2002.

and contribute materially to the sustainable and responsible development of the rich oceanic resources of southern Africa.