



ACTION The WWF's Samantha Petersen

PHOTO: ANDREW INGRAM

Nature fund releases ecoplan for fisheries

From SAPA

New York – A plan to reduce the effect of commercial fishing fleets within southern Africa's Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem (BCLME) was released in Cape Town yesterday.

Experts have hailed it as a clear and practical way of implementing an ecosystem approach to fisheries (EAF) policy in the region, and say putting it in place will reduce the impact of commercial fishing on vulnerable species such as turtles, sea birds and sharks. It is estimated that more than 33 000 sea birds and 4 200 sea turtles are killed each year by long-line fishing fleets in the BCLME, which covers the area of the Atlantic Ocean stretching from South Africa to Angola.

Ecological risk assessment, a tool for implementing an ecosystem approach for southern African fisheries, was launched jointly by the conservation organisation World Wide Fund for Nature South Africa (WWFSA) and the BCLME programme.

The programme is a multinational initiative involving the governments of Angola, Namibia and South Africa, and is aimed at managing and protecting marine resources and the environment in the waters off the subcontinent's west coast.

Both South Africa and Namibia committed themselves at the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg five years ago to implement an EAF policy by 2012.

The WWFSA and the BCLME programme say fisheries in the region have been managed by "single-species" techniques, where the main aim is to maintain the target species at commercially viable levels.

"This narrow management approach has been held

responsible for the poor state of our global oceans and declining socioeconomic returns for those that depend on it.

"The new approach [EAF] refocuses fisheries management on maintaining the overall health of the marine ecosystem that sustains commercially important species," the organisations said.

Recent workshops identified the main ecological risks to southern Africa's marine resources as the effect of:

- Fisheries on top predators and tuna through the removal of fish they would normally feed on;
- Fishing gear on vulnerable and slow-breeding species; and
- Heavy fishing gear on the sensitive sea life on the bottom of the ocean.

The BCLME's programme chief technical adviser, Michael O'Toole, said the report gave "a very practical plan of how we can implement an EAF to fisheries in southern Africa".

WWF fisheries programme manager Samantha Petersen said there was willingness and commitment among stakeholders to implement an EAF, but confusion on how to go about it.

"The report shows how to turn willingness into action," she said. According to the report, development of an EAF policy is "highly dependent on voluntary support from the fishing industry and other stakeholders having an impact on marine ecosystems".

Developing such support would require effective participatory and co-management structures with industry and fishing communities. The press release notes that implementing an EAF policy could see changes to regulations.

Asked if enforcement of such a new policy was feasible, given government's battle to control poaching, Petersen said this was "a concern for everybody".

