



Pilchard moratorium too little, too late

Ministry's dual role endangers marine ecosystem

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A three-year moratorium on pilchard fishing introduced this week came ten months after the fisheries minister had announced a controversial and defiant 14 000-ton pilchard quota despite the threat of extinction faced by the species in Namibian waters.

But while the moratorium has been welcomed by scientists and other concerned parties, they argue that the ministry's refusal to initially accept the evidence and take immediate action has further pressured pilchard populations and, in turn, added pressure on the fishing industry.

"I am pleased that there is finally a moratorium, albeit far too late," a scientist, who declined to be named, told Namibian Sun.

The scientist warned that a moratorium of three years might be too little and too late.

"Given that the Namibian sardine stock is a mere fraction of what it used to be and given that much of our marine ecosystem depends on the sardine, I doubt whether a three-year moratorium will be enough to turn the situation around and to rebalance our currently unhealthy ecosystem."

According to the Namibia Chamber of Environment (NCE), the debacle has also highlighted the conflict of interest of the ministry's role as both the protector of marine resources and the patron of the fishing sector.

"It is clear that the advice of marine scientists was disregarded in favour of the fishing industry. The evidence provided by declining seabirds was disregarded. From a governance perspective, it is just wrong that the industry should have such a powerful voice in the process," the NCE's Chris Brown said in a statement.

Brown acknowledged that the dual mandate of setting production quotas and ensuring sustainability of resources is tough but said it should not compromise the health of marine systems.

"The ministry has clearly failed in this second role. Their failure to ensure a healthy ecosystem has led directly to a failure in ensuring production of the pilchard industry. The two are inextricably linked," he said.

He said the NCE recognised that the ministry was sometimes placed in a difficult position, and had to weigh up fish resource sustainability with business interests and jobs.

"However, it is important that the health of the fish resource must take priority. Because without a healthy resource, there will be no long-term businesses and no long-term jobs."

Brown said the sector, including the fisheries ministry, was "shrouded in secrecy" and many of the ministry's problems were rooted in a lack of transparency and public accountability in the management of the marine ecosystem.

Research data on stock assessments is not made public, and an overview of how quotas are set and allocated remains out of the public eye, hidden from scrutiny.

Furthermore, the ministry does not make data on catches and by-catches public, nor the business arrangements within the sector.



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/asse-moratorium-too-little-too-late2017-12-140.jpg>)

AT WAR: The fishing industry and the marine ecosystem need careful management. PHOTO: FILE

"And these are national resources that we are talking about. This needs to change, and it needs to change now. We do not need more fiascos before we start getting the higher-level management systems right," Brown said.

The cabinet this week announced its endorsement of a recommendation to lower the total allowable catch (TAC) for pilchard to zero metric tons from 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2020 in order to allow the stock to recover.

The decision was based on the fact that pilchard stocks in Namibia have declined to a "precarious situation", in part due to the effects of climate change and overfishing.

In February this year, fisheries minister Bernhard Esau reassured the country that there was sufficient pilchard stock to justify his decision to issue a 14 000-ton quota.

This announcement came despite in-house and external warnings that the pilchard population had declined to near extinct levels.

Brown said a moratorium was good news, but warned that time was not the most critical factor.

"Given the current extremely low levels of the pilchard population in Namibian waters, perhaps at only 1% of their historic population, it may take much longer than three years for a partial recovery. The length of the moratorium must thus be based on achieving a threshold stock level, not on a number of years."

He said quotas should only be reintroduced once the pilchard stock had reached an agreed healthy threshold and recovered to the point where key marine indicators, such as seabirds, had started to recover. Populations of gannets and penguins have noticeably shrunk as their food source disappeared.

Brown also urged stakeholders to take additional stringent measures during the moratorium, such as putting penalties in place to prevent catching pilchard as by-catch.

"A moratorium will have little impact if pilchards are simply being caught as by-catch.

"The ministry of fisheries and marine resources should explain their strategy of how they propose to address this by-catch issue," the NCE stated.

Further, the ministry should work closely with Angola to extend this moratorium into Angolan waters and to work on a joint sardine and pilchard management plan.

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