



Stormy seas ahead

Jobs take precedence over sustainability

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The worst culprits responsible for the poor health status of Namibia's ocean and possible future job losses in the fishing industry, as well as the threat of extinction of several marine resources, are weak governance structures, lack of political will and the inflated power of fishing companies.

Following a United Nations conference on the state of the world's oceans, the Namibian scientific community strongly agrees that Namibians should be deeply worried about the poor health of Namibia's marine resources, the lack of oversight of fishing practices, and the lack of political will to reverse the decline in the ocean's health.

A major concern is that scientific research and advice are often ignored, despite the economic and environmental consequences.

One recent example of the sidelining of scientists was the announcement by fisheries minister Bernhardt Esau of a 14 000-ton pilchard quota for 2017, undeterred by grave warnings from marine biologists that the pilchard stock had slumped to just over 1% of its former population and could be extinct soon if not allowed to recover.

Scientists have explained that a temporary ban on pilchard fishing as well as implementing strict by-catch penalties and engaging with neighbouring countries to institute similar strategies would not only allow the species to recuperate, but also boost jobs and resurrect the pilchard industry.

"Current harvesting levels are at a few thousand tonnes per year. With a recovered resource, we could be sustainably harvesting about a quarter of a million tonnes per year," doctor of zoology and CEO of Namibia Chamber of Environment (NCE) Chris Brown told Namibian Sun.

He added that in the interim, "we could be substituting imported pilchards to keep the industry going – which is essentially what is happening at the moment, so small is our local catch."

Explanations by the fisheries ministry that the likely loss of about 600 jobs in the sector took precedence over the risk of a collapsed pilchard population were dismissed by Brown.

"Any suggestions that we cannot do this because we need to keep the pilchard industry alive to protect jobs is just nonsense. We could vastly increase the number of jobs if we allowed the pilchard resource to recover."



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/assets/seas-ahead2017-07-060.jpg>)

DEEPLY TROUBLING: Fishing vessels anchored at Walvis Bay. PHOTO: FILE

The cost of profit

The fishing industry's focus on profit, to the detriment of the ocean's health, and government's willingness to turn a blind eye are key problems contributing to the state of affairs.

"The industry is largely geared to greed and profit, with little thought of sustainability. Lip service is often paid by government who want scientists to provide information, and then to go away," a marine biologist, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retribution, told the newspaper.

And although "there are a range of efforts to improve political awareness, I am just not sure whether the penny has dropped at the right places yet. And when Minister Esau decides to give out a pilchard quota contrary to what his scientists recommend, then I don't think political awareness is sufficient," another scientist, who also spoke anonymously, said.

The scientist added that while a range of measures have been formulated to address some of Namibia's challenges "many of them are paper dragons and are not implemented, are not implementable, or stagnate and end up on some bureaucrat's desk."

The scientist added that political and public awareness on the deeply troubling state of the ocean is low.

Yet the lack of institutional integrity and strength, as well as transparency, is crippling the sector, scientists agree.

"Institutional weaknesses are at the heart of the problem. There is little transparency in the entire fisheries management process. Stock assessment data is kept out of the public domain. The methodology used and thus quality of data cannot be assessed and discussed openly. The process of deciding quotas for the different species is also kept out of the public domain," Brown said.

Brown underlined that the fisheries scientists have "insufficient influence" and instead "commercial fishing companies have far too much influence, compounded by political decisions not based on scientific advice".

Threat of extinction ignored

The impact of collapsed pilchard stock is most obviously reflected in coastal and marine seabirds, the scientists explained.

The African penguin population in Namibia has declined by more than 50% in the last three penguin generations, mainly because of a loss of the pilchard prey base.

The Bank cormorant has also experienced a greater than 50% decline in population in Namibia, for the same reason.

The Cape cormorant is declining, and the Cape gannet, over its last three generations, has declined by a massive 84%, mainly related to availability of food – pilchards.

“These trends would be similarly reflected in many aquatic species in the oceans, which are less easy to monitor, including some commercial fish species,” Brown explained.

A crucial difference could be made with the application of environmental impact assessments to the fishing industry, Brown said.

Currently, these are not applied but their implementation, as well as enforcing the fishing sector to have environmental management plans, could address several issues.

“We need to see a total reform of the way that the marine ecosystem and the marine fisheries in Namibia are managed,” he concluded.

He added that the country needs to establish a coastal and marine council, comprising of multiple agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, to provide oversight and to ensure that appropriate, transparent processes are in place.

“Until we do, our marine ecosystem will continue to be mismanaged, to the detriment of our economy and environment.”

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