



Risky fuelling at sea condemned

Works ministry moves to allay fears

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Red flags have been raised after the works and transport ministry gave the green light for a fuelling operation at sea which took place close to Lüderitz within Namibia's most sensitive marine wildlife area.

The ministry says offshore bunkering (refuelling) has taken place for more than 20 years without pollution incidents in Namibia's marine protected areas (MPAs), including the Namibian Islands Marine Protected Area (Nimpa) and are only condoned with stringent risk assessments and safety standards in place.

A mining vessel, the MV Ya Toivo, was spotted being refuelled this month within the Nimpa, Namibia's only MPA, with the permission of the directorate of maritime affairs (DMA) within the works ministry, although the owners of the vessel have denied that the refuelling took place there.

This is the second refuelling of the MVA Ya Toivo that took place in the MPA and Nimpa this year, according to reports.

The Namibia Chamber of Environment's (NCE's) Christopher Brown and other scientists warn such operations always carry a risk and should only be condoned under exceptional circumstances.

"Bunkering at sea is a risky business, prone to accidents. This is why there is legislation to regulate this."

Brown said although the vessel in question does not use heavy fuels "this cannot be dismissed as benign in the marine environment. Diesel is toxic to marine life, including seabirds."

Brown stressed permits should only be issued "for unusual circumstances, not for routine convenience".

According to the works ministry, "some large mining vessels, including the Ya Toivo, whose mining licences are in the MPA, regularly request permission for transferring fuel at their mining sites, mainly because of operational reasons."

Ministry spokesperson Julius Ngweda said this is for example, to "avoid interrupting mining activities and thereby maximising mining effort".

Brown said the NCE considered the issuing of permits to refuel within the usually 50 nautical mile off-limit refuelling zone "highly irresponsible".

He described the Nimpa as one of the richest and most vulnerable coastal biodiversity sites in Namibia.

The MPA is listed as an ecologically and biologically significant marine area under the Convention on Biological Diversity, of which Namibia is a signatory.

High-profile species include the critically endangered Cape gannet, the endangered African penguin which breeds on Halifax Island, and the endangered black cormorant.

While legislation prohibits offshore bunkering at sea within 50 nautical miles (about 93 kilometres) off the coast to protect sensitive marine areas, the DMA may grant permission for offshore bunkering under certain circumstances.



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/asset/fuelling-at-sea-condemned2018-12-030.jpg>)
RISKY: Photos from May show refuelling taking place close to ecologically sensitive islands near Lüderitz. PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

The off-limit zone is there for a “good reason,” Brown explained, as any spills at or beyond this distance from the coast is extremely unlikely to reach and pollute the protected marine wildlife areas.

“These distances and the likely movement of oils in the sea were modelled as part of the detailed studies undertaken at the time of early off-shore oil exploration in that area.”

Not wise

Ngweda said offshore bunkering which has been taking place for two decades near Lüderitz and within the MPA without incident is due mainly “because of the effectiveness of the international and local regimes governing offshore bunkering operations.”

He said most mining vessels have mining inspectors on board to enforce mining and other laws, including those related to the protection of the marine and coastal environment.

But scientists argue that mining inspectors are not adequately trained to deal with pollution or ecological risks and are not even familiar with the concept of MPAs.

The ministry's assurances that ministry officials may also be assigned to observe bunkering operations from start to finish, and through technical systems, was dismissed as taking place rarely, if at all.

Ngweda concluded that permits would not be issued for operations deemed too risky and each application is considered on its own merits.

Questions

Brown says another concern is the transport ministry's lack of consultation with relevant stakeholders, including the ministry of environment and the fisheries ministry.

Environment ministry spokesperson Romeo Muyunda confirmed last week that bunkering in Namibian waters is a listed activity which requires an environmental clearance certificate.

He said the environment ministry was investigating whether such a certificate had been issued for the bunkering operation.

'Inaccurate'

The IMDH Group, the owner of MV Ya Toivo, denied that the bunkering operation took place close to or within a protected area.

The group's Paolo Esposito said reports of the vessel's position near Halifax and within the Nimpa were “factually incorrect.”

He said the operation took place “beyond the 10 nautical miles from the shoreline”.

However, online tracking systems confirm the location of the Ya Toivo during the operation on 26 November was 26°36'5.11”S, 14°55'30.97”E, approximately 16 km from Halifax Island and 16 km from Dias Point, unless the on-board positioning systems were out of order.

“Any operations conducted by our vessels follow strict environmental procedures and reporting, which are approved, amongst others, by the Namibian authorities and the international classification society,” Esposito underlined.

He said operations were always “conducted in accordance with international anti-spillage best practice prevailing regulations at all times. Thus, no risk is posed to the marine environment due to the equipment deployed during operations and the highly skilled personnel undertaking the task”.

Brown said the NCE recommends that no bunkering should be permitted, as per legislation, within the 50 nautical mile limit, except for "extremely specific and justifiable reasons".

The NCE further said exceptions should be granted only in close consultation with relevant stakeholders and strict monitoring guidelines in place.

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