

Refuelling under scrutiny as SA penguins hit by oil spill

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African penguin. Picture: AFP

MAX MATAVIRE

St Croix Island, South Africa – Rangers in wet suits have been searching for oil-tarred penguins in shallow water around St Croix Island off the South African coast as a refuelling spill highlights conservationists' fears over pollution.

Experts said an unknown number of penguins had been affected on the rocky, uninhabited island, which is home to the largest breeding colony of endangered African penguins in the world.

A Liberian-flagged ship spewed between 200 and 400 litres of oil into the sea off Port Elizabeth during 'bunkering' re-fuelling – the process of filling a ship with fuel from another vessel.

The small-scale leakage from the bulk carrier MV Chrysanthi vessel at dawn on Saturday was the second oil spill in the environmentally-sensitive area in three years.

"This is exactly the concern with offshore 'bunkering' that we have been voicing concerns about," Stacey Webb, of the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB) charity, told AFP.

"The danger is not over yet. Penguins forage up to 100 kilometres (60 miles) away from the islands (St Croix Island and Bird Island), so they could run into the spill out at sea."

About 20 penguins covered in black sludge have been rescued by national parks rangers so far.

The weekend spill follows one in August 2016 when about 100 birds were affected by a smaller “bunkering” spill.

“Bunkering” only started in Ngqura port, part of Algoa Bay, in 2016, with the shipping industry promoting it as an economic boost for the area.

Plans to develop the bay into a major re-fuelling hub for international vessels have generated widespread controversy, with conservationists and the tourism sector saying the risk of pollution is too high.

African penguins, which are only found in South Africa and Namibia, are also known as jackass penguins for their braying call.

They re-colonised a beach near Cape Town in the 1980s, and have since become a major tourist attraction.

But there are only 50 000 mature African penguins alive, according to the UN conservation red list.

“Is the money generated out of 'bunkering' in Algoa Bay worth putting the survival of a species at risk?” asked Jack Peeton, manager of Raggy Charters, a tour operator which organises whale watching and deep-sea excursions.

He said he had taken tourists to St Croix Island on Monday, only to be “greeted by the grim sight of rangers loading penguins covered with thick oil into small boats.”

Port Elizabeth tourism consultant Peter Myles said the area plays a unique role in the penguins' survival.

“Bunkering' in Algoa Bay has been a point of discussion, with concerns raised over regulation,” he told AFP.

“There are significant environmental risk factors, and St Croix Island supports the largest breeding population of the African penguin on the planet.”

The government described the weekend spill as a “tier-one incident” that did not require national intervention, though it added that strong winds were hampering operations.

The South African Marine Safety Authority (Samsa) has launched aerial surveillance to determine the extent of the oil spill, which is drifting out to sea rather than onshore.

Neville Noble of Samsa told AFP that bunkering was in line with government policy to opening up the ocean economy under the so-called Operation Phakisa, and that operators underwent “a strict auditing process”.

– Nampa-AFP