

Media Release

It is estimated that approximately four million tonnes of fish are harvested off the east coast of Africa every year and that fisheries exports alone contribute US\$943 million to the economies of the region. Yet, while scientists believe that less than 50% of marine species off the east coast of Africa have been described, human activities - such as pollution, over-fishing and environmental degradation – seriously threaten the region’s coastal and marine resources.

This is the reality facing the representatives of nine countries who met in Durban, South Africa, last week to begin the process of intensively studying and, in time, collectively managing the marine resources of East Africa and its small island states.

Representatives of Comoros, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa and Tanzania met at the Oceanographic Research Institute in Durban for the first Steering Committee meeting and Inception Workshop of the Agulhas Somali Large Marine Ecosystems (ASCLME) project.

The five-year ASCLME project is centred on the two large marine ecosystems (LMEs) of the Western Indian Ocean region. These are the Somali Current LME in the north and the Agulhas Current LME in the south. An estimated 56 million people, living in the nine countries of the region, are dependent on the resources of the two LMEs.

Over the next five years, the nine countries will work together through the ASCLME project to:

- gather new and important information about the complex ocean currents and how they interact with and influence the climate, biodiversity and economies of the Western Indian Ocean region;
- document the environmental threats- such as marine pollution and declining fisheries- that are faced by the countries of the region;
- develop a strategic programme of action to deal with environmental threats;

- strengthen scientific and management expertise, with a view to introducing an ecosystem approach to managing the living marine resources of the Western Indian Ocean region.

“The Agulhas and Somali currents have a major influence on the societies and economies of the Western Indian Ocean region,” says Dr David Vousden, Director of the ASCLME Project, “yet there are large gaps in our understanding of their oceanographic processes, biodiversity and other fundamentals.”

Over the next five years, researchers affiliated to the ASCLMEs project will embark on a series of well-coordinated oceanographic research cruises in an attempt to gather information about the oceanography and living marine resources of the two LMEs. The coastal resources and their critical link to the well-being of coastal communities will also come under intense scrutiny.

Research findings will lay the groundwork for the nine countries of the region to develop a strategy for collectively managing the resources on which their people and economies depend.

“The countries of the region have already recognised their collective responsibility for their shared marine resources and voiced their support for this regional initiative,” says Dr Vousden.

The ASCLME project is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme. Funding of \$12.2 million has been secured from the GEF for the duration of the project which is being hosted in Grahamstown, South Africa, by the South African Institute of Aquatic Biodiversity. The UNDP country office in Mauritius is acting as the lead country office for the project.

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