



## Media release

### **NGOs and scientists welcome stakeholder engagement on fishing restrictions around important African Penguin colonies**

**Johannesburg and Cape Town, 10 August 2021:** The African Penguin is in crisis and, without urgent management intervention, Africa is in danger of losing its only penguin species, one of only 18 penguin species globally.

BirdLife South Africa, the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB), and WWF South Africa therefore welcome an announcement from the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment (DFFE) that it is finalising a stakeholder engagement process around proposals to restrict fishing close to African Penguin breeding colonies.

In light of the urgency of the situation, and in concert with scientists from the University of Cape Town's Department of Biological Sciences, Nelson Mandela University, and the University of Exeter, we believe that all possible science-based conservation interventions should be implemented to avoid the extinction of Africa's only penguin species

The African Penguin has been listed as Endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) since 2010, and each year the population reaches new record lows. In the last 30 years alone, South Africa has lost 73% of its penguins. If the current population decline continues, the African Penguin could be functionally extinct on South Africa's west coast in 14 years. This means that there will be too few penguins in the wild to maintain sustainable population levels.

The scientific evidence indicates that reduced prey availability is a major driver of the recent decline of the African Penguin population. Other threats to the species include oiling, predation, extreme weather events, poor breeding habitat, disturbance (including noise from shipping traffic) and disease. Many of these are currently being addressed by colony managers, rehabilitation centres, scientists and other groups, under the African Penguin Biodiversity Management Plan.

African Penguins feed primarily on sardines and anchovies which are also caught by the purse-seine fishery, the largest fishery by tonnage in South Africa. When fish stocks are low, resource competition makes it even harder for penguins to find enough food, particularly when they remain close to their colonies and their chicks when breeding.

To understand whether fishing has impacted the African Penguin, fishing around four breeding colonies was temporarily restricted in a ground-breaking project in 2008. The aim of this experiment

was to determine if a closure to purse-seine fishing in a 20 km radius around African Penguin breeding colonies would have a measurable effect on the birds. Despite the fact that the experimental closures did not coincide with the penguins' breeding cycle, the experiment showed significant beneficial effects for penguins, including for chick survival, an important factor contributing to population growth.

Since the experimental closures were implemented, the rate of population decline slowed from approximately 7% to 5% per annum. This is despite the waters around these islands only being restricted to fishing during half this time (on three-year open and closed cycles). Population projection models have also indicated that island closures would meaningfully contribute to reducing the extinction risk of African Penguins. These results have been contested by some stakeholders and this has therefore delayed a long-term management decision on the implementation of closures around major African Penguin colonies.

On 8 August 2021, DFFE issued a statement indicating that stakeholder meetings will take place this week to discuss their proposals to address impacts of reduced food availability on the decline in the breeding populations of the African Penguin. Proposals on the table from the department's technical task team include limiting fishing around six penguin colonies. The colonies identified for intervention are at Dassen Island, Robben Island, Stony Point, Dyer Island, St. Croix Island and Bird Island. This would be a watershed moment for African Penguin conservation as these six colonies collectively hold 88% of South Africa's penguin population. Restricting fishing in these areas will give breeding African Penguins respite from competition for scarce food resources.

While crucially important for the conservation of the African Penguin, this meeting is also an important step towards implementing a more sustainable approach to fisheries management, referred to as the "Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries". Adequately accounting for the food requirements of top predators such as penguins is critical to maintaining the functioning of South Africa's marine ecosystems as well as ensuring livelihoods linked to South Africa's marine resources. These closures would also benefit the Cape Gannet and Cape Cormorant, two other Endangered seabird species that rely on sardines and anchovies as prey. The largest South African colonies of both species are located at sites being considered in the proposals around which fishing may be limited.

The African Penguin is considered by the IUCN Penguin Specialist Group to be one of three priority species globally that need urgent conservation action – and the outcome of these deliberations will be critical for their future.

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