

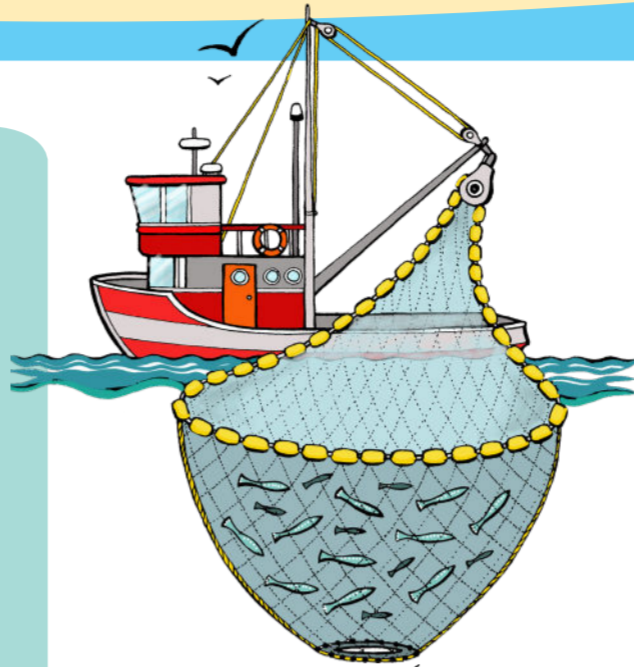
CAPE GANNET

CURRENT THREATS

VILLAIN OR VICTIM?

Gannets have long been blamed for eating too many fish. The truth is that gannets are the victims of overfishing by commercial fisheries. Cape Gannets naturally forage in areas where **purse-seine** vessels target anchovies (*Engraulis encrasicolus*) and sardines (*Sardinops sagax*), along the coast of Namibia and South Africa. Thanks to overfishing, these areas experienced a devastating drop in fish stocks, which led to the total collapse of the sardine fishery in Namibia in the 1960s and 70s.

This **scarcity** of food has forced adult gannets to forage further from their breeding colonies for their preferred prey, which in turn has led to chicks being fed less frequently and to a higher death rate of chicks from starvation. The reduced breeding success has resulted in a crash in gannet population numbers on the west coast of southern Africa.



FUN FACT

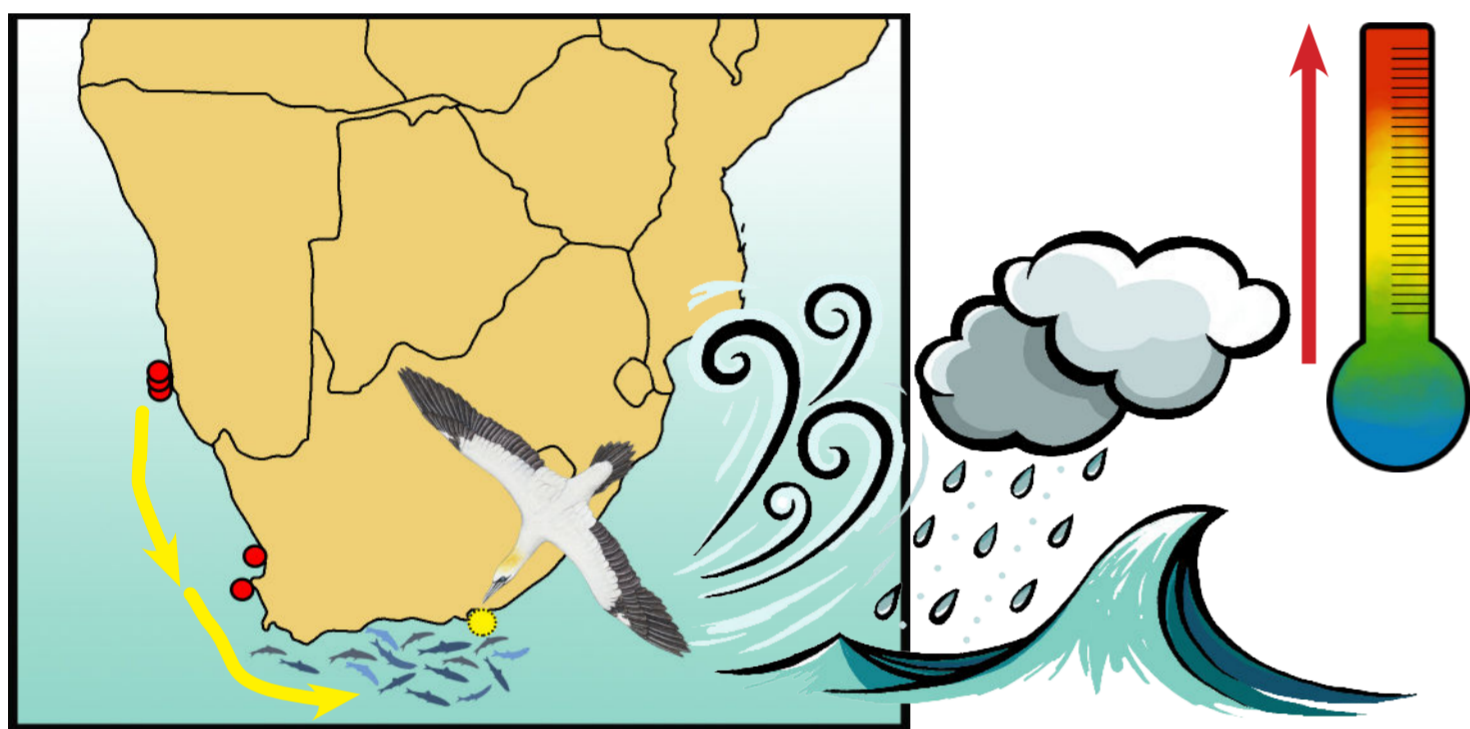
What does it mean if someone calls you a gannet?
It is slang for 'a **gluttonous** or greedy person'.



JUNK FOOD

The shortage of their preferred energy-rich prey (anchovies and sardines) is increasingly driving adult gannets to scavenge for fish scraps discarded from trawlers targeting deeper dwelling fish such as hake (*Merluccius* spp.). While hake may be adequate as a diet for an adult bird, it is not sufficiently **nutritious** a meal for breeding adults feeding growing, ravenous chicks. This low quality diet has resulted in a rapid drop in the health and breeding success of gannets.

Sadly, the hungry adult gannets are also often caught up in the nets and heavy warp cables of the trawl fishing equipment as they try to scavenge the netted fish and many drown as a result.



TOO MANY EGGS IN ONE BASKET

Because of the effects of **global warming**, the sea surface temperature is rising. This has resulted in pelagic fish moving from the west coast to the southern and eastern coasts of South Africa. A **scarcity** of food along the west coast has led to population declines of gannet colonies in Namibia and the west coast of South Africa. However, as many gannets have followed this movement of fish, the colony at Bird Island (Algoa Bay), on the east coast, is increasing in size. The worrying result is that over 70% of the world's population of Cape Gannets is now found in one area, which puts the species at risk should there be a major **storm, oil spill** or **avian disease outbreak** in this region.



OIL SLICK

In 1983, a large oil spill resulted in the oiling of about 5000 Cape Gannets. Smaller spills from vessels that illegally clean their oil tanks at sea, and fish factories discharging fish oil into the sea, have led to smaller numbers of birds being affected.



A SINKING SHIP

Global warming is also causing sea levels to rise. Extreme weather events are predicted to become more frequent. Low level islands, where gannets breed, are vulnerable to getting swamped by large waves and heavy rainfall. Nests may be washed away, chicks drowned, and their breeding habitat flooded. Increased summer temperatures may also cause adult birds and eggs to overheat which may lead to gannets abandoning their nests.

UNDER ATTACK

The Cape Fur Seal (*Arctocephalus pusillus*) is known to hunt Cape Gannet fledglings and even attack adult birds. The Bird Island colony at Lamberts Bay was totally abandoned in 2005 after repeated attacks of adult gannets by a small number of fur seals. Kelp Gulls (*Larus dominicanus*) and Great White Pelicans (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*) are **opportunistic scavengers** of eggs and small chicks, hunting on the vulnerable edges of colonies where gannets are more exposed to predation.

References:

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