



*Lonely Penguin by Andries Janse Van Rensburg*

## **African Penguin newly classified as ‘critically endangered’ as breeding pairs fall below 10,000**

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- [The International Union for Conservation of Nature \[IUCN\]](#) has uplisted the African Penguin from Endangered to Critically Endangered, underscoring the species' extremely high risk of extinction in the wild.
- The bird has already lost 97% of its population and could be extinct in less than 4,000 days if nothing changes.
- Among other threats, commercial purse-seine fishing is competing with penguins for sardines and anchovies, their main source of food, leaving them hungry and making it harder to breed.
- Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds [[SANCCOB](#)] and [BirdLife South Africa](#) have initiated landmark litigation against the South African government to enforce greater protection of this species.
- The public can advocate for the African Penguin by signing an OnlyOne petition [here](#), and watch a campaign video narrated by ocean conservationist, Zandi Ndhlovu [here](#).

**NEWS, CAPE TOWN, 28 OCTOBER:** The African Penguin, with its distinctive black-and-white tuxedo and playful nature, is a cherished symbol in South Africa and around the world. Yet despite its popularity, the species has been uplisted to Critically Endangered by the IUCN, revealing it is one step away from becoming extinct in the wild. The bird is the first penguin species (of the 18 species globally) to meet the criteria for this classification.

SANCCOB and BirdLife South Africa, with the support of ocean conservation charity [Blue Marine](#), are urging the South African government and the international community to take immediate action to save the African Penguin.

Faced with numerous threats, a primary cause of the African Penguin's decline is a lack of available food due to climate change, made worse by competition from commercial fishing around its breeding colonies, which impacts the species' survival and breeding success. While there are existing no-take zones where commercial fishing is prohibited to help the penguins better access the fish they feed on, primarily sardines and anchovies, [research](#) by seabird scientists has demonstrated that these zones are currently inadequate for penguin conservation.

### **The Red List rings the alarm louder for urgent action**

The IUCN Red List is the international "Gold Standard" tool for measuring species extinction risk; to date, 163,040 species have been assessed, of which 45,321 are threatened with extinction.

SANCCOB, BirdLife South Africa, and Blue Marine have long been raising the alarm for better protection of the African Penguin. However, the reclassification to Critically Endangered marks a crucial juncture in the species' future. While the Red List indicates the detrimental status of global biodiversity, it also points towards an urgent need for solutions, and the prioritisation of collaborative, cross-sector action before it's too late.

The current commercial fishery no-take zones in South Africa surround six African Penguin colonies that represent 76% of the global African Penguin population. Yet research finds that these zones fail to sufficiently protect important feeding areas for the penguins, forcing them to compete with commercial fisheries for food.

Scientists such as BirdLife South Africa's Dr Alistair McInnes and the University of Exeter's Dr Richard Sherley recommend expanded and achievable no-take zones that provide more substantial benefits to penguins without causing disproportionately high costs to the purse-seine fishing industry.

### **International support is needed**

SANCCOB and BirdLife South Africa have united to take legal action to enforce greater protection of the species. Launched by the [Biodiversity Law Centre](#) earlier this year, the two non-profit organisations have instituted a case against the office of the South African Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, to challenge the Minister's "biologically meaningless" island closures to purse-seine fishing around key African Penguin colonies.

The legal action seeks to substitute the existing commercial fishery no-take zones with alternative zones designed using an internationally-recognised process that will better align them to the African Penguins' important feeding areas, while minimising the impacts on the purse-seine fishing industry.

Meanwhile, the international community can help push governments to enact the changes needed to safeguard the species by [signing the OnlyOne petition](#) created by SANCCOB, BirdLife South Africa and Blue Marine.

The African Penguin also contributes to ecotourism and the local economy. A new [socio-economic report](#) found the total value of Boulders penguin colony and all other penguin colonies was estimated to be in the considerable range of R613 - 2702 million per year.

**Nicky Stander, Head of Conservation, SANCCOB** said "Seeing a 97% loss in African Penguin populations is devastating and knowing they are now officially 'Critically Endangered' is a sobering thought. In just over a decade, they could no longer exist, which not only has an impact on our marine ecosystem, but also on South Africa's economy and ecotourism. These animals are a key indicator of the wider ecological health of our ocean and are beloved worldwide. We cannot wait any longer for change."

**Dr Richard Sherley, Senior Lecturer, Ecology and Conservation, University of Exeter** states “The African Penguin’s uplisting to Critically Endangered highlights a much bigger problem with the health of our environment. Despite being well-known and studied, these penguins are still facing extinction, showing just how severe the damage to our ecosystems has become. If a species as iconic as the African Penguin is struggling to survive, it raises the question of how many other species are disappearing without us even noticing. We need to act now—not just for penguins, but to protect the broader biodiversity that is crucial for the planet’s future.”

**Alistair McInnes, Seabird Conservation Programme Manager, BirdLife South Africa** points out that “The availability of sardine and anchovy is the key driver of the African Penguin population and the sustainable management of purse-seine fishing, such as the implementation of effective no-take zones around the last remaining large colonies, is a critical intervention to help conserve this species. If we don’t act timeously we could lose Africa’s only penguin species within our lifetime.”

**Jo Coumbe, Communications Director, Blue Marine** said “The plight of the African Penguin, now critically endangered, is heartbreaking. Losing the bird isn’t just about losing a species, it’s a stark warning of the tragic impacts on biodiversity and the health of our ocean.”

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#### **About SANCCOB**

[SANCCOB](#) is registered as a non-profit organisation and public benefit organisation in terms of the laws of South Africa, operating from two facilities in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape. SANCCOB’s primary objective is to reverse the decline of seabird populations – flagship species being the endangered African Penguin – through a multi-faceted conservation approach that includes rehabilitation and release of seabirds, implementation and consultancy of preparedness and response in the event of oil spills affecting marine wildlife, carrying out integral scientific, research, provision of in-situ support to conservation managing authorities, skills development, and public awareness via environmental education.

#### **About BirdLife South Africa**

[BirdLife South Africa](#) is a registered non-profit, public benefit organisation dedicated to bird conservation in South Africa. BirdLife South Africa strives to conserve birds, their habitats, and biodiversity through scientifically based programmes, supporting the sustainable and equitable use of natural resources. Seabirds are one of the most threatened group of birds in the world. BirdLife South Africa has a dedicated seabird programme which focuses on ensuring sustainable management of important forage stocks, and protecting endangered coastal seabirds. In collaboration with other committed conservation organisations, BirdLife South Africa is working tirelessly to reverse the decline of the African Penguin.

#### **About Blue Marine**

[Blue Marine](#) is a UK ocean conservation charity set up in 2010 by some of the team behind the award-winning documentary film ‘The End of the Line’. Blue Marine aims to restore the ocean to health by addressing overfishing, one of the world’s biggest environmental problems. The charity is dedicated to creating marine reserves, restoring vital habitats and establishing models of sustainable fishing. Its mission is to see 30 per cent of the ocean under effective protection by 2030 and the other 70 per cent responsibly managed.