



MEDIA RELEASE

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Albatross deaths down by 99% in local trawl fishery

Cape Town, 30 April 2014. Conservation success stories are hard to find. Rarely are they the result of simple, elegant solutions that are truly win-win. Now BirdLife South Africa has demonstrated just such a good news outcome. Accidental seabird deaths during fishing is the single greatest threat facing many seabird populations. Albatrosses, in particular, are under extreme pressure with 15 of the world's 22 albatross species threatened with extinction. This month BirdLife South Africa staff and collaborators have published a 7-year study, showing that the hake trawl fishery in South Africa has reduced albatross deaths by 99%!

In recent years, deep-sea trawl fisheries have been identified as a major cause of accidental seabird deaths. Trawlers use large nets, held in the water by thick cables, to capture fish living on the sea floor. Seabirds, especially albatrosses and petrels, are attracted in their thousands to the trawlers when fish offal (unwanted heads and guts) is discarded from the onboard processing factory. While scavenging, seabirds are vulnerable to becoming entangled with the cables, and being dragged underwater and drowning.

In 2004 the hake trawl fishery became the first fishery in Africa to obtain Marine Stewardship Certification (MSC). MSC certification ensures that fished stocks remain stable and healthy, that ecosystem-wide impacts are minimised and not significant, and that there is continued monitoring and compliance to prescribed fishing regulations. As a condition of certification, the fishery had to assess the risk of seabird bycatch. They discovered that each year around 10 000 seabirds (70% of which were albatrosses) were being killed accidentally. BirdLife South Africa recommended the use of a single measure – called a bird scaring line, to address this problem, and in collaboration with fishing companies they got onboard and conducted scientific research into the effectiveness of the measure. Now their data, collected over five years, has been published in the international, scientific journal *Animal Conservation*, and shows a 90% reduction in seabird deaths and 99% reduction in albatross deaths since 2006.

A trawler's bird scaring line consists of about 30 m of strong rope, with 5-10 paired streamer lines of lighter, visible material, attached at 2-m intervals. The main line is tied to the back of the moving trawler, with a road cone at the seaward end providing drag that tensions the line and keeps it aloft behind the vessel, usually parallel with the trawl cables. The paired streamer lines hang downwards from the mainline and distract and confuse birds enough to keep them away

from the trawlers' cables. The lines are built through a collaborative project between BirdLife South Africa and the Ocean View Association for Persons with Disabilities (OVAPD) with sponsorship from Total South Africa. A team of ten individuals with various intellectual and physical disabilities from OVAPD can build a line in under an hour. These lines are then sold to the fishing industry to bring in a small income for the OVAPD centre. "This project is very important to us especially to Aubrey, an ex-fisherman who came to the centre after an accident. It takes him back to his fishing days. The team assemble the lines with great pride and thanks to our contribution there will be albatrosses in the future", says Deborah Gonsalves, manager of the OVAPD centre.

"We've worked closely with this fishery since the early 2000s to demonstrate that avoiding seabird bycatch is good for business and for the environment. Moreover it's relatively easy given the right tools." said Bronwyn Maree, Albatross Task Force Leader for BirdLife South Africa. "Bird scaring lines have now become part of everyday life at sea and fishermen no longer resist their use" she continued. "This fishery has shown that through a collaborative approach with industry, government and NGOs it is possible to effectively eliminate seabird mortalities within trawl fisheries." said Francois Kuttel, Chairperson of the Responsible Fisheries Alliance (RFA). The RFA is a group of like-minded organisations which promote responsible fishing practices, influence policy, develop the skills of fishers and managers and promote high quality research.

BirdLife South Africa attributes much of the success to the collaborative approach that was engendered through the fisheries' MSC certification. "This fishery should be commended on their approach and support which enabled such huge successes to be achieved in a relatively short period of time, says Martin Purves, Southern Africa Programme Manager of the Marine Stewardship Council.

The research will be available from 30 April at <http://doi.wiley.com/10.1111/acv.12126>. The full citation is:

Maree, BA, Wanless RM, Fairweather TP, Sullivan BJ & Yates O. 2014. Significant reductions in mortality of threatened seabirds in a South African trawl fishery. *Animal Conservation* 17: published online

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Notes for the editor:

1. The mission of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the enjoyment, conservation, study and understanding of wild birds and their habitats. BirdLife South Africa is the largest non-profit bird conservation organization in the country.
2. BirdLife South Africa contact details: Lewis House, 239 Barkston Drive, Blairgowrie, P.O. Box 515, Randburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, Tel. +27-11-7891122, Fax. +27-11-7895188, e-mail address: info@birdlife.org.za, website: www.birdlife.org.za
3. BirdLife International has been at the forefront of attempts to reduce the incidental capture and mortalities of albatrosses in trawl and longline fisheries globally. In 2006 they established the Albatross Task Force (ATF), with BirdLife South Africa hosting the first team to have been established. The ATF works with fishermen and government to find innovative solutions to seabird bycatch.
4. The South Africa hake trawl fishery is certified by the Marine Stewardship Council (www.msc.org) which certified sustainable fisheries based on stock status, ecosystem effects and monitoring and compliance.

5. The Responsible Fisheries Alliance (RFA) is a non-profit body made up of like-minded organisations working together to ensure that healthy marine ecosystems underpin a robust seafood industry in southern Africa. Members of the RFA are BirdLife South Africa, Worldwide Fund for Nature – South Africa, Irvin and Johnson Limited, Oceana Group Limited, Sea Harvest (Pty) Limited and Viking Fishing Group. This group of organisations continues to share and contribute resources and time towards the sharing of information, expertise and competencies to positively affect responsible fishing while influencing policy and fishery governance. (www.rfalliance.org.za). The majority of fishing vessels within the South Africa Deep Sea Trawl Association form part of the Responsible Fisheries Alliance.
6. The most widely used technique to avoid seabird bycatch is the “tori line” or bird scaring line, invented by a Japanese longline captain. Use of bird scaring lines is mandatory in South Africa.
7. Total South Africa has funded the bird scaring line construction project since 2009.
8. Ocean View Association for Persons with Disabilities (OVAPD) is a non-profit organisation (NPO 003-115) initiated in 1974. The group started with six members but now comprises more than 60 individuals who are physically and intellectually challenged. The aim of the centre is to generate work opportunities, provide training and occupation for adults with disabilities who are unable to end the open labour market.
9. Royalty-free images available on request