



It's Time to See to **Our Seas**

The Importance of Ocean Conservation

Text: Mvelase Peppetta
Images © iStockphoto.com

Conserving our oceans is everyone's concern and every little bit counts.



IN 2012, BP was forced to pay \$4.5 billion in fines and other fees – the largest settlement of its kind – as a consequence of 2010’s Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. The images of oil-slicked and dead marine-life, and the fire on the oil-rig itself, left an indelible mark on the memories of those who witnessed the disaster.

Here in South Africa we have not been spared. The first large oil spill that affected our coastline was near Cape Town in 1994 and led to the deaths of thousands of seabirds. More recently, in June 2000, the MV Treasure ran aground and some 1,300 tons of oil endangered our coastline. That spill, classified as South Africa’s worst environmental disaster, led to more than 20,000 of the endangered African Penguin being covered in oil, and more than 2,000 dying.

South Africans rallied en-masse to donate or volunteer in efforts to capture and clean oiled penguins, and limit whatever damage they could. On a broader scale, local and global reactions to these kinds of disasters shows just how deeply we are starting to value our oceans.

One unfortunate downside, however, is that our focus on these high-profile incidents allows us to either ignore or be ignorant of how imperilled our oceans are on a daily basis. Industrial actions like overfishing, deep-sea mining, or oil spills, but also our own unwitting actions, are causing as much potential damage to our life-giving oceans.

For example, even though prawns are not endangered, the method used to catch them in the wild, bottom-trawling, is known to be massively destructive to marine-life. Bottom trawling scoops all living organisms off the bottom of the ocean along with the prawns. As much as 75 % of these captured creatures are then thrown back into the ocean, either dead or dying. This has led to prawns being placed in the “Orange – Think Twice” category of seafood by the Southern African Sustainable Seafood Initiative (SASSI). As SASSI explains, amongst other reasons, a species can end up in this category “because the fishing or farming method poses harm to the environment”.

However, governments, to their

credit, are doing some work to assist in safeguarding our oceans.

In February 2016, South African Environmental Affairs Minister Edna Molewa announced the intention to create a network of 22 new proposed Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Once legislated, the network will create about 70,000 km² of protected marine area. To provide breeding grounds for fish and refuge for endangered species such as turtles, MPAs are a tool that governments can deploy to restrict fishing practices or declare “no-take zones”.

In the US, laws – which will come into effect in July 2017 – have been passed to ban microbeads. Microbeads are another example of how we unwittingly endanger our oceans. These tiny plastic particles are commonly found as exfoliants in our cosmetic products or toothpastes. They are now being banned because research shows that microbeads, which fish mistake for food, not only endanger marine life, but humans as well. The pellets can harbour dangerous chemicals that potentially cause problems in the food chain, and our food supply.

More About Relate

Proceeds from the sale of each Relate Bracelet support not only the relevant causes, but also seniors in impoverished communities who supplement their pensions by threading the beads. Many of these senior citizens care for their grandchildren and others orphaned by HIV/Aids. Relate's younger staff members, who close and pack the bracelets, also benefit with training in their chosen fields to further their careers beyond Relate. To date, Relate Bracelets has raised more than R30 million for 80 causes, including EWT. The EWT Relate Bracelet is available online at www.shop.relate.org.za and www.ewtshop.co.za. Alternatively, they can be purchased at selected Trappers stores and Protea Hotels, the Two Oceans Aquarium in Cape Town, and the Tsitsikamma National Park.



But when it comes to environmental issues, government intervention alone cannot be the sole solution. In South Africa, several organisations also lobby and run programmes along the conservation front. The Endangered Wildlife Trust's (EWT) Source to Sea Programme is one such initiative.

This initiative was started in the mid-1990s. One of its first projects was to monitor the status of Humpbacked dolphins, a threatened species which is killed as a result of shark nets along the KwaZulu-Natal coast at what is deemed an unsustainable rate. Since mid-2006, the Source to Sea Programme has looked to develop a comprehensive programme to tackle some of the major threats to marine habitats and to promote healthy marine and coastal ecosystems.

Bridget Corrigan, EWT's Source to Sea Programme Manager, commenting on the ongoing problem of ocean pollutions says: "Marine pollution is a huge concern from a biodiversity and ecological standpoint, as well as from a human health aspect. Oceans are not dumping grounds and we

cannot consider dilution to be a solution."

Government programmes and NGO work aside, it's ultimately up to the general public to become more knowledgeable and more involved in conservation initiatives to make them as effective as possible. And "getting involved" need not mean finding organisations to volunteer with. Becoming more knowledgeable about the seafood we should or should not be eating is a good start. SASSI, at www.wwfsassi.co.za, provides resources such as apps or pocket cards to help with this.

In the case of supporting programmes like the EWT Source to Sea, Relate Bracelets – which is a 100 % nonprofit social enterprise – has identified the project as something that their organisation can get behind and help to create wide-spread recognition and funding for. The EWT Relate Bracelet is available online at www.shop.relate.org.za and www.ewtshop.co.za.

Relate Bracelets makes handmade beaded bracelets in support of more than 80 causes, one of which is the work that EWT does in ocean conservation. Lauren Gillis, Relate founder, says that when faced

with seemingly insurmountable issues like ocean conservation, it can be tempting for an individual to simply believe there is nothing they can do: "With the multitudes of issues out there, so many of them incredibly complex in nature, it makes sense that we feel that there's nothing that can be done. But it's that kind of thinking, I believe, that must be combated. In doing something as simple as purchasing an EWT Relate Bracelet, you are doing something to help tackle some of the major threats and to promote healthy marine and coastal ecosystems in Southern Africa."

Corrigan echoes Gillis' point by saying: "Eventually, our waste will catch up with us and make it impossible to ignore. Everyone has a role to play in reducing the scourge of marine waste." /

