

World Oceans Day: healthy oceans, healthy planet

THE ocean is an important food source for South Africans. Each year, the country consumes 312 million kilograms of seafood, half of which is locally caught, according to South African Sustainable Seafood Initiative.

This, a growing body of research shows, is how the pollutants we put each year into the oceans end up on our plates and in our bodies. The concentration of the pollutants is especially pronounced in coastal cities and towns, eThekweni being no exception. A recent World Bank report found that all but three of the municipality's 16 estuaries, including Durban Bay and Umgeni, are highly degraded. The effects of chemical and organic pollution from households and industries in the area has become so pronounced that it has done major damage to the habitat and marine life.

Two of the primary drivers of the degradation, according to the report, are the rapidly growing and concentrated urban population, and household and industrial waste being pumped into the rivers and ocean. "About 23% of estuaries

within the broader water management area that serves Durban are under significant pressure from discharges from waste-water treatment facilities, storm-water run-off, and discharges from industry," the report said.

eThekweni is not alone. The effects of human activity are becoming more visible in oceans everywhere, prompting governments worldwide to respond.

One of the UN's 17 proposed sustainable development goals is to conserve and use the oceans, seas and marine resources sustainably. To achieve this goal, the UN and governments around the world are setting themselves 14 targets, including "preventing and reducing marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution".

In the United States, a new law will come into effect in 2017 banning microbeads, which are tiny plastic particles used as exfoliants in cosmetic and sanitary products. These particles are now found in higher concentrations in the bodies of fish and other marine life. Even

in SA, as a recent study by the University of KwaZulu-Natal has revealed.

Microbeads are among the latest of what are known as persistent organic pollutants (microplastics and heavy metals) to be found in the bodies of marine animals. These pollutants enter the marine food chain at the bottom, in fish like the horse mackerel, filter feeders that mistake the microplastics for food. These smaller fish are then eaten by larger fish, contaminating them, too.

Eventually these pollutants can end up concentrated in apex predators such as tuna, according to Bridget Corrigan, manager of the Endangered Wildlife Trust's (EWT) Source to Sea Programme.

"Marine pollution is a huge concern from a human health perspective, given the amounts of seafood we consume. If we do not get a handle on it, we will not only endanger this important food source but also potentially our own health," she said.

Corrigan added that we have a duty in terms of biodiversity and ecology to



Microbeads, tiny plastic particles used as exfoliants in cosmetic and sanitary products, are now being found in higher concentrations in the bodies of fish and other marine life. **PHOTO: SUPPLIED**

protect our oceans.

EWT is one of several NGOs working in co-operation with local, provincial and national governments to do the country's part in conserving and pro-

tecting the oceans. Through its Operation Phakisa programme, the government is set to designate 21 new marine areas as protected, increasing the coverage from the current 0,5% to five per-

cent of the country's oceans.

Each of these areas will have specific management objectives to protect the livelihoods of people dependent on the ocean, to protect the coast and ensure the oceans continue to be an attractive place for marine tourism, according to the Department of Environmental Affairs. However, the government cannot protect the oceans alone.

Corrigan said that one of the contributions EWT is making is raising awareness of World Oceans Day today, a global day recognised by the UN to encourage everyone to celebrate the important role oceans play in our lives and to change our behaviours to protect and conserve them. This year's theme is healthy oceans, healthy planet — reminding us that oceans not only feed us, they produce most of the oxygen we breathe.

Given how much of the pollutants that end up in the ocean come from households, there are practical steps each person can take, according to Corrigan. These include avoiding products with microplastics, disposing of toxic

waste and motor oil safely, and reporting any marine pollution to the local Department of Environment Affairs and Tourism. Coastal communities, in particular, have an important role to play in ensuring that household waste does not end up contaminating the oceans.

Through a partnership with Relate Bracelets, a non-profit social enterprise, the EWT has also made it easier for each person to support the conservation of the world's oceans. Relate Bracelets makes handmade beaded bracelets in support of more than 80 causes, one of which is EWT. Proceeds from the sale of each bracelet support not only the relevant causes, but also senior citizens in impoverished communities who thread the beads. Relate Bracelets are recognisable by their signature "R" bead, a sign of their transparency and accountability.

Each handmade "Protect Our Oceans" bracelet sold supports the work of the EWT's Source to Sea Programme.

Ultimately, by protecting the oceans, we are protecting ourselves and future generations, Corrigan said. — Supplied.