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Marine and Coastal Conservation in South Africa: WESSA Position Statement

This position statement reflects the Vision, Mission, Aim, Style and Values of WESSA. The position statement should be used to guide WESSA (internally), as well as seek to position WESSA (externally), as an active and credible influence on environmental governance in South Africa.

A copy of this statement may be found on our website: www.wessa.org.za.

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Acknowledgements

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Please remember though that this is a dynamic document that will evolve over time. (The National Biodiversity Assessment (2011) for South Africa identified Estuaries as one of four main focal areas. This position statement does not address estuary management specifically, as this particular habitat is worthy of its own position statement.)

This position statement replaces all other WESSA position statements relating to marine and coastal position statements that pre-date this one.

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa has a varied, biologically diverse coastline that stretches for 3000kms; it includes numerous Islands; and the EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) which extends for 200 nautical miles out to sea. As much as 30% of the country's population resides along the coast. Our coast is also the preferred holiday destination for much of the rest of South Africa's population, as well as for our foreign tourists – the National Department of Tourism cites beach tourism as one of the strengths of our tourism sector. The coast supports the commercial fishing and mining industries too.

Nearly 60% of our inshore coastal ecosystems, which include estuaries, are threatened however, whilst 41% of our offshore ecosystems are under threat. Unfortunately our coast and oceans are beset by severe problems, not least of which is the abject poverty experienced by many inhabitants of our coastal cities, towns and villages. Development is the biggest threat to our coastline though. Outdated sewage infrastructure is a major concern within our coastal municipalities. Over-fishing and poaching occurs in our waters. Alien vegetation infestation is a major threat to coastal biodiversity. Widespread pollution occurs in various forms. The effect of climate change, epitomised by sea level rise and severe storms, is exacerbated by all of the aforementioned.

WESSA believes in a 4-pronged approach to marine and coastal conservation:

1. Objective 1: Co-operative Governance
2. Objective 2: Integrated ecosystem approach
3. Objective 3: Species of Special Concern
4. Objective 4: Environmental Education

POSITION STATEMENT

Objective 1: Co-operative Governance

POSITION STATEMENT ON INTEGRATED COASTAL MANAGEMENT

We as WESSA realise that although it is the responsibility of local government to manage their coastlines (as per the Integrated Catchment Management Act), in the spirit of co-operative governance we will endeavour to assist them as much as possible, through education and training and facilitation. WESSA strives to engage with stakeholders through: participation, transparency, accountability, effectiveness and the rule of law.

POSITION STATEMENT ON BLUE FLAG PROGRAMME

Being involved with the Blue Flag Programme – a voluntary programme - is one recommended strategy for local and district municipalities to address their coastal conservation objectives. More awareness of this programme is required in order to make people realise that environmental management is a core function of the Programme, with a focus now on Marine Protected Areas and a future focus on biodiversity conservation.

POSITION STATEMENT ON GREEN COAST PROGRAMME

WESSA acknowledges though that some parts of our coastline may never be Blue Flag Beaches, due to their remoteness or idyllic nature, for instance but we believe that the Green Coast programme will provide a National Standard for Conservation-and-Education-focused beaches, especially for those Municipalities not involved with the aforementioned.

POSITION STATEMENT ON WORKING FOR THE COAST

One of the means of alleviating the economic burden on Municipalities is through the utilisation of the Government's Working for the Coast (WftC) Programme – one of many in the Expanded Public Works Programme stable. WESSA believes

that this programme is critical to both social upliftment and coastal management in our country and it is our mandate to continue to co-operate with National Government to ensure the success of this Programme. This programme has only proven successful if properly managed - we call for a means of effective operational quality control for these Projects.

Objective 2: Integrated ecosystem approach

WESSA believes that the Marine and Coastal environments cannot be managed and conserved in isolation, as all rivers lead to the sea. Whatever occurs in a terrestrial context affects these habitats. These habitats are impacted upon from human activities in numerous forms, from the introduction of marine alien species to pollution.

POSITION STATEMENT ON WASTE WATER MANAGEMENT

South Africa's sewage infrastructure is mostly hopelessly outdated. National Government must provide support for the upgrade of this infrastructure as a matter of urgency. We believe that much more stringent control needs to be exercised by the relevant Departments over what waste is discharged into the marine environment via the many pipelines which are currently discharging not only sewage but industrial wastes. This is an aspect that the public of S.A. need to be aware of and get involved with to make a difference.

POSITION STATEMENT ON COASTAL DEVELOPMENT

Development of our coastline is a serious threat to coastal biodiversity, particularly to dune systems; coastal forests and coastal fynbos. WESSA promotes responsible management of our coastal resources, particularly through the Blue Flag Programme and KZN's volunteer programme Coastwatch.

POSITION STATEMENT ON SAND MINING

WESSA is very concerned about the volumes of sand being mined in our coastal rivers not only from the environmental degradation that is taking place at the mining sites but the amount of sand being extracted impacts directly on beach replenishment. There is a marked lack of control by the authorities over this aspect and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

POSITION STATEMENT ON OFFSHORE ACTIVITIES

Not enough is being done currently by National Government to monitor and control offshore activities, particularly mining and exploration for oil and gas, with potential impacts from seismic surveys and from production activities on habitats and species. These include localised habitat damage, physical disturbance and smothering, localised pollution impacts, alien and invasive alien species introductions and the risk of catastrophic pollution. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

POSITION STATEMENT ON MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

WESSA supports the establishment of a National network of ecologically representative Marine Protected Areas (MPA's) but calls for the creation of more MPA's in South Africa, particularly in the Northern Cape and Eastern Cape, where there are currently gaps and urgent needs, as identified in the National Biodiversity assessment of 2011. We believe in inter-organisational co-operation for more effective management of these conservation areas, and, in fact, the improved management of our existing MPA's.

POSITION STATEMENT ON POLLUTION

Plastic Pollution is one of the greatest threats to marine biodiversity conservation. Life as we know it would be impossible without plastic, so we believe in the responsible management hereof, through: 1. Responsible use; 2. Efficiency through re-use; and 3. Re-cycling. We call on National Government and Local Government to institute recycling programmes. We strive to reduce marine plastic debris and improve plastics management, through our beach recycling programmes and

membership of the National Marine Plastics Debris Committee, established by Plastics SA. WESSA supports the Fishing Line Bin Project, which is aimed at reducing coastal bird mortality and marine animal mortality from discarded fishing lines. There have been several oil spills throughout South Africa in the last 20 years and although our oil spill contingency measures have improved, recent spills have occurred from shipwrecks. WESSA calls for improved management of any shipwrecks on our shores.

POSITION STATEMENT ON COMMERCIAL FISHING

WESSA is aware of the social and economic benefits provided by the commercial fishing industry. There is however too much waste and too many non-targeted species experience mortality, from seabirds to sharks. WESSA calls for the Department of Environmental Affairs to drastically reduce the percentage of acceptable by-catch, from 10% to 1% ideally, with the ultimate aim of preventing by-catch through improved fishing techniques. Commercial Fisheries and their quotas must be monitored much more strictly - the Department's Observer Programme should allocate far more observers for this industry.

Objective 3: Species of Special Concern

WESSA chooses to focus on the conservation of certain species – usually keystone species, due to our current involvement in their management; their position in the ecosystem; or because of their conservation status (which is usually a consequence of human actions).

POSITION STATEMENT ON SHARK CONSERVATION

Sharks are one of the apex predators of our oceans and are therefore considered keystone species, so should enjoy greater conservation measures. This is not the case though, with more than 30% of open ocean species threatened. In South Africa, the Great white (*Carcharodon carcharias*) and Scalloped Hammerhead (*Sphyrna lewini*) are respectively vulnerable and endangered for instance.

We believe that the three greatest threats to sharks in South Africa are bycatch in commercial fishing; shark nets; and shark finning. WESSA realises that shark nets have been in place in KZN since the 1960's (when a spate of attacks occurred, ostensibly because this was the sad height of our whaling) and it will take a great deal of education before the general public is fully aware of the ecological destruction that shark nets cause - until then though WESSA calls for an alternative to shark nets. Drum lines are not a viable alternative and WESSA believes that the use of this method – which is akin to fishing for sharks – be stopped immediately. We support the Shark Spotters Programme that is implemented by the City of Cape Town as a viable means of monitoring their shark population.

Millions of sharks are killed each year globally for their fins. WESSA believes that this is a cruel, wasteful and unnecessary practice and calls for the immediate cessation of shark finning and improved anti-poaching measures to counter this illegal practice.

Shark-viewing as an ecotourism venture is becoming increasingly popular and is possible in three ways – sharkcage diving; free diving (specifically in KZN with Tiger sharks) and boat-based viewing (usually in conjunction with one of the aforementioned activities). This industry requires both regulation and improved monitoring; research and education.

POSITION STATEMENT ON WHALE CONSERVATION

WESSA strongly believes in the non-lethal use of all species of Whales. This is epitomised by the whale-watching industry. There are standards for this ecotourism industry, but we believe that improved collation of information is required, as well as improved regulation of the industry. WESSA calls for observers to be made available for all whale-watching boats. We also believe that more research is required to better determine the impact of this industry on the animals involved.

POSITION STATEMENT ON ALIEN SPECIES ERADICATION

Alien plant and animal species are considered serious threats to biodiversity. South Africa has been combatting this scourge for decades now, but primarily on a terrestrial basis. Increasing numbers of alien species are being introduced to

our shores by foreign boats. The research, monitoring and eradication of marine alien species must improve dramatically, whilst the efforts to eradicate alien vegetation along our coastline should continue at a rapid pace.

Objective 4: Environmental Education

WESSA believes that as a conservation organisation the best tool we have is education, and so we encourage education and awareness programmes as the first step to achieving our conservation objectives.

POSITION STATEMENT ON WINDOWS ON THE WORLD

WESSA's coastal education resource *Windows on the World: Coast* is an ideal resource for empowering both children and adults to conserve their coastal environment. This resource has been made available to coastal municipalities and schools, but corporate funding is required to implement this resource more widely.

POSITION STATEMENT ON ADOPT-A-BEACH

We call for National Government to support the resumption of the very popular and successful Adopt-a-Beach Campaign, through the funding that they once provided.

POSITION STATEMENT ON SHARK AWARENESS & EDUCATION

WESSA believes that once South African consumers are made aware of the fact that shark nets do not save human lives but personal responsibility does, and that shark nets are responsible for killing hundreds of animals, that they will call for the removal of our shark nets.

POSITION STATEMENT ON WESSA EE PROGRAMMES

We call for the support of all environmental education programmes that lead to improved coastal and marine management if implemented properly, such as the Blue Flag Programme and Eco-Schools.

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