Fund hails signing of Benguela convention

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THE signing of the long-awaited Benguela Current Convention by SA, Namibia and Angola has been hailed as "excellent news" by the World Wide Fund for Nature.

The convention defines the boundaries of the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem, reaching from Port Elizabeth to Angola's Cabinda province, a region that provides an estimated annual $54.3bn in "ecosystem services" — the benefits derived from ecosystems such as agricultural lands and fisheries — to the three countries.

"That's excellent news, ecosystems are not limited to political boundaries and we need a holistic focus on managing them," sustainable fisheries manager Samantha Petersen said yesterday. "The Benguela programme has delivered excellent work, and undertaken some excellent research on a wide range of issues.

"It's very holistic ... Its (work is) an absolutely excellent foundation for the management of the area. One of the best anywhere in the world, I would argue," said Dr Petersen.

The agreement must still be ratified by each country's parliament.

The convention established the Benguela Current Commission as a permanent organisation "to promote the long-term conservation, protection, rehabilitation, enhancement and sustainable use of the Benguela current ecosystem," Department of Environmental Affairs oceans and coasts director Zolile Ngayi said.

The ecosystem is considered to be one of the most productive in the world and supports important economic activities, including Angola's gas and oil fields and the hake stocks that range from southern Angola to Port Elizabeth and are an important export commodity for Namibia and SA. The convention has implications for the fishing, marine mining (diamonds) and oil and gas industries and means that the three countries will increasingly work together to manage these in an environmentally sustainable way.

Water and Environmental Affairs Minister Edna Molewa said the signing was "historic" and "the culmination of many years of research, consultation and negotiation".

The commission was established on January 31 2007 through the signing of an interim agreement.

Dr Petersen said the only hitch was the longer than expected time needed to get to the signing, and some momentum had been lost. She hoped Monday's milestone would reignite enthusiasm.

The signing committed SA, Namibia and Angola to managing the Benguela ecosystem co-operatively and sustainably, for the benefit of people living on the coast, Mr Ngayi said.

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