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Angola, Namibia and South Africa prepare to sign Benguela Convention

The city of Benguela in southern Angola has been selected as the location for the signing of the Benguela Current Convention, a treaty between Angola, Namibia and South Africa that will regulate the future management of the marine ecosystems of the Benguela Current.

The Convention will be signed in August or September this year.

The three southern African countries are expected to ratify the Convention by December 2012, thereby bringing into force a unique multilateral agreement that has as its objective the long-term conservation, protection, rehabilitation and sustainable use of the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem or BCLME.

Sustaining fisheries

The BCLME is an asset of global importance. It stretches from Port Elizabeth in South Africa to the province of Cabinda in northern Angola, encompassing the full extent of the cold Benguela Current. This current sweeps up the west coast of southern Africa, bringing cold, nutrient-rich waters to the surface, and, through a process known as “upwelling”, sustains abundant shoals of fish.

Small schooling fish, such as sardines, anchovy, redeye round herring and pelagic gobies are the nucleus of the offshore ecosystem. Known as “forage fish”, they are the main food of a host of predators.

But the Benguela is also the site of vitally important industrial activities. The nearshore and shelf environments of the BCLME hold rich reserves of minerals, particularly diamonds, while Angola is the largest crude oil producing nation in Africa. All three countries derive substantial benefits from offshore industries such as fishing, mining and oil and gas extraction.

Protecting biodiversity

The signing of the Benguela Current Convention will ensure that industrial development progresses in an environmentally responsible manner and that the three countries work together to protect biodiversity, maintain the integrity of the ecosystem and minimise the risk of long-term or irreversible effects by human activities.

Preventing marine pollution, be it from ships, land-based sources or from the marine mining and oil extraction industries is a priority of the Benguela Current Convention.

Harmonising policies, laws and regulations so that industrial activities in one country do not impact the coastal or marine environment of another country, is another priority of the Convention. And the transboundary management of fisheries, including the monitoring and control of fishing activity, is a third priority.

Establishing a holistic approach

“Essentially, the Benguela Current Convention will help the three countries to establish an ecosystem approach to managing the BCLME,” says Dr Hashali Hamukuya, executive secretary of the Benguela Current Commission.

He explains that an ecosystem approach is a holistic approach to marine and coastal management that strives to balance the many activities that take place in an ecosystem. It is a long-term approach that aims to optimise the use of an ecosystem without damaging it.

Dr Hamukuya believes that the selection of the city of Benguela as the location for the signing of the Benguela Current Convention is significant.

The city, which is located 700km south of the Angolan capital of Luanda, shares its name with the Benguela Current and is built around a natural bay that reflects the stark beauty that is typical of the Benguela region.

The fact that Benguela was once a centre for slave traders who transported slaves from Africa to Brazil and Cuba, is also significant, says Dr Hamukuya.

Cooperation is key

“Benguela symbolises the fact that these three southern African countries have overcome serious obstacles, including colonialism, occupation and bitter wars and are now working together constructively and peacefully to ensure that their shared natural resources are managed in a sustainable and integrated way.”

As head of the Benguela Current Commission, Dr Hamukuya has been driving the process of drafting the Convention text and ensuring the three countries reach consensus around the wording of the treaty.

Once the Convention is signed, the Commission will continue to provide administrative and logistical support to the three countries and manage the Commission’s ambitious science and training programmes.

In September last year, eight ministers responsible for the marine industries and the marine environment in their respective countries agreed that the Benguela Current should be "protected and promoted as an asset" and that their countries should participate in the Benguela Current Commission as it responds to challenges of poverty and underdevelopment.

The Ministers met again in March 2011 to attend to administrative matters of the Benguela Current Commission and to monitor progress with the drafting of the Convention text.

South Africa’s minister of Water and Environmental Affairs, Edna Molewa, is the current chairperson of the Benguela Current Commission.

From left to right: Aníbal Octavio Da Silva, deputy minister of Petroleum, Angola; Bernard Esau, minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources, Namibia; Victoria De Barros Neto, Secretary of State for Fisheries, Angola; Edna Molewa, minister of Water and Environmental Affairs, South Africa; and Syanga K Samuel Abillo, Deputy Minister of Environment, Angola.