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SARDINE FISH STOCKS “EXCEPTIONALLY” LOW

LOWEST SARDINE STOCKS SINCE 1989 TRIGGERS RESTRICTION ON COMMERCIAL FISHING QUOTAS

Cape Town, 17 February 2017: Sardine biomass in the Benguela ecosystem has fallen below the “Exceptional Circumstances” threshold, triggering an immediate 50% reduction in the 2017 allowable catch for sardine. The alarming state of the west and south coast ecosystems has huge implications for both commercial fishing and species such as seals and seabirds.

The November 2016 annual biomass survey of the sardine on the West Coast estimated the stock at approximately 259 000 t. This is considerably lower than the long-term (1984-2015) average of 950 000 t and is the second lowest annual measurement since 1989. The Exceptional Circumstances threshold is set by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) to reduce fishing pressure in years of low abundance with the aim of ensuring the long-term sustainability of the stock.

Sardines and anchovy form the base of the food chain along South Africa’s west and south coasts. Small pelagic fish are the primary food source for many seabird, seal, dolphin and whale species. In particular, sardines form a vital component of the diet of the endangered African Penguin, which has undergone a dramatic collapse. More than 30 000 pairs of African Penguins have disappeared from their colonies, equivalent at a rate of >120 birds per week, every week, between 2004-2013. Much of this loss is attributed to a lack of food availability. “While sardine populations naturally fluctuate due to their boom-bust population dynamics, the decline of the sardine stock to below the precautionary Exceptional Circumstance threshold could have dire consequences for seabird populations, many of which are already struggling” states Dr Taryn Morris, BirdLife South Africa’s Coastal Seabird Conservation Manager.

The state of small pelagic fish stocks is important not only for the ecosystem but may also have potential economic and food security ramifications. The small pelagics fishery is South Africa’s largest fishery by tonnage, with an estimated value of R1.55 billion per annum. Small pelagic fish are also prey for the commercially important hake and yellowtail which in turn are eaten by tunas and sharks. “It is quite easy to see that ecological functioning and economic security all depend on there being sufficient small pelagic fish at the base of the food chain” remarked Dr Morris.

While the stock status is cause for concern, the fishing of the stock does not go unchecked. Scientists and fishery managers are monitoring the situation closely and implementing measures to ensure the long-term sustainability of the resource. Apart from the precautionary slashing of the annual allowable catch by 50%, the scientific advisory group that works to regulate the small pelagics fishery is also nearing completion of a revised Operating Management Procedure (OMP) scheduled to be adopted mid-year. The much-anticipated OMP-17 regulations will take newly developed

spatial fisheries regulations into account in attempt to minimise localised depletion of sardine on the west coast. The sardine stock will be surveyed again in May/June and the catch quotas will be reassessed accordingly.

While pressure on the small pelagics fish stocks is an ongoing concern, BirdLife South Africa is working alongside government, industry and stock scientists to ensure the long-term viability of the sardine stocks and the integrity of the marine environment.

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Notes for the editor:

- BirdLife South Africa strives to conserve birds, their habitats and biodiversity through scientifically-based programmes, through supporting the sustainable and equitable use of natural resources and through encouraging people to enjoy and value nature.
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