



FOCUS ON THE

AVIAN DEMOGRAPHY UNIT

The Avian Demography Unit undertakes bird research in partnership with BirdLife South Africa

Saving seabirds

In the early 1990s concern began to grow over the numbers of seabirds, especially albatrosses, being killed by longline fishing vessels in the Southern Ocean. Reports also began to emerge of substantial seabird mortality from longliners in other parts of the world: the North Atlantic, in Alaskan waters, around Hawaii in the North Pacific and off the coasts of southern Africa, South America, Australia and New Zealand. It was clear that seabird mortality from longlining was a global issue.

This realisation has spawned a number of initiatives. Governments, NGOs, inter-governmental bodies such as fishery management organisations, and the fishers themselves have become involved in plans to reduce the mortality. In 1999 the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) adopted an International Plan of Action for Reducing Incidental Catch of Seabirds in Longline Fisheries (abbreviated to IPOA-Seabirds). The IPOA-Seabirds is a voluntary instrument which encourages the countries that undertake longline fishing to develop their own National Plans of Action (NPOA) to reduce this mortality by following the guidelines set out in the international plan.

With financial support from the FAO, South Africa has assessed its longline fisheries and produced a draft NPOA for its seabirds. This was written by John Cooper of the Avian Demography Unit and Peter Ryan of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute, on contract to the South African government. The plan of action has been released for public comment, following a well-attended stakeholders' workshop in January (see www.environment.gov.za and click on 'fishing').

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) has this year commenced an assessment of South Africa's hake trawl fishery. If this assessment shows that the fishery is sustainable, and that it is properly managed in terms of the MSC's criteria, including in respect of bycatch, then



LES UNDERHILL

South Africa's NPOA-Seabirds will help protect Grey-headed Albatrosses, among other seabird species, which breed at the Prince Edward Islands.

South African hake will command a premium price on the European and other markets. If the adoption of the NPOA for seabirds results in a significant reduction in the number of seabirds killed in longline fisheries, then these fisheries could also apply to be assessed by the MSC, to the combined advantage of the birds, the fish and the fishing industry.

South Africa will soon be joining the international Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP), so as to be able to improve the conservation status of seabirds that visit local waters and breed at the sub-Antarctic Prince Edward Islands. South Africa's NPOA for seabirds will be a major contribution to its activities within ACAP, and will confirm its place among the leaders

within the fishing nations of the world in working towards saving seabirds.

Mitigation measures which can reduce seabird mortality in longline fisheries to insignificant levels already exist and have been shown to work at little cost or change of practice to the industry. The challenge now is for their willing adoption so that South African fishers can continue to catch fish on longlines in the presence of albatrosses and other seabirds, and leave these birds unharmed to fly southern seas.

JOHN COOPER



Avian Demography Unit,
University of Cape Town, 7701 Rondebosch.
Tel. (021) 650 2423; fax (021) 650 3434;
e-mail adu@adu.uct.ac.za
web www.aviandemographyunit.org