

Sustainable Seas Trust



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Mission Blue-Sustainable Seas Trust- BirdLifeSA joint press release

Cape Whale Coast Hope Spot (Overstrand)

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From Rooi Els to Quoin Point, the 200 km-long Cape Whale Coast is unique in its combination of rich and abundant biodiversity, spectacular scenery and cultural heritage. Mountains run down to an intricate coastline of estuaries, beaches and bays. Offshore, two major ocean currents come together, as temperate south coast currents meet cold west coast upwellings. The region is home to a number of iconic animals, including the Marine Big Five: African penguin, great white shark, Cape fur seal, whales (humpback, Southern right and Bryde's) and dolphins (common, bottlenose and

humpback). It hosts many endemic bird species and is regarded as one of the top birding destinations in South Africa. The Cape Whale Coast reminds us of our rich heritage and history of dependence on the sea, with shell middens and artefacts dating back to the Stone Age, pre-colonial Khoi and San fish traps, the old whaling station at Betty's Bay, and World War II radar stations at Cape Hanglip.

These days, the region supports a vibrant local community, many of whom still rely on the sea for their livelihoods. Line fish and West Coast rock lobster are important to small-scale and recreational fishers. Estuaries support Southern mullet (harder), provide important nursery areas for white steenbras, and supply habitat for large numbers of waterbirds. Kelp is harvested for the international seaweed market and also for local abalone farms, of which there are four in the area. Tourism, specifically eco-tourism, has the potential to become one of the major economic activities of the Cape Whale Coast. Thousands of people visit the area each year during the holiday season, and ecotourism ventures include whale- and penguin-watching, shark cage-diving and bird-watching.

Much of the Cape Whale Coast is well-protected. Included are the magnificent Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve (the heart of the Cape Floristic Kingdom), the Stony Point Penguin Colony at Betty's Bay (one of only two mainland penguin colonies in South Africa), the Betty's Bay Marine Protected Area, the Bot/Kleinmond and Klein river estuaries, the Walker Bay Whale Sanctuary Marine Protected

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Area, the Dyer Island Nature Reserve complex, and a network of conservation stewardship sites. The environmental excellence of the region is ensured through the efforts of diverse groups of people, including the Department of Environmental Affairs, CapeNature, a variety of conservation-oriented NGOs and Overstrand Municipality – three of the region's beaches have Blue Flag status and in 2013, Overstrand was the recipient of five Green Municipality awards.

But the Cape Whale Coast faces a number of challenges that are common to coastal areas all over the world. There is a burgeoning human population; over 80,000 people live in the area and the population growth in Overstrand is the second highest in the Western Cape. This creates competition for, and hence pressure on, the region's natural resources. Some of the environmental



issues are inappropriate development planning, informal urban sprawl, pollution, flow reductions of rivers, invasions of river systems by alien plants, and illegal gill-netting. Over-fishing is a huge concern. This, together with ocean cooling (perhaps a result of human-induced climate change), has caused an eastward shift in the distribution of anchovy. Scientific scrutiny has demonstrated that this eastward shift has had severe and sometimes surprising knock-on effects. These include an eastward shift in the distribution of west coast rock lobster, a concomitant decrease in sea-urchins (which lobster prey on), and subsequent decrease in young abalone (which take shelter from predators under urchins). This is a catastrophe-in-the-making for the abalone industry, which is further threatened by poaching. Although the Overstrand region is relatively affluent (90% of households have access to electricity and 76% have piped water), there are pockets of extreme poverty in the community, with 24% unemployment and 16% illiteracy. This is at least partly at the root of abalone poaching and illegal gill-netting.

Common to all of the threats faced by the region is a lack of understanding of the dependence of people on the health of our environment. It is the hope of the Cape Whale Coast that, by becoming part of an international network of Hope Spots, the profile of Overstrand will be raised both locally and abroad. By showcasing the remarkable resources and outstanding work being done in the area, and by prioritizing and drawing attention to the threats to these resources, we hope to also attract resources and focus efforts towards creating a culture of caring that will translate into one of protection of our natural environment. Iconic animals such as whales and sharks will be used to draw attention to the plight of the environment, and this attention will then be broadened to include the habitats of these and of lesser known species. Conservation efforts will be focused on parts of the coast that are currently not formally protected, with the idea of lifting the status of these areas and linking them into one unified protected area stretching from the Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve in the west to the De Hoop Marine Protected Area in the east.

<http://www.sst.org.za/what-we-do/hope-spots/cape-whale-coast-hope-spot>

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