

## Department Of Environmental Affairs Marks World Migratory Bird Day 2019

**13 MAY 2019**

The Department of Environmental Affairs marked World Migratory Bird Day 2019, a day set aside annually to raise awareness and educate the public on the plight of migratory bird species, on Saturday 11 May 2019.

This is an international day established by United Nations Environment Programme and is celebrated twice a year, on the second Saturday in May and October. World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) was initiated in 2006 by Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) an international body of the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA).

The theme for this year's World Migratory Bird Day is *Protect Birds: Be the Solution to Plastic Pollution!* It places the spotlight on the negative impact of plastic pollution on migratory birds, particularly ocean birds, and their habitats. The bi-annual campaign not only raises awareness about the need for conservation of migratory birds and their habitats, but also about the threats they face, their ecological importance and the need for international cooperation to conserve these species.

The timing of the International World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) is interrelated to the departure of migratory birds from the Southern Hemisphere to the Northern Hemisphere for the summer. Most bird species migrate to areas where there is abundant food and nesting grounds annually. However, large numbers of birds are killed on their return flight from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere due to anthropogenic behaviour, among others, plastic pollution.

Marine litter, including plastic litter, has become a matter of increasing global and national concern as a source of marine pollution. More than 300 million tons of plastics are produced annually, making it one of the most widely used materials worldwide. Plastics are ubiquitous and last for decades, or even hundreds of years, resulting in mountains of waste once they are discarded, most of which often after being used only once. They persist in the environment and many end up in landfill sites, but also in rivers and ultimately the ocean.

The presence of plastic threatens migratory birds worldwide, either through entanglement in, for example, fishing nets, and ingestion of small items of plastic. Large numbers of birds are also smothered by plastic rings, and some seabirds such as cormorants, gannets and gulls have been seen incorporating plastic in their nesting materials. In a research published in 2015, South Africa was ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in a list of top 20 countries for mismanaged waste, which could potentially become marine litter. Furthermore, over 80% of all marine litter is composed of plastic. Once plastics enter the environment it does not

biodegrade, but simply breaks down into smaller pieces over time which becomes a greater threat for marine species once they have entered our oceans.

The adverse effects of plastic on marine species has been receiving widespread attention globally for some time. AEWAs indicate that the number of seabirds dying from the effects of plastic annually is one million, and growing. Seabirds were among the first bird species to contain ingested plastic around the 1960's. It is further suggested that at least 40% of all seabird species contain ingested plastic and some have been recorded entangled by plastic. Species such as petrels, albatrosses, gulls and skuas have been observed to contain higher ingestion of plastics. Due to the vast distances travelled by some seabirds, plastics can be dispersed to uninhabited islands. Existing research pinpoints the urgency of the matter: not only do 40 percent of seabirds have plastic in their guts, but this proportion will reach 99 percent by 2050 if there is no intervention.

Avitourism, as it has come to be known, generates millions of rands annually, contributing significantly to GDP. It has also become a large job creator in South Africa.

In 2018, South Africa hosted two Meetings of Parties that deal with the conservation of birds. In May 2018, the 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Parties to the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP) agreed to develop guidelines to quantify the ingestion of plastics by albatrosses and petrels which will include protocols for macroplastics and microplastics. Again in December 2018, the 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Parties to AEWAs agreed on measures to tackle threats from climate change and to increase protection of individual species and seabirds. Furthermore, a study on plastic and waterbirds was commissioned by AEWAs to look at the impacts that plastics have on waterbirds and suggested possible monitoring tools to track interactions between waterbirds and plastics.

The Durban Plan of Action for Africa presented a renewed framework for responding to contemporary waterbird conservation issues in Africa. Among the Resolutions adopted was on AEWAs' contribution to the Aichi Targets and the Agreement's relevance to the Sustainable Development Goals, strengthening the monitoring of migratory waterbirds, guidance on the implementation of the AEWAs Action Plan, climate resilient flyways, financial and institutional arrangements.

South Africa has numerous interventions to dealing with marine litter including plastic pollution.

The Department has implemented its Working for the Coast Programme as an Extended Public Works Project aimed at creating jobs through dealing with challenges emanating from the coast, among which includes the clearing of litter from beaches nationally. Additionally, in 2014, the Department launched its National Coastal Management Programme under the National Environmental Management: Integrated Coastal

Management Act to prioritise the management of pollution in the coastal zone. Under that priority, South Africa adopted Management Objective 4.3, which is to develop and implement programmes to address marine litter.

The Department will soon launch the Source-to-sea Programme to address the growing concern of litter from inland river systems, including catchment systems, therefore reducing marine litter. One of the other streams that has been prioritised by the Department is packaging waste, which includes plastic waste with the intent is to ensure that the industry commits to specific targets on the diversion of waste from landfill sites.

Additionally, South Africa has amended its fiscal and waste management policy to introduce environmental levies for plastic bags and is looking at investments in plastic palletization plants which is also emphasised under Operation Phakisa initiatives as one of the best available ways to divert plastic waste from landfill sites. Lastly, South Africa has also conducted a Plastic Material Flows and End of Life Management Study to assess the current status with regard to the production and management of plastics and identified barriers to improving the diversion of plastics from landfill sites.

These interventions will assist events such as World Migratory Bird Day in protecting our delicate wildlife, and some are ideal opportunities for communities to take action in mitigating unnecessary injuries suffered by migratory birds as a result of plastic waste, and to contribute to a decrease in the mortality of these birds due to plastic pollution.

World Migratory Bird Day allows for all to stand together and unite to fight and alleviate this rapidly growing environmental problem. The Department of Environmental Affairs would like urge the citizens of the country to continue with the Good Green Deeds, to ensure that our country is free from litter and illegal dumping that eventually end up in our oceans and affect our precious marine life.