

## **A New African Inspiration and Global Commitment to meet Challenges in the Western Indian Ocean**

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There is a looming crisis in the western Indian Ocean. Millions of people who depend upon the sea are facing the ever increasing threat of diminution of the living resources upon which they depend. Their livelihoods are tied to a natural resource-based economy and, at present, they have no alternative but to harvest what they can. Organisations in eight African countries have been inspired to find a long-term solution and have made a global commitment to do their part. They have formed and are growing the first independent multi-national transborder Sustainable Seas Trust. This is a new vehicle for funding African initiatives to conserve marine genetic resources and meet the needs of coastal village communities. It is hoped that the global community will also make a commitment to support the Trust.

The African coelacanth, *Latimeria chalumnae*, is an icon for conservation and a symbol of hope for a better future for millions of African people who are dependent upon living marine resources. The area of regional collaboration stretches widely across the western Indian Ocean including the Comoros, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Reunion, Seychelles, South Africa and the United Republic of Tanzania. The coelacanth has drawn these countries together to better understand the marine ecosystems and the processes which support life. Under the banner of the African Coelacanth Ecosystem Programme (ACEP) each of those countries in which coelacanths have been found has formed a National Management Committee (NMC). Members of these committees are drawn from governmental organisations and institutions plus non-governmental organisations (NGOs). A feature of this partnership in Africa is that the vast majority of members are active practitioners of marine science, conservation, capacity building and socio-economics. NMCs are responsible for dealing with national issues. Senior NMC members represent their countries on the Regional Management Committee (RMC) which is responsible for promotion of regional co-ordination and transnational benefits, regional cruises, development of regional capacity and sharing of information.

The success of these organisations from so many countries in working together has led to ACEP becoming a leading marine project of the African Union's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). NEPAD calls for African countries to become responsible for their own destiny. To these ends the countries have formed and are developing the Sustainable Seas Trust, which is an independent charitable, public benefit organisation that will support and sustain conservation and management programmes.

Predictions of a collapse of the Large Marine Ecosystems of the world by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are alarming (Worms *et al.* Science November 2006). For the western Indian Ocean countries management of fisheries is particularly challenging, spread as it is among many thousands of fishing villages who operate at the artisanal and subsistence levels. Reversing the trend is dependent upon developing a new economic alternative in which conservation becomes more profitable than exploitation. The Sustainable Seas Trust is seeking such alternatives and simultaneously endeavouring to help the region meet Millennium Development Goals, pledges to the World Summit for Sustainable Development and to the World Parks Congress, all within the guiding principles of the African Union and its NEPAD programme.