

# Youth Push for South Africa's Ocean Legacy

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Looking into our status of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) the sobering reality remains that only 0.4% of our oceans around South Africa are protected, compared to a global target of at least 10%, to which our government have committed to. In an attempt to proactively engage with the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) to achieve increased protection for South Africa's oceans, *Youth for MPAs* drafted and sent a letter to the DEA Minister, Edna Molewa, on 17 August.

The *Youth for MPAs* group, consisting of young marine science students, drafted a letter which outlines their concern around the paucity of MPAs in South Africa. While much of DEA's work is to be commended, the team stated that this is simply not enough, especially considering that science tells us 30% ocean protection is needed. The team highlighted Section 24 of the Constitution which states that everyone has a right to a healthy, clean, protected and sustainable environment. Government cannot limit this right and are mandated to protect the environment in a sustainable way.

The proposed 5% MPA expansion that Minister Edna Molewa gazetted for public comment back in February 2016, will see the protection of 43 ecosystem types and 9 of the 15 critically endangered ecosystem types, all currently unprotected. The letter touched on the degradation that the marine environment is experiencing and the important role of MPAs in supporting fishery sustainability.

The letter touched on ocean threats, stating that oil and gas exploration and seabed mining are prohibited inside protected areas in South Africa, and therefore establishing MPAs will stop seismic surveys, exploration, and extraction within these important and sensitive areas. Seismic surveys have been proven to cause hearing impairment (temporary or permanent), physiological changes (such as stress responses) and tissue damage to marine life; and in some extreme cases even death. This sort of impact could also lead to the extinction of marine species, especially those that are sensitive and difficult to monitor.

In concluding the letter, the *Youth for MPAs* members emphasized the importance of protecting MPAs as they play a role in managing the above-mentioned threats. Prioritizing the protection of the ecosystem functions before they are compromised benefits the youth of this country.

Molewa has been invited by the *Youth for MPAs* to attend the annual **WILDOCEANS'** Ocean Stewards Science Evening, due to take place on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 2018 in Durban. The youth have stated that they want to engage directly with her about how MPAs can be established and want to be involved in decisions that will affect their future.

Aiming to start the conversation with Molewa, a small delegation from *Youth for MPAs* attended the DEA Women's Breakfast on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 2018, in Pretoria. This presented a perfect opportunity to raise the pertinent issues expressed in the letter. In Molewa's keynote address, she touched on biodiversity economy, highlighting that SA is the third-most diverse country in the world, after Brazil and Indonesia. With that in mind, it can only be emphasized even more, the prioritisation of MPAs and how South Africa is lagging behind partner countries such as Brazil in terms of ocean protection.

The programme included a Q&A session. Questions about marine protection dominated this part of the programme. The *Youth for MPAs* delegates asked Molewa about the status of MPAs in SA and expressed concern around permits for ocean space being granted to oil and gas entities.

Nobuhle Mpanza, member of *Youth for MPAs*, voiced her concern by asking, "What is the hold-up in

implementing the 21 MPAs to get to the 5% that we need now? The 5% was meant to be declared in 2016, which means we are two years behind schedule. If there are any valid reasons for the delay, why hasn't the Minister informed the public? What strategy has the Minister put in place to reach the 10% by 2020?"

Dudu Ntombela, MPA & Youth Coordinator at **WILDOCEANS**, highlighted the importance of the oceans for livelihoods of coastal communities, and the benefits of MPAs saying, "Minister, please proclaim the 21 MPAs, because they are not only benefitting the animals in the sea, but also the surrounding communities." She encouraged the Minister to look after the futures of the poor and that healthy natural resources are more important than the short-term financial security that prominent international companies bring for offshore industries.

Sizo Sibanda is an avid science communicator, currently pursuing her masters degree through UCT looking at optimising Marine Protected Area design to increase socioecological benefits. At the breakfast Sizo spoke about the importance of having the youth join forces with DEA to achieve the urgent objective of 5% MPA expansion. "Intergenerational engagement is so important, because we are able to leverage on the wisdom of older people and combine that with the vitality that young people have. We have got to protect and preserve some parts of the environment, we cannot just use everything we have all at once. We need to highlight that in our engagement. I am proposing a solution to you, Minister, to use young people in bringing about solutions regarding marine protected areas."

Molewa responded by saying: "The team has been working very hard on MPAs. I have the power to declare even tomorrow, however, I want to ensure that all government departments involved such as the Department of Mineral Resources, are on board. To date, I can assure that there are bankable MPAs, MPAs that are still being negotiated, and MPAs that still need work to be included in the network. The current strategy is to declare a number of MPAs at a time, while doing the research in support of more MPAs to be declared. It is a tough balancing act to meet the different needs- being social, economic and environmental."

Jamila Janna, elected spokesperson for *Youth for MPAs*, expressed excitement at the fact that she got to engage with Molewa and was able to voice out the concerns of the team. "It is definitely a step in the right direction," said Jamila, "and I am hopeful about our continued engagement, and glad that she gave us an update. Although she will not be able to attend the Ocean Stewards Science Evening, she will be sending a representative – and we hope this will present yet another opportunity to engage with DEA about MPAs and reaffirm the support of the youth for this expansion."

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