

Cabinet approves Marine Protected Areas

Acting Environmental Affairs Minister Derek Hanekom says a network of 20 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) will considerably advance South Africa's efforts to protect its ocean heritage for future generations.



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Cabinet approved the declaration of 20 MPAs on Wednesday as part of the Operation Phakisa: Ocean Economy MPAs Representative Network.

Hanekom welcomed the announcement, saying it will increase ocean protection within the South African Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to 5%.

“The [MPAs] will contribute to fisheries sustainability, advance marine ecotourism and help maintain resilience in ecosystems that are under stress from climate change,” Hanekom said.

Work on the new approved network of MPAs dates back to 2014, when the South African government endorsed a plan to achieve, as part of Operation Phakisa: Ocean Economy, a viable network of MPAs.

Hanekom said South Africa's ocean space, which is one of the most varied in the world, is highly productive, with rich

biodiversity providing living and non-living resources that contribute significantly to the country's economy and to job creation.

As South Africa grows and intensifies the ocean economy, the Hanekom said a representative sample of marine ecosystems must be protected to ensure their resilience to human use and impact, and also the impacts associated with climate change.

MPAs provide safe spaces in which fish can breed undisturbed. They are essential to maintain eco-certification of the South African deep-sea trawl fishery. The certification process assesses whether habitat and nursery areas for the hake fishery are adequately protected.

MPAs also contribute to growing South Africa's marine eco-tourism sector by providing undisturbed natural habitat for whales, sharks, seals, dolphins, turtles and seabirds for international and domestic tourists to experience.

An adequate network of MPAs will also provide the basis for ongoing resilience to the impact of climate change. Oceans are an essential component of the climate system, absorbing and transferring heat, and regulating the exchange of carbon dioxide (CO₂) with the atmosphere.

With increasing CO₂ levels and rising ocean temperatures, this regulatory capacity is at risk. The network of MPAs will assist in building ecological resilience, and therefore social and economic resilience in the growing ocean economy.

The new MPA network is the product of extensive consultation and negotiation with all stakeholders, which sought to ensure that the network is aligned with relevant policies and priorities for fisheries, aquaculture, tourism, as well as marine mining and oil exploration, while also protecting ecologically important areas.

South Africa is also mindful of its longer term commitments to the protection of marine biodiversity, including meeting the 2020 Global Target in the Decadal Plan of the Convention of Biodiversity (CBD), which stands at 10%.

"The efforts to increase the protection of marine ecosystems is within this global and national context. MPAs are important in maintaining ecosystem functioning and structure, as well as protecting biological diversity. The approved 20 new MPAs are a significant step towards meeting the global 2020 target," the Minister said.

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