

Parties to the Abidjan and Nairobi Conventions Address Marine Pollution from Land-Based Activities and Oil and Gas Exploration in Sub-Saharan Africa

South Africa hosts Joint meeting of Parties to the Abidjan and Nairobi Conventions focusing on holistic approaches to marine and coastal resources management

Johannesburg / Nairobi, 2 November 2007 – Some 200 experts, governments officials, and stakeholders will meet at the Indaba- Sandton in Johannesburg from 5 to 8 November to seek solutions to the rising trend of environmental changes impacting the coastal and marine ecosystems covered by the Abidjan and Nairobi Conventions on the Protection, Management and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the West, Central, Southern and Eastern African Regions



The theme of the Joint Conference is 'Building on Success'. By focusing on the progress and successes achieved through the work programmes of the Nairobi Convention, key partners and stakeholders, the Joint COP will facilitate the sharing of experiences and ideas, and establish a larger pool of expertise to address common problems. The Joint COPs will focus on ecosystems-based management approaches, especially in the context of the connection between land and sea.

Other key thematic areas to be discussed will include: the re-vitalization of the Abidjan Convention's; oil and gas exploration and exploitation; application of strategic environmental assessments; delineation of the continental shelf beyond territorial waters in accordance with the Article 76 of the United Nations Law of the Sea; climate change adaptations and mitigation; sustainable financing; and enhanced visibility for the two Conventions.

The two Conventions cover countries that are rich in biodiversity and natural resources. But as coastal populations in Africa continue to grow, and pressures on the environment from marine and land-based activities, land-use change, including urbanization, and climate change, as well as the rising sea level, coastal erosion and lowland flooding increase, coastal and marine living resources and their habitats are being lost or damaged in ways that are diminishing biodiversity and thus decreasing livelihood opportunities and aggravating poverty.

“The causative relationship between poverty, human health, unsustainable consumption and production patterns, unsustainable social and economic development, and the degradation of coastal and marine environments are most evident in Africa. It is also clear that most of the marine and coastal resources are shared; consequently, the management of such resources must be addressed through regionally integrated and cooperative action by governments and other stakeholders. ‘UNEP’s Regional Seas Conventions provide a legal framework for collaborative action.’” said the United Nations Environment Programme’s Executive Director Achim Steiner.

“The continuing capacity of Africa’s coastal and marine ecosystems to provide the goods-and-services that are essential to human well-being will depend on the effectiveness of ecosystem management in

response to the pressures global change. Such management requires reliable monitoring information gathered from community to global levels and needs to be supported by nationally and internationally relevant policies and legislation. Robust governance and institutional capacity, and the cooperative integration of sectoral interests at all scales, are essential. The 5th and 8th meeting of the Contracting Parties presents an opportunity to place the Abidjan and Nairobi Conventions on the path of sustainability and enhanced protection of the coastal and marine environment in sub-Saharan Africa.” He added.

The recently published GEO-4 Report reveals that coastal habitats have been converted, destroying sensitive wetlands (mangroves) and coastal forests. Nutrient loads, have increased in freshwater and coastal systems. The increased use of agricultural fertilisers in many river basins has led to large quantities of excess nitrogen being carried by rivers to the sea. Once there it can cause toxic algal blooms and deoxygenation, resulting in coastal ‘dead zones’ with high mortality rates of fish and a range of negative impacts on human well being and the fisheries sector..

Coastal tourism is an important industry in Mauritius, Seychelles, Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa and is rapidly growing in Mozambique, Madagascar and Comoros. In Kenya, coastal tourism contributes over 60% of Kenya’s tourism earnings and accounts for 45% of the coastal economy. However, in the last two decades, increased population pressure, urban development and poverty have contributed to physical alteration and the destruction of coastal habitats, resource overexploitation and water quality degradation. Unregulated land use patterns and poor regulatory regimes reduce the aesthetic, cultural and tourism value of the coasts and also reduce the protection of the coasts thus increasing coastal erosion rates.

Some coastal urban hotspots are facing a multitude of problems stemming from unplanned and unregulated land use patterns worsened by poor regulatory regimes. At the same time, there is an interest in exploring and exploiting potential oil and gas reserves, which could further exacerbate the destruction of critical habitats such as coral reefs, mangroves, beaches and sea grass meadows.

During the last decade or so, substantial oil and natural gas resources have been discovered offshore, some of them in deep or ultra-deep water on the continental slope, as in Western Africa. Africa’s coastal and marine areas also have offshore commercial oil and natural gas reserves in some 20 countries and many of these are being developed to supply the global energy market as well as domestic needs. Off-shore oil exploitation or exploration in the Region is beginning to raise pertinent environmental concerns. Exploitation of non-living resources is already damaging the coastal environment and, in the case of oil production in the Niger delta, has caused civil conflict.

An important point to be considered is the need to encourage countries to conduct Strategic Environmental Assessments to avoid adverse impacts to the marine and coastal environment, particularly for countries in which off-shore oil exploitation or exploration is planned.

The Western Indian Ocean supports regionally important fisheries, with industrial fishery landings of approximately 280,000 metric tonnes per annum; for example, in 2002 fisheries exports exceeded \$940 million. The overexploitation of offshore fisheries impacts on the food security of coastal populations. Marine and inland fish stocks are in decline from a combination of unsustainable fishing pressures, habitat degradation and global climate change. Fish stocks have collapsed by about 30 per

cent between 1987 and 2003. Economies of countries and food security of millions of people have been affected.

Arresting further losses of coastal and marine resources, and building on opportunities to manage the resources that remain in a sustainable way, are urgent objectives.

In 1981 and 1985, the adoption of the Abidjan and Nairobi Conventions for Cooperation in the Protection and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment in the West, Central (Abidjan Convention) and Eastern African (Nairobi Convention) generated great hopes for the people and communities that share the marine and coastal resources in all coastal states in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In the last 6 years, the implementation of the Nairobi Convention and its related action plan has greatly improved. However, the implementation of the Abidjan Convention is still slow and staggered due to ineffective coordination structures, lack of funds, poor political will and poor visibility.

The Conference will aim to raise the profile of the Nairobi and Abidjan Conventions and NEPAD. By increasing the visibility of both the issues and the framework in which solutions can be developed, the Conference can ensure that sustainable management of the marine and coastal environment stays high on the political agenda.

Note to editors

The Joint COPs will be organized in collaboration with the Department of Environment and Tourism in South Africa and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), under the umbrella of the African Union. The Conferences will be structured in three segments: a Stakeholder workshop for each Convention; experts' meetings for each Convention; and parallel sessions of the Heads of Delegation for each Convention. These will be followed by a joint meeting of the Heads of Delegations for both the Nairobi and Abidjan Conventions and NEPAD.

The main direct outputs from the Joint COPs will be decisions from each of the Convention's Conference of Parties, the adoption of protocols for land based activities and sources of pollution, and the adoption of work programmes for 2008-2012 for each Convention.

The COPs will be preceded by a meeting of the steering committee of the GEF-funded project entitled "Addressing land-based activities in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO-LaB)" on the 5th November. The WIO-LaB project, which primary focus is on major environmental problems that lead to the degradation of the marine and coastal environment due to land-based activities, was launched in 2004 as a direct follow-up to the recommendations of World Summit for Sustainable Development.

This Joint meeting will also witness the launch of the New Consortium for Conservation of Coastal and Marine Ecosystems in Western Indian Ocean (WIO-C) on 6 November, and the launch of the "Regional Conservation Strategy for the West Africa Manatee, as well as the Mangrove of West Africa reports.

Article 76 of the United Nations Law of the Sea refers to the delineation of the continental shelf (outer edge of the continental margin wherever the margin extends beyond 200 nautical miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured)

The Convention on the Protection and Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the West and Central African Region (Abidjan Convention) and the Marine and Coastal Environment of Eastern Africa came into force in 1984 and 1996 respectively, to address the threats and the necessity for action. The two conventions are the only UNEP Regional Seas Conventions in sub-Saharan Africa).

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