Alcyon - what’s new and what's not...

When Julien Semelin, formerly from FIBA and now at MAVA, first suggested the Alcyon project concept to me, back in 2011, it was unusual. The project was going to be modelled on BirdLife’s marine IBA concept. This was the first time a non-BirdLife organisation was attempting something like this, so I was very supportive and encouraged Julien as much as I could. This lead Julien to invite me to sit on the Steering Committee, and through that a deeper involvement with Alcyon. Thus it came as no surprise, when FIBA closed its doors, that BirdLife was asked to consider taking over the implementation of Alcyon. That said, the BirdLife International Marine Programme is extremely proud to have a regional marine IBA programme in West Africa. MAVA was both generous and pragmatic when discussing the handover, extending Alcyon by a full year (to the end of 2016) to allow key project components to be completed in good time.

So here we are, half-way through the first year of the two years that BirdLife has to implement Alcyon. Justine Dossa, the Alcyon project Manager has moved across with Alcyon, and is now a BirdLife staff member. Tracking and census work are ongoing, and another MAVA-supported programme, the Coastal Migratory Birds (CMIB) project, has created new opportunities and links for Alcyon work.

The CMIB held a workshop in association with Alcyon, after they identified the Cape Verde Shearwater as a priority species for developing an Action Plan. Now much of the needs that were identified at the workshop is being implemented through Alcyon - including support to try and find new shearwater colonies using tracking devices. The consulting team at VEDA have successfully concluded their regional census of Royal Terns, a key Alcyon species, including trialling our new, remote-operated drone-mounted cameras. The team flew the drone over tern colonies up and down the West Africa coast, and were able to get amazing views and great data to support out efforts at identifying marine IBAs.

Early next year we will reach the point where our fieldwork ends, and the analysis stage, where marine IBAs will be defined, can begin. Thereafter we will have a policy expert take the maps and start getting them, and indeed the whole concept underpinning marine IBAs, integrated into national, regional and international marine spatial planning processes. If the advocacy work is anywhere near as successful as our partners have been in collecting the data, the seabirds of West Africa will be a lot closer to being secure, protected and valued components of the regions marine environments!

Ross M. Wanless, Africa Coordinator - BirdLife International Marine Programme
Seabird Conservation Programme Manager
The simultaneous comprehensive census of seabird colonies nesting along the West African coastline from Mauritania to Guinea was carried out with great success. The Veda Consultancy team (contracted to support this work) was able to try out a new technique with the drone Phantom II which flew few dozens of metres high over all the Laridae colonies, in particular, those of Royal Terns on all the main nesting sites from Mauritania to Guinea allowing amazing views of the colonies.

In addition, all the park wardens in the sites concerned received training in seabird colony monitoring methods and techniques. A practical handbook published for this (can be downloaded here) was given to each warden that received training. A scientific article currently being prepared will analyse the astonishing results obtained using the drones for a census for the first time compared to census results obtained until now using the usual counting methods. The next global counting of breeding colonies is planned for 2017 in order to harmonise our seabird global counting cycle with that of other international initiatives such as AEWA, WSFI and input their report.

In Senegal, the second year of GPS Laridae tracking and the comprehensive seabird colony breeding season monitoring campaign successfully took place at Saloum Delta National Park (PNDS) as part of the collaboration with the National Parks of Senegal Department (DPN). In total, 16 Terns were fitted with GPS devices. The data obtained back up our first conclusions in confirming the first results obtained last year on feeding areas of Royal Terns which in fact go further than the continental shelf to seek their prey.

Elsewhere, Lika Gueye, a Masters 2 student at UCAD finished his thesis on evaluating the socio-economic importance of seabirds in PNDS as part of cooperation between tourist operators and other stakeholders and park management. The concerns and specific recommendations made by these stakeholders were gathered by the student to be analysed and will serve as a basis for discussion during the next consultative meetings to set up a charter of good practice between both types of stakeholders.
As part of the identification of IBAs off the Dakar peninsula, our partners from Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD) in Dakar are continuing their third year in the Alcyon project. The team started tagging Red-billed Tropicbirds breeding in Madeleine Islands National Park and also taking blood samples to analyze stable isotopes to better identify the species’ feeding habits. These analyses form part of the partnership developed with Jacob Gonzalez-Solis, a specialist in the study of seabirds at Barcelona University (UB), and his team that are giving scientific support to the UCAD team as part of Ngoné Diop’s doctoral thesis, supported by both universities.

In Cape verde, our partners, Biosfera I is making progress in implementing the action plan to conserve Cape Verde Shearwaters. The various Cape Verdean stakeholders and authorities very quickly took ownership of the action plan to conserve Cape Verde Shearwaters drawn up last year. In parallel to current steps to formally adopt this plan, Biosfera I focused its annual action plan work this year on implementing a large part of the action plan’s priority activities, a great milestone in incorporating future marine IBAs in Cape Verde’s management plans and national strategy to conserve seabirds. Thus, for the first time the Biosfera I team carried out a complete census of the Shearwater population on Raso Isle (Santa Luzia, Raso & Branco MPA) and collected new data on the state of the entire Shearwater population of this island as well as reproductive parameters, important data in defining IBAs.

Elsewhere, the team again fitted 15 GPS devices on Cape Verde Shearwaters, on all the GPS tracking data to be analysed for three (3) years, more than sufficient data for a definition of IBAs off the coast for this species.

On the other side of Cape Verde, on the island of Fogo, as part of the collaboration with Jacob Gonzalez-Solis’ team from Barcelona University, the first GPS tracking of a dozen Fea’s Petrels (Pterodroma feae), a near-threatened species, was carried out on their nesting site on Fogo National Park. The first tracks obtained show their movements to feeding areas in direction north-east of the site, which leads us to believe that the southern part of Santiago is an important area for Fea’s Petrels feeding even if they use a large part of the Cape Verde archipelago for their feeding.

In contrast with Cape verde Shearwaters, Fea’s Petrels do not go as far as West Africa’s continental shelf to search their prey. The first analyses of these birds’ movements have generated thought on action against light pollution, which impacts their movements. The collaboration as part of this study gives the Alcyon project the chance to collect a large set of historical data on several species for analyses with a view to defining marine IBAs in West Africa.
Off the coast of West Africa, as part of the collaboration with the Institute of Research for Development (IRD) piloting the AWA project, a session on ‘Seabirds/interaction with fisheries’ was organized during the AWA conference: ‘Ecosystem Approach to the Management of Fisheries and the Marine Environment in West African Waters’ in last December. The report of this session is now available and can be downloaded here. This report includes strong recommendations made by session participants to deal with the now obvious issues related to conserving seabirds and biodiversity off the West African coastline. Thus, the Alcyon project team has already initiated a strategic consideration to put in place possible measures to reduce risks of interaction with fisheries off Africa.

Elsewhere, two (2) Masters 2 students in Ecology and Aquatic Ecosystems Management at UCAD II finished their dissertations on perceptions of small-scale fishermen on interaction between seabirds and fishing activities, the first stage for a better evaluation of the impact of fishing activities on seabirds.

In addition, following the joint experimental mission carried out at Palmarin by the UCAD and Barcelona University teams to launch GPS/GSM tracking of Audouin Gulls on their wintering areas in Senegal, it was decided to widen the possibility of covering all the species’ flyways by making a part of the tracking based on their nesting site in Spain and the second part on their wintering areas in Gambia and Senegal. Ten (10) Audouin Gulls juveniles were fitted with GPS/GSM devices in Ebro Delta National Park in Spain. The results from both parts of these study on this species’ flyways are important for IBAs off the West Africa coastline and specific measures to take for risks of interaction with fisheries.

It is all the more important to look further at the risks linked to interaction with fisheries in the West Africa area because, as part of the collaboration with David Grémillet’s team from CEFE (Centre for Functional and Evolving Ecology) of Montpellier University for a study on the spatial ecology of Northern Gannets (Morus bassanus) off West Africa, the team’s first conclusions showed these risks remain very clear in the sub-region. This year, 20 new trackers were fitted to Northern Gannets, which enabled data on this species over a decade. This type of collaboration has great added-value for the direction of the Alcyon project in that conclusions will shed light on the challenges off the sub-region.
BirdLife International is pleased to have inherited the Alcyon project since FIBA’s merger with MAVA. Since taking the reins, BirdLife International marine programme (BIMP) has used this project as a tool to address conserving the marine environment in West Africa and strengthen BirdLife partners in this area.

This is why the project team visited Sub Regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC) to congratulate it on its recent efforts to alleviate IUU fishing, in particular the referral to International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, and show its desire to collaborate and provide expertise in future action. The Alcyon project team participated in the workshop on the restitution of the referral, and remains attentive to the process of the opinion implementation.

The emerging threats from petrol extraction and marine mining on birds and biodiversity are becoming increasingly felt in the West African sub-region. The Alcyon project team in collaboration with Veda Consultancy informed participants in the Abidjan Convention Experts Panel on environmental norms of the risks related to the recent discovery of future oil production facilities off Sangomar Point in Senegal, not far from Saloum Delta National Park (PNDS), and its possible negative consequences for the biggest Royal Tern nesting colony in this park. The poster presented at the meeting can be downloaded here.

For further information:

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Upcoming events

The 2nd World Seabird Conference, South Africa, 26-30 October 2015, with strong attendance from West African partners who will make a dozen of presentations (oral and posters) on the results of Alcyon project. A Mini-workshop will be held for strategic thinking on how to deal with the challenges of marine issues in West Africa.

Recruiting of the Policy Officer to support the Alcyon project team in its advocacy policy work on marine IBAs. An advert will soon be available on the BirdLife website and other networks.

Council of Africa Partnership -CAP 2015 on 9-14 October 2015, Accra, Ghana: mini-workshop on presenting the Alcyon project and opportunities related to the use of the Alcyon project to create a marine profile in West Africa.