The Alcyon programme, mainly funded by the MAVA Foundation, aims to contribute to the conservation of seabirds and marine and coastal biodiversity in West Africa.

All too often, it is the most sensitive, most vulnerable and less known group of animals, like those amazing seabirds which associate the least with the other underwater animals, which are the worst affected. There is evidence that one of the principal current threats to seabirds at sea is posed by commercial fisheries. While seabirds are more threatened than other groups of birds, all species of sea turtles are endangered and at risk of extinction. West African stakeholders have now the chance to produce data and to put solid information on the global agenda and push for action at the international level when speaking about seabird and turtle bycatch in industrial fisheries.

Indeed, in addition to its land-based seabird conservation projects, BirdLife International (BLI) is coordinating the implementation of a regional project to reduce the bycatch of seabirds and sea turtles in industrial fisheries in West Africa. This is a huge opportunity for BLI and all-level stakeholders to significantly expand bycatch work in West Africa, using the proven BirdLife marine programme model. This is also an important step forward in the battle for capacity building within all disciplines relevant to marine conservation, paving the way for professional local team to handle bycatch issues in West Africa.

The first half of 2018 has been very stimulating for West African marine programme - the Alcyon programme. The on-going field activities under the Cape Verde Seabird project are revealing new discoveries about the seabirds of Cabo Verde. Our local partners working on the coastal seabird project received training on monitoring techniques using drones. The first steering committee meeting of the bycatch project was organised and the very diverse stakeholders and partners of the project discussed the way to promote good collaboration between their ongoing activities with a view to contributing to the effective implementation of the project. Investigations are underway with fishermen onboard foreigner fleets, the first results are quite worrying. Observers training programme and EAF courses are in development for upcoming training sessions on the bycatch project. This first semester has also seen an increase of the Alcyon programme team. I guess you cannot wait to meet the new talented members of the team, the last part of this newsletter is especially dedicated to them.

Justine Dossa
West Africa Marine Programme Coordinator
BirdLife International Marine Programme
BirdLife International Africa Partnership Secretariat

We’re digging deep in understanding at-sea threats to seabirds and marine megafauna in West Africa

First half of 2018

Stranding of northern gannets on a beach in Mauritania, an example of the several cases of seabirds caught by fishing gears off West Africa (© Oumar Ba)
Minimising bycatch of seabirds and turtles in industrial fisheries

During this first half of the year, we’ve started up our ambitious bycatch work for two of the most threatened animal groups in the world: seabirds and turtles. As you know, we’ve embarked on a multi-partners and collaborative work to reduce seabird and turtle bycatch in industrial fisheries in West Africa.

In the spring of this year, while most of the project partners have started up the implementation of their various activities under the project, we organized the first steering committee meeting (SCM) of the project. It was exciting to see about 60 representatives from fishing associations, ministries of fisheries and environment, universities, research institutes, civil society organizations from the 7 countries (Mauritania, Senegal, Cabo Verde, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau and Sierra Leone) of our sub-region together with external experts sharing and discussing the way to carry on the work together in order to effectively achieve the goals of the project. The SCM was a great opportunity to jointly evaluate appropriate mechanisms to promote communication and dissemination of results among various partners. The monitoring plan of the project was developed and adopted with the best evaluation methods to assess the results against the project specific objectives.

Training tools (modules, manuals and other materials) are under development for the various training sessions planned in the project: manuals for professional courses on Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) for fisheries technical staff, fishermen, fisheries managers, government officials, data collection protocols and tools for observers training in field skills, as well as basic sea survival, are also being developed. These training sessions will start in autumn this year.

Investigations are ongoing with industrial fishermen onboard European fleets. 112 surveys have already been carried out in one of the 7 countries. The first results are quite worrying. You will hear more shortly.

Reviews of national fisheries and bycatch-related legislations are underway in the 7 countries by the PRCM in collaboration with UNEP-CMS in order to make recommendations to fill the gaps and to advocate to improve fisheries governance.

Colleagues from BirdLife Europe have started an incredible advocacy process to decrease the impact of EU vessels on seabirds and turtles in West Africa. Currently research protocols are under development for 5 MSc and 2 PhD students to build technical expertise within disciplines relevant to bycatch. This is an amazing step ahead to the capacity building of technical expertise of West African people under the project.

Want to know more?
Please contact Ahmed Diame from August 1st, at Ahmed.Diame@birdlife.org
Conservation of coastal seabirds along the West African coast

The beginning of the breeding season at Delta du Saloum NP (PNDS) in Senegal saw a training session on colonial seabird monitoring combining classic methods with novel monitoring techniques using drones. Training was provided by external partners (Ecospace/VEDA Consultancy) and BirdLife staff to experienced officers from Protected Area agencies and NGOs responsible for seabird colony monitoring in Guinea-Bissau, Senegal and Mauritania. The training highlighted the need to use comparable counting methods in order to assess population numbers and trends across the region. Participants were briefed on different approaches and techniques aiming at surveying different seabird species (e.g. royal tern, grey-headed gull). An introduction on the use and piloting of drones offered a first insight on how to employ these devices to monitor colonies and to deal with the challenges of data processing and analysis. The use of drones is becoming popular worldwide to support monitoring, research and conservation activities. The project is working to develop and promote this tool in order to get accurate and comparable data, while keeping disturbance from monitoring and research activities to a minimum. A survey of the seabird colonies of PNDS was also carried out and the results will be used to assess population trends. Moreover, a threat monitoring protocol is under development to assess the impact of disturbance and predation in all the colonies. A study on the geomorphological dynamic of the coastal zone at key sites is also underway in order to identify the most vulnerable sites to coastal erosion and natural hazards.

Promoting the conservation of Cabo Verde seabirds

The last six months have been very exciting for BirdLife and its partners under this project (the DNA - National Directorate for the Environment, the NGOs Biosfera I, Projecto Vito and SPEA, the BirdLife partner in Portugal, and the University of Barcelona). Work on the ground is revealing almost weekly new findings about the seabirds of Cabo Verde.

Many unknown sites with breeding Cape Verde petrel, red-billed tropicbird, band-rumped storm-petrel, Cape Verde and Audubon’s Shearwaters and brown booby colonies were located during recent systematic surveys. A black-capped petrel showing a brood patch, an endangered species found to breed only at a single island in the Caribbean, was caught in suitable habitat suggesting breeding may occur. Studies on the breeding and foraging ecology of the seabird species breeding in the archipelago are ongoing at a number of key sites.
Field data are being collected mostly by local PhD and Masters students together with highly motivated field assistants. For the first time breeding white-faced storm-petrels at Ilhéu da Laje Branca are being closely monitored using purpose-built artificial nests in collaboration with a local NGO (Fundação Maio Biodiversidade). Continuous monitoring of red-billed tropicbird and Cape Verde petrel colonies is showing unsustainable levels of predation by dogs and cats, as well as illegal trapping by people at key sites. These data are essential to assess threat impact in order to implement urgent conservation action. An ambitious national awareness and educational campaign on the conservation of the seabirds of the archipelago is receiving a massive participation from schoolchildren. A cartoon featuring a couple of Cape Verde shearwaters has already been broadcast on television receiving wide acknowledgement. Regular radio shows on the national public broadcasting station are also contributing to put the Cape Verdean seabirds on the map.

Alcyon Programme staff Updates

During this first half of the year, a huge part of our time was spent in recruitment process. The Alcyon team grew up with 5 talented new colleagues.

- Ngoné Diop (seabirds.intern@birdlife.org) has joined us in May 2018 as Intern, to support the seabird projects
- Mame Betty Lette Diouf (bettydiouf@birdlife.org) has joined us in June 2018 as Programme Assistant
- Ahmed Diame (ahmeddiame@birdlife.org) will be joining us on 1st August 2018 as the bycatch Project Manager.
- Ruben Rocha (rubenrocha@birdlife.org) has joined us on 1st June 2018 as the bycatch Instructor to support seabird bycatch data collection
- Oumar Ba (bycatch.intern@birdlife.org) has joined us on 1st June 2018 as the bycatch Intern in a perspective to take the role of bycatch instructor, focussing on turtles data collection

Upcoming events

- 23-24 July 2018, Abidjan Côte d’Ivoire, 1st Aquatic Wildlife Partnership meeting
- 6-16 August 2018, monitoring campaign of marine avifauna and megafauna in the continental shelf and slope of Mauritanian waters on board the N / O Al Awam BirdLife will participate in the campaign and will contribute to practical training for IMROP technical team on avifauna survey during the campaign.

Call for Students: BirdLife is looking for motivated and capable students, with a keen interest in both fisheries and seabirds, for MSc and PhD programme. Funding for research costs is available for both MSc and PhD. Announcements can be found on the BirdLife website.

For more information:

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