



Scarce predators
About 90% of large predatory fish are gone from the ocean and about 90% of commercial fish stocks are fully or over-exploited — Source: Blue Marine Foundation. Picture of sea turtle by Beth Taylor



At the deep end of the lockdown

A whale shark, the largest fish known to inhabit the world's seas. Environmentalists fear the relaxation of monitoring on boats will further deplete fish stocks, harming coastal communities and conservation. Picture: Danny Copeland

While poaching of abalone and other seafood along SA's coastline has subsided, experts warn that the suspension of certain fishing controls on the high seas during lockdown will compromise the protection of marine species into the future, writes **Claire Keeton**

When the sea is a calm blue in False Bay, dozens of poachers go out diving for abalone. At least they did, before lockdown. But under lockdown, poaching numbers on the Western

Cape's coastline have dropped from hundreds to about a dozen a day, says Pierre de Villiers, CapeNature senior manager: marine and coasts.

"Prior to lockdown, we had engagements with poachers every day," he says. CapeNature works with an Operation Phakisa anti-poaching team, from the west coast to Plettenberg Bay.

"We had daily arrests and confiscation of abalone, but this has slowed down significantly," says De Villiers, attributing it to the restrictions on the roads and on the launching of recreational vessels. The export demand has also declined for abalone, rock lobster and other species threatened by commercial extinction.

But the short-term reprieve for abalone is barely a glimmer of light in a bleak picture worldwide.

The suspension of certain fishing controls on the high seas during lockdown will compromise the protection of marine species into the future.

This could be devastating to overfished species, like yellowfin tuna sold in supermarkets across SA, says Jess Rattle, communications head of the Blue Marine Foundation, a marine conservation charity.

"In an attempt to protect fishing crew and coastal communities from Covid-19, there has been widescale relaxation of important monitoring and surveillance measures in fisheries around the world," she says.

The Indian Ocean Tuna Commission, for example, has suspended the regional observer programme on vessels indefinitely, says Rattle — paving the way "for increased illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing".

Observers on boats would, for example, record the bycatch (like sharks) and illegal practices like shark finning.

"How is this going to be controlled without observers?" asks John Burton, chair of the International Pole and Line Foundation, which supports pole-and-line/handline fishing.

"Vessels are catching sustainably and unsustainably on the same voyage. Without observers, who determines whether fish are from a free school or a school which is not [Marine Stewardship Council] certified?... This is a big, big problem."

The World Wide Fund for Nature and 19 other environmental organisations have written to the regional fishing management bodies and asked them to review their decisions and look at alternatives to observers such as electronic monitoring, says Marcel



A group of spinner dolphins in Sataya lagoon, in the Red Sea off Egypt. Picture: Alexis Rosenfeld/Getty Images

Kroese, the global tuna lead at the WWF.

Environmental organisations have fought hard for years to win the measures which are being set back by the pandemic, he says.

China recently listed tuna as a strategic food resource, he notes. This will exacerbate the massive and rising global demand for tuna.

Scientists warned in 2016 that a 20% catch reduction was needed to save yellowfin tuna, but fishing has increased since then, up by 9% in 2018. The knife-edge threat to this species increased with the postponement of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission's annual meeting in June, says Rattle.

"The world is dealing with an unprecedented crisis, but that should not be used as an excuse to put off important decisions or to carry out unregulated fishing. If it's not regulated, it shouldn't be happening," she says. "No referee, no game."

Many coastal states, like the islands of the Maldives, rely on tuna pole-and-line fisheries for their food, says Burton. Industrial fleets threaten their survival.

"Fishing is the largest contributor to the GDP after tourism in the Maldives. The per capita consumption of tuna is the highest in the world at 150kg per person," he says.

Coastal communities globally live on increasingly

Old guard

"We need the bigger predators in the kelp forest, like reef fish, rays and sharks, to come back to keep this vulnerable ecosystem in balance. They have been hammered by overfishing and pollution." — Craig Foster, kelp forest conservationist and co-founder of the Sea Change Project

Meanwhile, wildlife appears to be making the most of the reduction in noisy boats. Footage shows unusually large pods of dolphins playing in the Hout Bay surf and thousands of seabirds on the west coast hunting anchovies

depleted fish stocks — ravaged by overfishing and poaching — and access to resources is often a struggle for them, as with many landlocked communities on the edge of protected wilderness areas.

They could become even more dependent on natural resources both during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Jo Shaw, WWF-SA senior manager: wildlife, says the crash in tourism with Covid-19 is likely to harm anti-poaching programmes and conservation, historically funded by the dollars flowing in from safaris and lodges.

"One of the things we will see is a shift in the socio-ecological systems: fewer jobs, fewer sources of income and more reliance on natural resources... The benefit of living around protected areas will have declined but the costs still remain — and that is a threat to conservation.

"Covid-19 is a massive disruptor, shaking everything up so quickly, so to some extent we have to see this as a catalyst for how to finance conservation going forward," she says.

About 5.4% of SA's territorial waters are marine protected areas, just over half the 9% of land protected areas.

Poaching on the seas could escalate in places under lockdown with the withdrawal — for example in the Sea of Cortez, off Mexico — of the boats and volunteers of the marine conservation organisation Sea Shepherd Global. The Sea Shepherd's nightly patrols have been saving creatures like the highly endangered vaquita, whales and turtles, from illegal longlining by poachers linked to organised wildlife crime networks. But the Sea Shepherd vessels and crew are in self-quarantine for now.

Even a break or slowdown in the coastal fishing industry across regions like the Mediterranean is unlikely to balance out the reduced controls on fishing vessels.

Meanwhile, rare shore sightings suggest that wildlife appears to be making the most of the reduction in noisy boats. Footage shows unusually large pods of dolphins playing in the Hout Bay surf and thousands of seabirds in Langebaan on the west coast hunting anchovies.

"It is probable that the national lockdown had a significant role to play in this — there are no people on the beach to disrupt the frenzy, and no boats or other craft in the water to distract or disturb them," Birdlife SA reports. "These will also be anchovy shoals due to the time of year and the fact that there is sadly very little sardine left on the west coast."

Unless people take stock of what's still left, instead of stockpiling tuna, human demand will continue to strip the ocean of its biodiversity and balance.

"We want to set up legal, sustainable fisheries, not just run an enforcement battle to keep abalone in the water," De Villiers said on Thursday, before racing off to catch poachers in Hermanus.



A school of damselfish. Picture: Shaha Hashim