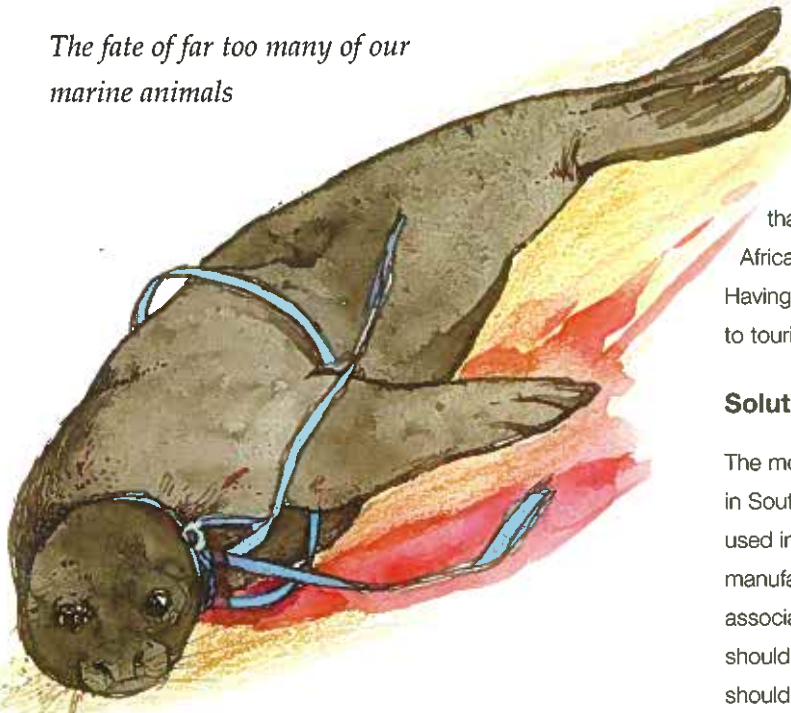


The fate of far too many of our marine animals



Biological impacts

Entanglement in and ingestion of litter affects a wide variety of marine animals and often causes their deaths. Off South Africa at least five species of mammals, 13 seabirds, two turtles and six fish species have been found entangled in marine litter. Although entanglement results in the death of many individuals, it appears that this is generally insufficient to threaten otherwise healthy populations.

Relative to entanglement, much larger numbers of marine animals ingest marine litter. Some pelagic seabirds that visit our waters have among the highest levels of plastic ingestion recorded, with almost every Great Shearwater (*Puffinus gravis*) or Blue Petrel (*Halobaena caerulea*) containing plastic in its stomach. When plastics accumulate in the stomach of an animal it doesn't feel hungry and starves to death.

Economic impacts

The direct economic impacts of litter in marine systems may be quantified. For instance, one study, based on insurance returns, estimated that in 1985, hundreds of millions of US dollars were lost to shipping and fishing companies as a result of damage and lost time caused by marine litter fouling of engines and equipment.

Another approach to quantifying the economic impacts of marine pollution is to consider the amount that local authorities spend on cleaning beaches. In South Africa, this amounts to approximately R8 million per year. Having beaches littered with debris may also be a deterrent to tourists and cost the country millions in lost tourist trade.

Solutions

The most effective way to tackle the marine litter problem in South Africa, may be to reduce the amount of material used in one-use applications, such as packaging. Plastics manufacturers should be responsible for the disposal costs associated with their products and re-use programmes should be supported by a deposit system. Public education should play an increasingly important role in addressing the litter problem, with communities encouraged to tackle the problem at its source.

A poverty alleviation project has been initiated in several areas to provide work and training programs for teams of beach cleaners.

Action

- South Africans need to be educated to reduce, re-use and recycle plastics to prevent them from polluting the marine environment.
- Join the thousands of South Africans who take part in an international "Coastal Cleanup" campaign. The annual cleanup serves to remove debris from beaches, collect valuable information about the amount and types of debris on our beaches and to educate people about plastic and other forms of marine pollution.

Legislation

Did you know that it is illegal to throw persistent litter such as plastics into the sea from a boat or a ship?

Author: Claire Attwood September 2000

FURTHER INFORMATION:

- Environmental Officer, Plastics Federation of South Africa, Private Bag X68, Halfway House, 1685. Tel: (011) 3144021/7 Fax: (011) 3143764. E-mail: dsteyn@plafed.co.za
- Dolphin Action & Protection Group, PO Box 2227, Fish Hoek, 7945. Tel: (021) 782 5845.

RELATED FACTSHEETS:

- Impacts of Human Activity on the Coast • Oil Pollution • Harbour Pollution • Beach Cleanups.

