



# ***Eastern African Marine Ecoregion: A Strategy for Success***

## **Eastern African Marine Ecoregion: A Biological Treasure**

The Eastern African Marine Ecoregion (EAME) stretches along the Eastern Africa coastline from Kismayu in Southern Somalia, through Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique, to Sodwana Bay in South Africa.

This globally outstanding Ecoregion supports a great diversity of plant and animal life, including some of the Indian Ocean's most diverse habitats. EAME is home to over 200 species of coral, 1,500 species of fish and over 3,000 species of mollusks. It hosts 34 marine mammals including the threatened dugong and all five species of the Indian Ocean turtles. It also supports major expanses of ecologically critical mangrove forests and seagrass beds. Approximately fifteen percent of the species in this Ecoregion are found nowhere else on earth.

### **A Critical Resource**

The Ecoregion sustains a coastal population of about 22 million people, with a population growth rate of 5-6% per year. Most of the coastal communities are involved in a wide range of artisanal activities that include fishing, mangrove harvesting, salt-production and coral mining. Fishing and tourism are the main large-scale commercial activities in the Ecoregion.

### **At Risk**

EAME'S biodiversity faces many challenges. Poorly planned coastal and watershed development, destructive fishing practices, pollution, and climate change are destroying fragile coral reefs and mangrove ecosystems. Over-fishing by local and foreign fleets is depleting marine food webs. These threats gravely endanger valuable marine resources and ecological systems that have long sustained the livelihoods and well-being of much of the coastal population.



*Furry Pincushion Starfish © Matt Richmond*

## **Ecoregion-Based Conservation: Action at Scale**

To take marine conservation to a level where it can actually reverse the global trends we are seeing today, it is critical that we shift our thinking to larger scales of conservation action. The ecological processes supporting biodiversity and the causes of degradation extend beyond the range of most site-specific projects. Within the tropical portion of the eastern African coast, the shores and coastal seas harbor a characteristic set of species, habitats, dynamics and ecological conditions. The coastal and marine plants and animals present in the region have adapted and evolved to live and breed in the consistent, reliable tropical conditions that prevail here. This coastal region, functioning largely as one unit or ecological region, is called the Eastern African Marine Ecoregion.

To reach the most effective scales for action, the key stakeholders in this biologically dynamic and inter-connected ecoregion had to develop a clear long-term vision and strategic plan. These will be used to guide the increased conservation effort required to ensure enduring success in such a complex system.

## Vision

A long-term (50 year) Biodiversity Vision for the Eastern African Marine Ecoregion was agreed by representatives from all five EAME countries in 2001. The goal is *to have a healthy marine and coastal environment that provides sustainable benefits for present and future generations of both local and international communities, who also understand and actively care for its biodiversity and ecological integrity.*

21 priority seascapes were established as targets for conservation, with 8 sites considered to be of global importance, and a further 13 sites identified as important at region or national levels.

## Strategic Framework

Key components:

- Conservation of priority seascapes
- Conservation of migratory and wide-ranging species
- Enhancing the enabling policy and legislative environment
- Developing sustainable livelihoods and economic development
- Building capacity, learning, and monitoring

## Creating a New Plan

Over the past four years, a full range of Eastern African agencies, in partnership with WWF, have developed a strategic plan for large-scale conservation approaches in the Ecoregion. The process of drawing up the EAME Conservation Strategy followed a number of steps. At the outset, in the reconnaissance phase, the ecoregion boundaries were determined and a review of biological, social and economic characteristics of the ecoregion undertaken. This was followed by the development of a Biodiversity Vision (see box) including identification of priority areas for action. Threats to biodiversity were identified and their root causes analyzed. On the basis of this, a strategy was formulated to combat the threats and build on opportunities to conserve the important biodiversity.

## Changing Approaches

Ecoregion conservation is undertaken in recognition of the need to implement conservation both in and beyond the traditional site level. The three principal components of the approach clearly forge a new path to conservation success. First is the development of a sound scientific basis through the collaborative development of biological priority areas and targets for the whole ecoregion (the Vision). Second, necessary action in the policy, legal and institutional environment is identified at national, ecoregional and international levels to ensure success on the ground. Third, action in the field is undertaken on the basis of an ecosystem or land/seascape approach that may stretch to the scale of the ecoregion when working on conservation of wide-ranging species. This approach is holistic and strategic, and aims to catalyze action by a full range of stakeholders.

## The Strategy

Dedicated representatives of academic, non-profit and governmental institutions from the countries of EAME worked together over the course of two years to develop a detailed strategic plan to guide the Ecoregion toward achieving the Biodiversity Vision. The Plan is comprised of a 20-year Strategic Framework outlining the key components of a comprehensive strategy, and detailed five-year Action Plans at both the national and ecoregional scales. Specific biological targets have been developed for each component that provide indicators of progress toward reaching the Vision.

## Building Partnerships for Lasting Results

Over the past four years, a strong network of partners in the Eastern African Marine Ecoregion, including government agencies, academic institutions from the region and abroad, national and international conservation organizations, and key groups from the development and economic sectors, have worked on this together through a series of workshops facilitated by WWF. During this process, participants decided to create an ecoregion-level coordinating mechanism comprised of National Committees – with each electing two representatives to a Regional Committee. As the programme of action in the Ecoregion proceeds, activities will be coordinated by a Secretariat, which will work with focal institutions in each country to provide required logistics and administrative support for local activities. With this solid partnership and an agreed strategy in hand, the nations of the Eastern African Marine Ecoregion are well prepared to take on the dynamic challenges they face in maintaining the rich biological heritage of this global treasure for decades to come.

Based on the foundation established through this process, WWF aims to maintain its long-standing commitment to helping conserve the marine biodiversity of Eastern Africa.

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