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**THE NORTHERN MOZAMBIQUE CHANNEL AREA OPPORTUNITIES FOR STRATEGIC
PARTNERSHIPS FOR A PROSPEROUS WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN**

Context

The shores and coastal waters of the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) are recognized globally for their biological richness, their role as corridors for migratory species, natural beauty and high ecological and socio-economic value. The region is one of the world's less ecologically disturbed ocean areas, with some of the Indian Ocean's most diverse coral reefs, mangrove forests and seagrass beds. The Mozambique Channel and East African coast are the prime habitat of the coelacanth, a 'living fossil' that illustrates the long term oceanographic stability of this region. The total area of coral reefs in the WIO is 11,060 km² (8% of the global area), and the mangrove is 8,897 km² (1.5% of the global area). Two countries (Madagascar and Mozambique) are among the fifteen nations sharing the most extensive mangroves in the world.

The Mozambique Channel experiences a highly energetic and variable regime of meso-scale circular currents (gyres, approx. 100-300 km across) that cause water to flow in all directions – north, south, east and west – and fundamentally affect the diversity and productivity of marine ecosystems within the channel. The rich fisheries, including major prawn fisheries and a regional tuna stock, are exploited not only by domestic fishing industries but also by foreign fishing fleets - not always to the benefit of the countries of the region (roughly 20% of the world tuna catches are from the southwestern Indian Ocean). Furthermore, near-shore fish stocks support a centuries old artisanal fishing industry and significantly contribute to the livelihoods and food security of the region's population

The Western Indian Ocean Coral Centre

The conventional view of coral diversity in the Indian Ocean is of declining species richness from east to west. However, this is now contradicted by a recent scientific finding that highlights a very high diversity center for Indian Ocean corals in the northern Mozambique Channel. This context makes the northern Mozambique Channel one of the world's globally outstanding marine biodiversity areas and a biological reservoir for the entire coastal East African region. Endemism is marked and overall reef diversity is second only to the Southeast Asia's Coral Triangle, with an estimated more than 400 hard coral species. The oceanographic mechanisms that have created the Coral Triangle are strongly paralleled in our landscape. Owing to its consequent high productivity, the Mozambique Channel is one of the most important breeding and foraging areas for key indicator and flagship marine species.

The importance of the northern Mozambique Channel was first identified by experts during a regional workshop under the auspices and direction of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) in November 2009, in Antananarivo. Currently, this key area is named the Northern Mozambique Channel Conservation Area (NMCCA) among the region's marine scientists. In 2012, an initial assessment of the Indian Ocean by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre Marine Programme identified the NMCCA as the highest priority new World Heritage Site. This decision was taken using various criteria (geology and oceanography; ecology and evolution; and habitat and conservation). Furthermore, the assessment identified numerous sites of potential Outstanding Universal Value within the NMCCA. The provisional demarcation of the NMCCA includes northern Madagascar, the Comoros Archipelago, northern Mozambique and southern Tanzania, and may extend as far as the southernmost Seychelles. In parallel, the NMCCA was subsequently integrated into the final list of areas meeting the EBSA (Ecologically or Biologically Significant Areas), thus reconfirming the area's outstanding global importance.

Challenges

The main challenge is poor ocean governance that is manifested in:

MPA governance and management: The insufficient coverage of MPAs in the WIO - a total area of 17,186 km² for MPAs corresponding to 4% of ocean shelf while the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) target is 10%. Because benefits are not usually perceived, MPAs do not obtain the political and public support they merit, which in turn leads to weak management effectiveness.

Fisheries in general: The coastal waters, lagoons, estuaries and continental shelves are important fishing grounds. The WIO region generates about 4.8% of the global fish catch, equivalent to about 4.5 million tons of fish per year (FAO, 2007), although this is likely to be an underestimate due to the under-reporting of catches by some countries. In most maritime countries, fisheries legislation requires updating and strengthening. Additionally, surveillance and enforcement of regulations are often inadequate because of a lack of resources and capacity. Efforts to assess and manage fisheries have also been hampered by scientific uncertainty, as most of the countries lack adequate human resources and financial or technical capacity to carry out scientific research needed to sustainably manage fish stocks.

Tuna fisheries: Weak IOTC effectiveness is widely accepted (no harvest control rules, no reference points, weak application of resolutions). Information received by the IOTC on bycatch data for sharks, seabirds and sea turtles (except from South Africa and the EU) is poor while WIO bycatch is only very poorly researched. Monitoring, control, and surveillance (MCS) of the EEZs is still a major challenge. For these reasons, the level of IOTC compliance is often low. Finally, it is widely perceived that the Fisheries Protocol Agreements are inequitable in terms of compensation to host nations and with respect to subsidies for distant water fishing fleets.

Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU fishing): Very few countries have paid sufficient attention to growing maritime threats, including IUU. Most frequently, the reasons include: weak governance, a lack of maritime domain awareness and command and control capability, and fragile regulatory and judicial structures. In addition, there may be a lack of political will, inadequate interagency co-ordination and inconsistent relationships with international partners. IUU fishing undermines efforts to conserve and manage fish stocks and is a significant threat to the economic and social wellbeing of WIO states. Vessels involved in IUU activities in the EEZs are largely from distant water fishing fleets, and their illegal activities include fishing in off-limit areas and misreporting or underreporting of catches.

Piracy: Since 2008, core maritime users of the WIO (commercial cargo, recreational and cruise, and fisheries) have been subject to piracy of Somali origin. It poses a serious development challenge, affecting employment and income while also leading to increased poverty. For example, piracy has resulted in a 4% decline in GDP for the fisheries-dependent economy of the Seychelles. The costs of providing security by maritime States are a serious strain on already restricted budgets, involving the costs of military personnel, equipment, patrols and surveillance. Piracy disrupts business planning and investment potential. Important economic investments may be postponed or abandoned. Thus, the establishment of new seafood services or industries is under threat in affected areas, weakening the already narrow competitive edge of certain coastal states. Similarly, industry layoffs are of real concern in many coastal states. Piracy has particularly depressed fish exports in island States that have few other sources of foreign exchange, with knock-on effects on balance of trade and currency stability.

Oil and gas development: Major gas discoveries off coastal East Africa mean that the NMCCA is rapidly becoming a global fossil fuel epicenter. Comparable hydrocarbon discoveries are also anticipated off Madagascar's west coast, while additional smaller reserves are predicted in the Comoros, the Seychelles and France's Scattered Islands. Virtually the entire East African coastline has been divided into exploration blocks, including areas with protected status, wildlife migration corridors, tourism development zones, and areas that support fish/prawn breeding and nurseries - mangroves, coral reefs, sea grass beds, and lagoons. Many challenges therefore arise with the development of the offshore petroleum sector (cf. WWF's discussion paper on oil and gas).

Shipping: Pollution is the current main area of concern. Response efforts are insufficient in terms of effective collaboration between environmental organizations, maritime governance agencies and shipping companies that integrate environmental concerns into marine operations. The Mozambique Channel is a major international maritime transportation route. The oil and gas discoveries are leading to increased maritime traffic and add a further environmental risk through seafloor seismic exploration.

Climate change: The main climate change concerns are higher sea surface temperatures, extreme weather events and changes in rainfall patterns. The region is ill prepared to manage and adapt to the impacts of climate change that threaten all coastal economic sectors. The natural resources that fuel the WIO region's economic development are under pressure from issues such as overfishing, inappropriate coastal zone planning, pollution and environmental degradation, all of which are exacerbated by climate change. Responding appropriately to climate change is thus an important priority within the framework of the region's sustainable development.

Solutions: Partnerships and Cooperation

The above challenges constitute significant risks for the WIO in general and, in particular, the globally important NMCCA. It is therefore urgent that the state parties take action to develop a coherent regional 'Ocean Governance Agenda.' This agenda should facilitate strengthened collaboration and synergy among maritime nations to address common issues including livelihoods, food security and revenue generation through fisheries, tourism and other forms of economic development within the NMCCA. The agenda would be an excellent instrument to channel existing platforms and programs that address specific environmental concerns. These include the Nairobi Convention, the IOC, the East African development communities (SADC, EAC), the Western Indian Ocean Coastal Challenge (WIOCC) initiative, WIO-Consortium and Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA). These regional fora are further complemented by international initiatives, notably EBSA/CBD, UNESCO World Heritage Convention and the IUCN High Seas Alliance. The Nairobi Convention COP7 delegates are well positioned to catalyze high political leadership leading to an effective multi-country and partner cooperation to design and implement this coastal governance agenda. Now is the most fitting time to develop the agenda given current development trends and emerging environmental issues and opportunities. Some of the key priorities to be addressed by the agenda are the need to effectively represent and conserve the outstanding biological richness of the NMCCA within a clear sustainable economic development framework that addresses improved livelihoods, food security, and wise planning of coastal and marine areas.

Potential Benefits to Member States

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A multi-stakeholder ocean governance agenda focused on the NMCCA would yield the following benefits to countries included in this globally significant conservation area:

- Strengthened public motivation and participation in coastal development across the region;
- Strengthened markets and trade across the region leading to robust economic growth;
- A more favorable climate for foreign investments that are well aligned with Nairobi Convention priorities;
- Improved capacity within governmental agencies for marine and coastal resource management and governance, including appropriate regional and national policy/legislative instruments regulating key sectors such as oil, gas, mining, tourism and fisheries;
- Improved international negotiation capacity regarding access to member states’ natural resources;
- Increase in fisheries productivity following stronger spatial planning and management of key production coastal areas, leading to enhanced food security, and therefore contributing to higher political stability;
- Increased financial gains to maritime states owning tuna resources through equitable fisheries agreements that are favorable to host nations and environmentally sound;
- Increased tourism revenues through the development of a world-class MPA network within an internationally recognized and transnationally managed NMCCA;
- International recognition for the efforts made by WIO states with regard to the sustainable management of their World Heritage Sites, leading to an raised political profile among international fora; and
- Inter-governmental cooperation to manage the widespread impacts of climate change.

Recommendations

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