

However, Efforts Underway to Protect Estuaries Are a Source of Hope.

Coastal and marine ecosystems represent essential income and livelihood sources for numerous coastal inhabitants, significantly contributing to the growing economies of the countries in the WIO region. The current (and conservative) estimate of the economic value of the goods and services provided by the WIO coastal and marine environment exceed 25 billion US dollars annually, considering its combined coastline of more than 15,000 km, including those of the island states, and a total continental shelf area of about 450,00 km² (UNEP 2009). Indeed, the value of the ecosystem services provided by coral reefs alone in the WIO region is estimated to exceed 7 billion US dollars per year, with mangroves adding nearly 9 billion US dollars in ecosystem services per year. In fact, the direct benefits obtained from coastal goods and services in South Africa alone, the largest economy in the region, is estimated to be equivalent to about 35% of the country's gross domestic product.

The region's beautiful sandy beaches mangrove forests, lagoons and coral reefs make tourism the largest income source directly linked to the WIO's coastal and marine environment. They attract more than 20 million tourists from all over the world each year injecting more than 6 billion US dollars into the economies of the WIO region countries each year, sustaining the livelihoods of those dependent on this activity for their well-being.

As previously highlighted in Section 1, the WIO region's marine waters, particularly its coastal waters, lagoons, estuaries and continentated shelves, are very important and lucrative fishing grounds. Indeed, the WIO region generates about 4.5 million tonnes of fish per year, equivalent to about 4.8% of the total global fish catch. It is suggested that this value actually may be an underestimate because of the under-reporting of fish catches by some WIO countries. Although not as productive as some better-known fishing grounds in the world, particularly those associated with upwelling systems, the WIO fisheries sector nevertheless continues to be of major importance in terms of food security, employment and income generation for the growing coastal population, providing food and livelihoods to about 61 million WIO coastal inhabitants.

In light of the overwhelming values of the WIO estuarine and related coastal ecosystems, governance and management of these critical assets are a critical factor in maintaining the valuable functions and services that they represent. Fortunately, the latest decade has seen an increasing attention to the importance of the marine and coastal environment of the region. This book itself is a display of some of the important scientific work that has and is being undertaken by scientists from the region and beyond. Also Government increasingly put attention to the matters at hand, with key bodies such as the Nairobi Convention, the south Western Indian Ocean Fisheries Commission, the Indian Ocean Commission, gaining maturity and strength.

The final chapters of this book provide a cross-cut of some of the systems and intervention being undertaken to conserve and manage the important estuarine and coastal ecosystems of the WIO region, including the river basins leading in to them.