

Cape Times

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Oceanic desert

REPORTS by BOC Challenge Yachtsmen arriving in Cape Town of the oceanic "desert" encountered on their voyages across the Atlantic suggest that South Africa has awoken to the problem just in time. The use of gill-nets has only recently been banned in coastal waters and warnings issued to fishing companies of all nations that their trawlers will be seized if gill-nets are found in their possession.

The conservation of marine life is essential not only for environmental reasons but also for economic ones. Stripping of the ocean may bring immediate profits but in the longer term destroys the capacity of the sea to produce a harvest at all. It could also have a disastrous effect on the coast as a tourist resource.

Seasides elsewhere in the world have become cesspools. The Mediterranean is practically dead. Tourists, in the words of Captour managing director John Robert, are now more conscious of "the need for a healthy, unpolluted environment". They are looking for it in the Cape which, for the first time in its history, expects a million or more visitors over the next year.

One of the inducements is the sight of whales gambolling close inshore. Southern Right whales and Humpbacks have always come here to calve, but their presence is being more appreciated. Strict regulations prevent them from being molested, and so-called "whale routes" are being promoted. Hermanus, for instance, has been flooded with whale-watchers.

The ominous aspect, however, to the yachtsmen's observations is that while whales and dolphins were sighted off the American and South African coasts, the ocean between the continents was, in contrast to 20 years ago, empty of mammal life. What is happening beyond range of the patrol vessels of responsible maritime nations? Can nothing be done to halt the plunder of the sea outside territorial waters?