Caring for seabirds at the Lüderitz seabird rehabilitation facility

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The small seabird rehabilitation facility at Lüderitz, which belongs to the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR), can hold up to about 50 birds. I have managed this facility since June 2000 as a volunteer, in collaboration with some staff from MFMR’s Lüderitz office. The majority of our “patients” are penguins, including oiled, injured or starved individuals, as well as abandoned chicks. Over the years we have also cared for small numbers of Cape Gannets, Cape Cormorants and Hartlaub’s Gulls, and, on the rare occasion, Swift Terns, Greater Flamingos, Wilson’s Storm-Petrels and even an abandoned South African Shelduck chick.

Most of the birds that are admitted to the facility originate from one of the three seabird breeding islands in southern Namibia that are permanently staffed by MFMR personnel (Mercury, Ichaboe and Possession islands) or from Halifax Island, which is regularly monitored. Others come from the Swakopmund / Walvisbay area and have already received care at the Swakopmund Seabird Rehabilitation facility, run by Sandra Dantu and Mark Boorman. The rest of our patients are reported from Lüderitz and surrounding areas by members of the public.
The number of birds receiving care at the facility at any one time varies greatly – sometimes we have no patients for several months. At other times we have a lot of birds, especially when there has been an oiling incident. Luckily we have not had to face a major oil spill to date. However, we have had several incidents over the last 16 years where more than 30 penguins needed to be rescued, washed and nursed back to health. The most notable of these was in April 2009, when altogether 171 oiled penguins were rescued from all four islands. Although we managed to stabilise and wash all of them, our facility was overcrowded and we were unable to give the best possible care to all penguins. Thanks to our ongoing good relationship with the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Seabirds (SANCCOB), we were able to evacuate the 129 strongest penguins to SANCCOB’s facility in Cape Town for further rehabilitation.

Various organisations and individuals were instrumental in carrying the costs for the evacuation and the rehabilitation of the penguins cared for in Lüderitz, including the Namibia Bird Club, whose special fundraising efforts at the time proved to be extremely valuable. Only six penguins were lost during this rescue (four in Lüderitz and two at SANCCOB); the other 165 penguins were successfully rehabilitated, ringed and released. Most of them have been seen subsequently on the Namibian islands, and many have been recorded breeding, clearly making the rescue and rehabilitation a worthwhile endeavour in the ongoing effort to conserve this endangered species.
The biggest expense during seabird rehabilitation is fish; a penguin usually will eat between four and eight sardines per day, depending on the condition of the bird and the size of the sardines. At the Lüderitz seabird rehabilitation facility, MFMR has a budget to carry this expense. However, this budget is limited, and additional fish sometimes needs to be bought from donations, especially during times when there is a large influx of birds.

Other sundry costs (e.g. water, infrastructure maintenance, and some basic equipment and medication) are also generally covered by MFMR, but often need to be supplemented by donations. Additional expenses, not covered by MFMR, include petrol, for example to rescue birds from the Lüderitz peninsula. As Lüderitz has no veterinary clinic, it is sometimes necessary to transfer birds to Swakopmund or to take them to Keetmanshoop for emergency surgery. We are lucky that to date all veterinary treatment has been gratuitous, and are particularly thankful to the Swakop Veterinary Clinic for their generous support.

2015 was a distinctly quiet year, with only 30 penguins, two gannets and one cormorant coming through the Lüderitz seabird rehabilitation facility. By contrast, May 2016 is proving to be busy with 16 penguins currently being cared for in Lüderitz. Eleven of these were found oiled on Mercury Island and are now recovering after being cleaned. In addition there are two adult penguins from Ichaboe Island that were bitten by seals. They had been sent to Swakopmund in March for veterinary treatment and received subsequent care by Sandra Dantu and Mark Boorman before returning to Lüderitz; their wounds are healing nicely. Two young birds are receiving treatment for an injured shoulder / eye, and one abandoned chick from Mercury Island is being raised.
I would herewith like to extend a BIG thank you for the valuable financial support the seabird rehabilitation effort in Lüderitz has received over the years from the Namibia Bird Club. Your donations have been helping us immensely, especially during emergency situations.