Marine Important Bird Areas (IBA) Programme in India

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Introduction

India has one of the longest shorelines in the world and many pelagic birds are found in Indian waters and along the coast (Singh 2003). It has been documented that as many as 300,000 seabirds are being caught on the hook annually as bycatch (http://www.birdlife.org/action/science/species/seabirds/seabird_calling_card.pdf). Hence, there is considerable international attention for the conservation of pelagic birds. Unfortunately, we do not have much data on the bird mortality by bycatch of longline fishing in Indian waters. Information about our pelagic birds is scanty and is limited to the records of stray pelagic birds blown to the coast by monsoon gales.

BirdLife International's Important Bird Area (IBA) Programme is a method of identifying the most significant sites for birds globally. These sites, called IBAs, can then form the basis for more detailed conservation planning, and the focus for practical advocacy, action and monitoring. In India, Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) have already identified 466 IBAs with the help of its members and volunteers (Islam & Rahmani 2004).

Background

Although the identification stage of the Important Bird Area (IBA) programme is currently approaching completion in terrestrial environment; the process is still at an early stage in the marine realm. The process of identification of marine IBAs has already been completed in many countries like Portugal, Spain, Australia, Japan and U.K.

Extending the IBA programme to the oceans, while a logical and significant development, has posed both conceptual and practical challenges. IBAs have formed a significant scientific reference in most of the countries and even in India they are getting recognised as priority sites for conservation. It is therefore appropriate that the IBA selection criteria should be reviewed and, as necessary, adapted, in order to use them to identify marine IBAs in India.

Types of marine IBAs: Osieck (2004) has recognized four types of marine IBAs as described below, that include the different aspects of pelagic birds at-sea activities. It should be noted that there is some overlap between non-breeding (coastal) congregations and areas for pelagic species.

1. Seaward extensions to breeding colonies: While, many seabird breeding colonies have already been identified as IBAs, their boundaries have been, in almost all cases, confined to the land on which the colonies are located. The boundaries of these sites can, in many cases, be extended to include those parts of the marine environment which are used by the colony for feeding and social interactions. Such extensions are limited by the foraging range, depth and/or habitat preferences of the species concerned. The seaward boundary is, as far as possible, colony-specific and/or species-specific, based on known or estimated foraging and maintenance behaviour. Pitti Island, Lakshadweep, for example, holds more than 20,000 terns and noddies is one such site where seaward extension needs to be considered (Islam & Rahmani 2004).
2. Non-breeding (coastal) concentrations: These include sites, usually in coastal areas, which hold feeding and moulting concentrations of water-birds, such as divers, grebes and benthos-feeding ducks. They could also refer to coastal feeding areas for boobies, noddies, shearwaters, etc. Sites like the Burnt Island (Vengurla Rocks), Maharashtra, which are already declared as an IBA (Islam & Rahmani 2004), will qualify this criteria.
3. Migratory bottlenecks: These are sites whose geographic positioning enable the pelagic birds to fly over or round in the course of regular migration. These sites are normally determined by topographic features, such as headlands and straits.
4. Areas for pelagic species: These sites comprise marine areas remote from land where pelagic birds regularly gather in large numbers. These areas usually coincide with specific oceanographic features, such as shelf-breaks, eddies and upwellings, and their biological productivity is invariably high.

A workshop on the Marine IBAs was held at Hornbill House, BNHS on 28 September 2010 and a select group of biologists working in the marine environs of India attended this workshop. This workshop aimed at developing the strategies and future action plan towards identification of Marine IBAs with in the geographical limits of India.

We request all the marine biologists and ornithologists working on pelagic birds to join Indian Bird Conservation Network (IBCN) and share their data on marine birds which will help in the identification of marine IBAs in India. The data shared will be acknowledged in all publications.

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