ENDANGERED

Migratory birds risk pollution

Protecting precious wildlife from the scourge of perilous plastics

ALBI MODISE

ON SATURDAY South Africa and the global community marked the World Migratory Bird Day, a day set aside annually to raise awareness and educate the public on the plight of migratory bird species.

World Migratory Bird Day was initiated in 2006 by the Secretariat of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals, in collaboration with the Secretariat of the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (Aewa).

This year's celebrations were held under the theme "Protect Birds: Be the Solution to Plastic Pollution!" It places the spotlight on the negative impact of plastic pollution on migratory birds, particularly ocean birds and their habitats.

The bi-annual campaign not only raises awareness about the need for conservation of migratory birds and their habitats, but also about the threats they face, their ecological importance and the need for international co-operation to conserve these species.

The timing of the International World Migratory Bird Day is interrelated to the departure of migratory birds from the Southern Hemisphere to the Northern Hemisphere for the summer. However, large numbers of birds are killed on their return flight from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere, due to anthropogenic behaviour and, among other things, plastic pollution.

Marine litter has become a matter of increasing global and national concern as a source of marine pollution. More than 300 million tons of plastics are produced annually, making it one of the most widely used materials worldwide. Plastics are ubiquitous and last for decades, or even hundreds of years, resulting in mountains of waste once they are discarded, most of which are only used once. They persist in the environment and many end up in landfill sites, but also in rivers and ultimately the ocean. The presence of plastic threatens migratory birds worldwide, either through entanglement in, for example, fishing nets, and ingestion of small items of plastic.

Large numbers of birds are also smothered by plastic rings, and some sea birds, such as cormorants, gannets and gulls, have been seen incorporating plastic in their nesting materials. In a study published in 2015, South Africa was ranked 11th in a list of top 20 countries for mismanaged waste, which could potentially become marine litter.

Furthermore, more than 80% of all marine litter is composed of

plastic. The adverse effects of plastic on marine species has been receiving widespread attention globally for some time. Aewa indicates that the number of sea birds dying from the effects of plastic annually is about a million, and growing. Sea birds were among the first bird species to contain ingested plastic around the 1960's. It is further suggested that at least 40% of all sea bird species contain ingested plastic and some have been recorded entangled by plastic. Due to the vast distances travelled by some sea birds, plastics can be dispersed to uninhabited islands. Existing research pinpoints the urgency of the matter: not only do more than 40% of sea birds have plastic in their gut, but this proportion will reach 99% by 2050 if there is no intervention.

In December 2018, the 7th Meeting of the Parties to Aewa agreed on measures to tackle threats from climate change and to increase protection of individual species and sea birds. Furthermore, a study on plastic and water birds was commissioned by Aewa, to look at the impacts that plastics have on water birds and suggested possible monitoring tools to track interactions between water birds and plastics.

The Durban Plan of Action for Africa presented a renewed framework for responding to contemporary water bird conservation issues in Africa. Among the Resolutions adopted was on Aewa's contribution to the Aichi Targets and the Agreement's relevance to the Sustainable Development Goals, strengthening the monitoring of migratory water birds, guidance on the implementation of the Aewa Action Plan, climate resilient flyways, financial and institutional arrangements.

South Africa has numerous interventions to dealing with marine litter, including plastic pollution, like the Working for the Coast Programme, as an Extended Public Works Project, aimed at creating jobs through dealing with challenges emanating from the coast, among which includes the clearing of litter from beaches nationally. Additionally, in 2014, the Department launched its National Coastal Management Programme, under the National Environmental Management: Integrated Coastal Management Act, to prioritise the management of pollution in the coastal zone.

The Department will soon launch the Source-to-sea Programme, under the broader auspices of Good Green Deeds, to address the growing concern of litter from inland river systems, including catchment systems,

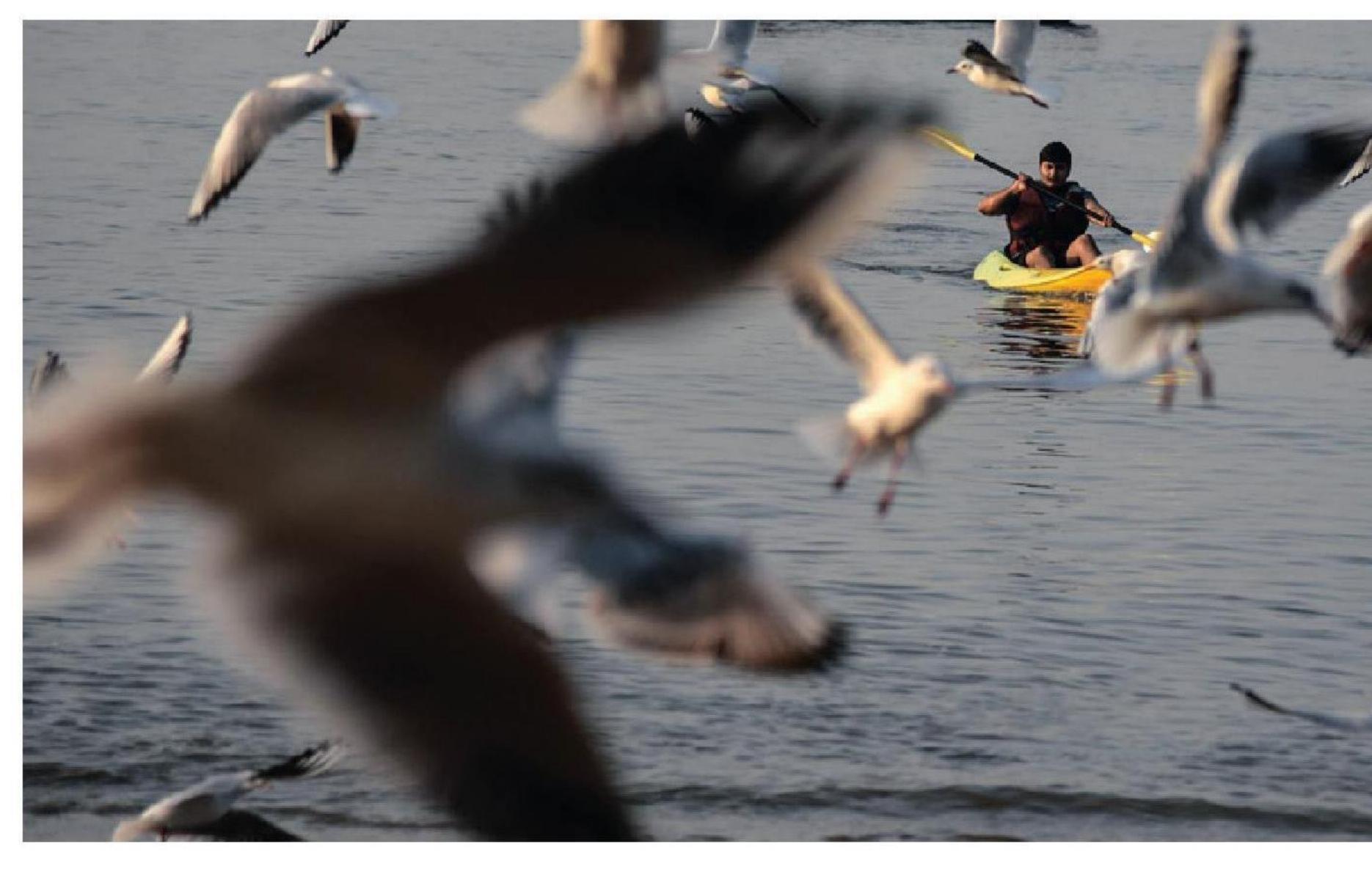
therefore reducing marine litter. Additionally, South Africa has amended its fiscal and waste management policy to introduce environmental levies for plastic bags and is looking at investments in plastic palletization plants, which is also emphasised under the Operation Phakisa initiative as one of the best available ways to divert plastic waste from landfill sites. Lastly, South Africa has also conducted a Plastic Material Flows and End of Life Management Study to assess the current status, with regard to the production and management of plastics and identified barriers to improving the diversion of plastics from landfill sites.

These above-mentioned interventions will assist events, such as World Migratory Bird Day, in protecting our delicate wildlife, and some are ideal opportunities for communities to take action in mitigating unnecessary injuries suffered by migratory birds as a result of plastic waste, and to contribute to a decrease in the mortality of these birds due to plastic pollution.

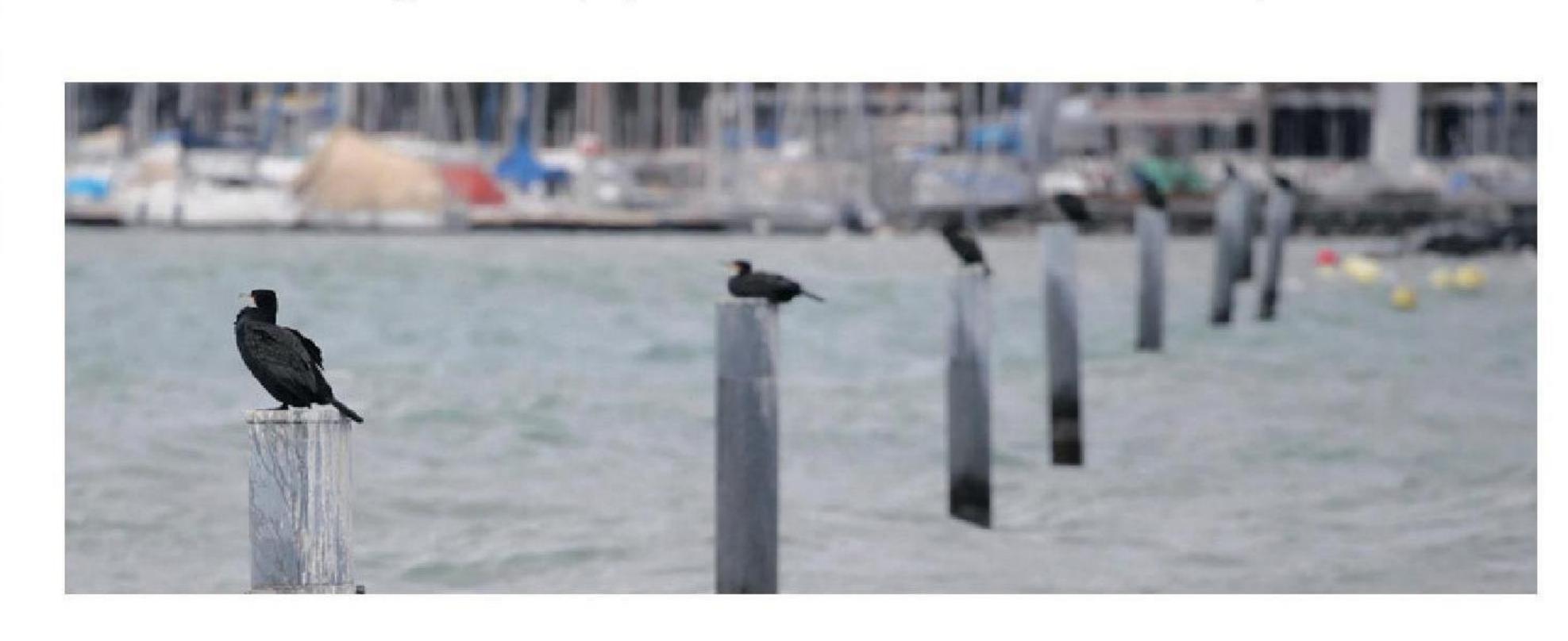
World Migratory Bird Day allows for all to stand together and unite, to fight and alleviate this rapidly growing environmental problem. The Department of Environmental Affairs would like to urge the citizens of the country to continue with the Good Green Deeds, to ensure that our country is free from litter and illegal dumping, that eventually ends up in our oceans and affects our precious marine life.

* Modise is the Head of Communications at the national Department of Environmental Affairs

JUVENILE Cape Gannets are kept warm before their release in Cape Town. | AP Archives



A MAN feeds the seagulls as they fly over the Arabian Sea coast in Mumbai, India.



CORMORANTS are pictured during a windy winter afternoon in Lausanne, Switzerland. REUTERS Archives



SEAGULLS enjoy their meal from a

generous stranger, near Blouberg beach.