

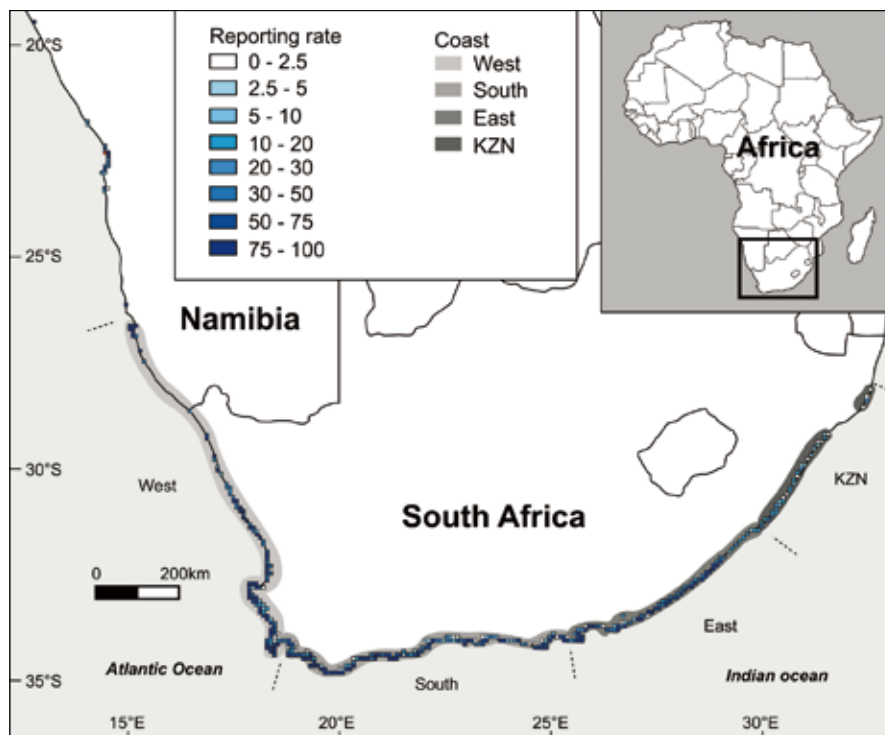
IT ALL COUNTS

Long-term monitoring confirms conservation success story

The South African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP) is without doubt the best long-term citizen science dataset in Africa and is probably one of the best anywhere in the world. For many of us, atlasing is an incredibly rewarding activity that has enhanced our birdwatching. Not only does it add purpose to our birding trips, but it also enables us to feel a real sense of accomplishment by contributing to the 'greater good' of conservation.

But does it really make a difference? Can scientists extract meaningful conclusions from the vast sets of data we submit? The answer is an emphatic yes! In a recent paper (Brown et al. 2019), colleagues and I tell an amazing conservation success story based on SABAP data. Using data from the South African coastline, we compared the first (1987–1991) and second (2008–2017) SABAP periods and annual data within SABAP2 to investigate changes in the range and relative abundance of the African Oystercatcher. We did this to corroborate the recent downlisting of the species' IUCN Red List status from Near Threatened in 2000 (Underhill 2000) to Least Concern in 2015 (Taylor et al. 2015), based on its documented range expansion into KwaZulu-Natal and reported total population increases.

Using advanced statistical tools, co-author Dr Alan Lee was able to show that the reporting rate for African Oystercatchers between the two SABAP time periods has increased by between five and 16 per cent along the coastline. This confirms the doubling in population within selected areas of the Western Cape over 30 years, between 1981 and 2011 (Ryan 2013). The analysis also showed a seven per cent increase in range, confirming previous data from KwaZulu-Natal. The fine-scale



analysis of SABAP2 data suggests that the population has been stable since 2008, with KwaZulu-Natal still showing an increasing reporting rate over time.

So not only are African Oystercatchers bucking the conservation trend (justifying the change in their Red Data status), but it's a feather in the cap for all citizen scientists who have contributed to SABAP over the years – the data are enabling meaningful assessments at a conservation management level. Well done!

MARK BROWN

African Oystercatcher reporting-rate data from SABAP2 (2008–2017), which show an increase in reporting rate since SABAP 1 and a consistent reporting rate during SABAP2, indicating a now stable population.

References

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