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CONFERENCE PAPER

Seagrass beds in the Western Indian Ocean region

Seagrass ecosystems cover wide expanses of the intertidal and subtidal zones of the WIO region. Worldwide the value of these ecosystems has been estimated to be $ 19,400 ha^{-1} yr. These ecosystems are critical in their support of a valuable fishery which contributes to the livelihoods of coastal communities, and support habitats for a diverse assemblage of plant and animal species. Ecologically, the presence of seagrasses is important as their rhizomes and roots anchor them to the soft sandy substrates characteristic of coastal areas resulting in sediment stabilization, nutrient uptake and protection of the coastlines from strong oceanic currents. Seagrass beds are now also recognized for carbon sequestration whose value of carbon storage capacity is just being understood worldwide.

In the WIO region, the seagrass ecosystems are subjected to a variety of threats. Such threats include nutrient seepage from increased urbanization of coastal zones, overfishing that has changed the predator prey balances and caused the overgrazing in seagrass beds and the decline of seagrass plants and their functionality. Other threats include climate change although its implications on seagrass beds are yet to be fully understood.

Through the support of WIOMSA and the US based SeagrassNet programme seagrass scientists have been working both individually and in groups to strengthen the knowledge base on seagrass ecosystem dynamics. The studies have ranged from the taxonomy and functionality of these critical habitats to monitoring of habitat change in selected areas in the region. Currently, the management aspects of seagrass habitats in Kenya are being addressed through the development of a national coral reef and seagrass conservation and management strategy by the National Coral Reef Task Force funded through the World Bank Kenya Coastal Development Project.

Considering the importance of seagrass ecosystems, their critical contribution to marine and coastal ecosystems, and the need to direct concerted efforts on their sustainable management a regional WIO Seagrass Network of scientists, managers and policy makers from government and NGO institutions is proposed. A technical paper on the proposed network will be presented before Contracting Parties during COP7 for a decision on the formation of the network. Such a network would enhance the collaborative effort of scientists and managers for better understanding of seagrass ecosystems and informed management. Contracting Parties

will be requested to support the national and regional levels network. (See UNEP-DEPI-EAF-CP.7.Inf17-en for details).