

CLOSE VICINITY OF FORAGING AREAS AND BREEDING SITES MAY EXPLAIN POSITIVE POPULATION TRENDS OF ENDANGERED BANK CORMORANTS AT MERCURY ISLAND, NAMIBIA

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The Bank Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax neglectus*), endemic to the Benguela Region, is declining throughout its range. In Namibia the population crashed between 1993 and 1998 and has not recovered.

Mercury Island is the only breeding site where the local breeding population has recovered from the crash. It represents today more than 80% of the Namibian subpopulation and more than 70% of the world's population, making Mercury Island the largest breeding site for this endangered species.

We studied the foraging behaviour of breeding Bank Cormorants from Mercury Island during the breeding season 2007-08 using data logger technology. Foraging areas were identified through MiniGPS devices attached to birds recording their locations at sea. Dive depth recorders allowed a detailed analysis of diving behaviour during foraging. Additionally, we investigated the diet of breeding Bank Cormorants from pellet analysis.

Areas frequently used for foraging by breeding cormorants were located within close vicinity to the island (maximum distance 5km). During the study period, all birds used almost identical areas, showing strong preferences for an area southwest of the island. Birds were mostly feeding at the sea bottom, diving to an average depth of 25m. The diet of Bank Cormorants at Mercury Island consisted almost entirely of Pelagic Goby (*Sufflogobius bibarbatus*). Size distribution of otoliths in the pellets confirm bottom diving by cormorants because demersal adult gobies are the main prey taken.

Increasing numbers of breeding pairs and good breeding success of Bank Cormorants at Mercury Island seem to be due, in part, to good prey availability in the vicinity of the island. Incorporating the identified feeding grounds into the Marine Protected Area (MPA) planned along the southern Namibian coast would be vital to ensure the future of this endangered species.