

Fisheries research resumes with Ellen Khuzwayo relaunch

While the Ellen Khuzwayo was laid up for seven months, a significant survey gap arose, which is now closing as she returns to her duties.



Critical research functions, such as rock lobster quota allocation, have resumed and new data windows are being developed, which will inform findings. She has already tackled a number of lobster and shark-longline research voyages. The vessel has also completed the first of several voyages to monitor the recovery of the benthic ecosystem in South African waters, following the ban on bottom trawling off Port Nolloth.

Playing a critical research role

The Ellen Khuzwayo was built in Cape Town by Farocean Marine and commissioned in 2007. She's primarily a research vessel focusing on rock lobsters, line fish, sharks, pelagic long lining, marine mammal research and scientific diving. The vessel is equipped for environmental research to depths of 1,000m and, operating mainly within South Africa's EEZ, is used as part of the South African Government's commitment to the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem (BCLME).

To perform her primary function, the vessel has an acoustic lab, hydrology wet and dry labs, a CTD wet lab, an operations room and a wet fish deck.

Meeting international maritime requirements

In May 2013, the SA Navy returned the DAFF fleet, including the fisheries research vessel Ellen Khuzwayo to the DAFF. After extensive repairs and Flag/Class surveys, she returned to operational service in December 2013.

The layup was necessary to reinstate the vessel to meet local and international statutory maritime requirements. During the seven months she was out of commission, Nautic South Africa, the current vessel managers for the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF), focused on getting the vessel compliant.

Management of port calls

Once she was ready to return to sea duty, Nautic South Africa's focus shifted to maintaining her operational availability and managing her port calls.

A fully operational vessel conducting regular surveys and making frequent port calls presents an exciting challenge to the Nautic South Africa vessel operations team. Port calls have to be carefully planned, so all supplies, vessel- and equipment-repair teams, fuel supplies, etc. are ready the moment the vessel comes alongside. Weather also needs to be taken into account in this critical planning role. As is the nature of the business, the Nautic South Africa team has to be flexible on timings as vessels don't always run to schedule and sometimes arrive a day earlier or a day later than anticipated.

"Careful and detailed planning is often a nice luxury to have, but in this phase of operations, we rely heavily on the experience and skills of our management and support teams. With no time to lose, our team is able to pull rabbits out the hat and meet the stringent demands of short port calls," says Eddie Noble, Project Director for Nautic's operations team.

Port calls involve regular logistic supply functions such as re-fuelling of the vessel, victualing (supply of food), consumables and crew swop-outs. However, there are always some issues that require urgent attention, such as spare parts and coordinating specialist contractors to carry out repairs and maintenance of equipment.

Necessitating innovative management processes

Nautic South Africa has developed an innovative process that allows it to handle quick turnarounds. A proven network of supply companies able to react at short notice, plus a store of essential items that reduces lead times, gives Nautic South Africa the edge and enables it to keep operation downtime to a minimum and sea time at maximum.

Headed up by Anne Myers, Nautic's Vessel Operations Manager, the team is experienced in the various aspects of vessel management and support, and ably supported by key companies in the local maritime industry. "Having a competent and versatile local maritime industry is a significant advantage, but the trick also lies in the ability to quickly identify and direct exactly what we need. Our team's unique skills set and knowledge of the vessels, their operations and specific requirements allows us to achieve this," says Myers.

Port calls and the management thereof are done for other vessels besides the Ellen Khuzwayo. Nautic South Africa handles all four of the DAFF vessels currently operational around the South African coastline. Myers is able to juggle the team's activities to meet all the client's operational demands.

The sea never rests and neither does Nautic South Africa. The company is looking to expand its vessel operations management capabilities, and currently is tendering for the vessel management and technical assistance to Robben Island Museum's ferries. This would be a natural extension of Nautic's current services, and would enable improved economies of scale.

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