

**Opening remarks by the MEC for Economic Development and Environmental Affairs, Michael Mabuyakhulu on the occasion of the Sharks International Conference held at the Elangeni Hotel, Durban on 2 June 2014**

Programme Director, Jeremy Cliff

The KZN Sharks Board Maritime Centre of Excellence Chairperson, Mr. Sipho Mkhize and the Board Members present;

The KZN Sharks Board Maritime Centre of Excellence CEO, Mr. Mthokozisi Radebe;

All dignitaries present;

All Sponsors present;

Delegates to Sharks International;

Members of the media;

All protocol observed;

Ladies and gentlemen;

Good morning!

It is a pleasure for us to greet and welcome you all to KwaZulu-Natal, a province which, our international guests in particular, would have no doubt already noticed only has two seasons all year round – summer and summer.

Constant proof of this claim can be found in the fact that whilst we are now in the middle of winter, our ideal geographic location on the east coast – facing the warm Indian Ocean means that we can afford to spend time on the beach even in winter.

Programme Director, we are indeed very blessed as the Province of KwaZulu – Natal to be playing host to a conference attended by the crème de la crème of global speakers and researchers who are at the cutting edge of research into the habits and livelihoods of the shark and ray specimens.

It is our expectation, ladies and gentlemen, that the selection of speakers who will

submit extracts and oral presentations during the duration of this conference will give us an opportunity to further understand the behavioural and survival patterns of these regal but oft misunderstood aquatic creatures.

This conference, therefore, seeks to stimulate fresh thinking and creative ideas on how we can mitigate the threats that we as human-beings sometimes pose to not only the elasmobranch species but to nature and other living organisms in general.

Programme Director, we note with some concern that this affair occurs after a four-year hiatus, given that the previous international Sharks Conference was last held in Australia in 2010.

In this regard, and given the urgent and critical need to facilitate the sharing and discussing of new knowledge of species biology, status and threats, we hope that this year's instalment of the affair will serve as a call to action to other stakeholders globally in the marine biology space to emulate the actions of the KZN Sharks Board Maritime Centre of Excellence and do their bit to ensure that this conference becomes an annual occurrence.

For its part, KwaZulu-Natal has always been of maintaining peaceful relations between sharks and humans. As the only province in the country and indeed the world which boasts an institution such as the Sharks Board Maritime Centre of Excellence, we boast the proud record of being the global leader in protecting bathers from shark attacks. But over and above this, and as attested to by our participation in this week's proceedings, the Centre also takes a keen interest in research on all marine-living resources.

However, it has always been our belief that there is a lot we can achieve if we work with other like-minded organisations which are also in the maritime sector.

In this regard, the KZN Sharks Board Maritime Centre of Excellence has forged active partnerships with Seychelles with the aim of assisting that country, which has previously borne the brunt of increased incidences of shark attacks in the areas of:

- Formulation of extensive prevention measures
- Identification of shark species with the aim of determining what may have triggered the attacks

- Devising methods of abating or removing the particular shark threat
- Identification and list of other biological and anthropogenic factors that may be considered such as disposal of food from yachts and other leisure vessels and what effects these may have on shark feeding behaviour.

As many of us are aware, KwaZulu-Natal is one of the provinces in the country which, its smorgasbord of tourism products, has 900 kilometres of pristine coastline. This coastline is also the natural habitat of sharks and their cartilaginous relatives, rays, which all play an important role in the marine ecosystem. We therefore owe it to them to create a harmonious existence.

Sharks and their direct predecessors have been swimming in the world's oceans for well over 300 million years, long before dinosaurs walked the Earth. The fact that sharks have survived for so long without changing very much is a real tribute to the effectiveness of their anatomy.

Sharks are fascinating creatures, surrounded by myth and misconception. To many, sharks symbolize the very essence of ruthlessness, representing the ultimate savages of the natural world. Most people would rather not intentionally socialize with these fearsome predators. But we are pleased to see that attitudes towards sharks are changing and more and more people are wanting to see sharks, even if it is on television screens from the comfort of their own lounges or from the safety of boats. Education and awareness are cornerstones to promoting conservation and sustainable utilisation of natural resources.

Despite this, many shark populations are dwindling due to heavy commercial fishing and the general attitude that they are nothing more than a nuisance. The demand for shark fin soup continues and sharks, being slow growing and long-lived creatures with low reproductive capacity, are not able to replace themselves fast enough. We must respect these animals and give them the space they need to live.

South Africa as a nation recognizes the need for sustainable utilization of resources. This is manifest in the form of a National Plan of Action to manage shark fishing and to protect shark stocks. South Africa is committed to the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries. It is also signatory to various international conventions such

as CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) and CMS (Conservation of Migratory Species).

There are over 500 species of sharks and 600 species of rays in the world's oceans. Southern Africa (including Namibia, South Africa, and Mozambique) has one of the most diverse shark and ray faunas with more than 200 species known to occur in this region. Globally the diversity of sharks and their relatives has increased exponentially over the past decade with more than 200 new species having been described over the past decade. This represents nearly 20% of all shark species that have been described. Most of these new discoveries have come from the Indo-Australian region, followed by the western North Pacific and southern African regions.

For the above reasons, we take special pride in aligning ourselves with initiatives such as this Sharks International Conference, aimed at ensuring the long term survival of these creatures.

In closing, ladies and gentlemen, we would like to again express our gratitude opportunity to all the delegates in attendance for making the educated choice of visiting the province of KwaZulu – Natal.

We know that Wednesday is a free day for the delegates, with no presentations on that day. Many you have booked on the mid conference tours on offer, which range from a cultural tour of Durban and surrounds, scuba diving at Aliwal Shoal, a visit to the Midlands Meander or a trip to Tala Game Reserve and out township tourism offerings.

We trust that all the delegates will take the opportunity to explore our exciting smorgasbord of tourist destinations in the province after the conference.

A special thanks to the conference's other sponsors and benefactors, who have all helped to curtail costs and ensure low registration fees.

Once again, we wish you all a productive conference and a memorable stay in KwaZulu-Natal.

I thank you!

