

Akshata Mehta

Director, Terra Mare Consulting (www.terramareconsulting.org)

PhD Candidate, Department of Biodiversity & Conservation Biology at the University of the Western Cape

My research areas of interest include marine social-ecological systems, human dimensions of marine and coastal ecosystems, ecosystem services, and climate change and resilience. I am passionate about science communication and engagement.

Education

MPhil in Climate Change and Sustainable Development, with distinction

March 2022

African Climate and Development Initiative and Bioeconomy Research Chair

Department of Environmental & Geographical Science, Faculty of Science, University of Cape Town

Topic: Golden Forests of the Sea: *Assessing Values and Perceptions of Kelp in the Western Cape Region of South Africa*

Bachelor of Arts, cum laude

May 2014

The College of Idabo, Idabo, United States of America

Majors: International Political Economy, Literature in English **Minors:** Business, Mathematics

Research and Leadership Experience

Newsletter Editor

January 2023 to present

Phycological Society of Southern Africa (PSSA)

- Produce and edit quarterly newsletters highlighting developments in phycology in Southern Africa
- Liaise with all office-bearing PSSA positions to produce annual reports
- Develop the newly launched PSSA website <https://phycologysa.co.za/>

Research Associate

October 2021 to present

University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

Research

- Engage in various research projects (EXEBUS, BlueConnect, iAtlantic) within areas of interest and collaborate on scientific publications
- Teach the Ecosystem Services and Valuation Methods module for the BDC334: Macroecology and Global Biogeography course
- Provide administrative support for Prof Albertus J Smit's research team and manage science communication activities

Project Management

- Manage a transdisciplinary 3-year scientific research project (EXEBUS) that looks at the ecological and economic impacts of the intensification of Extreme Events in the Benguela Upwelling System.
- Develop stakeholder engagement surveys using tools like Kobo toolbox and run stakeholder workshops in coastal communities
- Manage the resource mobilization, budget allocation and accounting for each of the EXEBUS Work Packages and their Case Studies
- Develop accessible content based on scientific findings for stakeholder engagement and communication
- Coordinate reporting cycles and develop required reports and funding proposals for various funders and committees, including the Belmont Forum, National Research Foundation (South Africa) and National Science Foundation (USA)
- Provide social science and research and data support to the EXEBUS team in the form of questionnaire creation, literature reviews, participatory mapping, and data visualization

Research Consultant

March 2022 to November 2022

Global Choices, United States

- Assessed environmental science and policy for Global Choices, specifically looking at Arctic and Antarctic policies of Member States and Indigenous groups as well as the High Seas Treaty (Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction)
- Analysed and communicated climate science, negotiations and environmental treaties for a wide variety of audiences.

Selected Recent Outputs

Publications

- Mehta, A. *et al.* (2024) 'Embracing diversity: enhancing the management of South Africa's kelp forests in an era of change', *Botanica Marina*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/bot-2023-0058>.
- Mehta, A. *et al.* (2023) 'Exploring local perceptions around the value of marine biodiversity: the case of kelp in the Western Cape, South Africa', *Ecosystems and People*, 19(1), p. 2234499. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/26395916.2023.2234499>.
- Zimmerhackel, J., **GEAK Network**, *et al.* (2024) 'Dependency of commercial fisheries on kelp forests for valuation of ecosystem services', *AgEcon*. Available at: <https://mnhn.hal.science/mnhn-04420970/document>
- Prew, Z., Reddy, M., **Mehta, A.**, Dyer, D. and Smit, A. J. (2024). "The African seaforest: a review" *Botanica Marina*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/bot-2023-0060>.

Science Communication and Research Contributions

- Mehta, A. (2024). Case Study: Kelp (*Ecklonia Maxima* and *Laminaria Pallida*), *People & Plants*. Available at: <https://www.peopleandplants.org/kelp>.
- Champion, G., Mehta, A., Strand, M. (2024). Marine art deepens our understanding of the oceans. Here's how it has evolved through the centuries. *The Conversation*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/marine-art-deepens-our-understanding-of-the-oceans-heres-how-it-has-evolved-through-the-centuries-237082>
- Mehta, A. Kelp: South Africa's Golden Forests. (2023), <https://youtu.be/RuAO304lp1s> [Official selection for the Goethe Institut's Science Film Festival 2023, Suncine International Environmental Film Festival, and IFF Ekotopfilm Envirofilm Festival. Previously screened at MPA Day 2024, the Ocean Innovation Summit in Cape Town, Two Oceans Aquarium Kelp Night, 33rd Congress of the Phycological Society of Southern Africa.
- Case Study 5: Great African Seaforest (Research Contribution). United Nations Environment Programme, & Norwegian Blue Forests Network (2023). *Into the Blue: Securing a Sustainable Future for Kelp Forests*. <https://wedocs.unep.org/20.500.11822/42255>.
- Mehta, A. "Golden Forests: The Perceived Value of South African Kelp." *Bio-Economy Research Chair*, 7 Nov. 2022, <https://bio-economy.org.za/golden-forests-the-perceived-value-of-south-african-kelp/>.

Conferences, Symposiums, and Workshop Presentations

- Mehta, A. Film and Ocean as Method and Art Roundtable Panellist. The Flowing Image: The Ocean on Screen Conference. August 2024. University of Southampton, United Kingdom.
- Mehta, A. BLUECONNECT: Blue growth opportunities in changing kelp forests. SANOCEAN Concluding Conference. September 2023, Oslo, Norway.
- Mehta, A. Golden Forests of the Sea: Assessing Values and Perceptions of Kelp in the Western Cape. 33rd Congress of the Phycological Society of Southern Africa. January 2023, Arniston, South Africa.
- "Sea State" as an Extreme Event: Investigating the impact of worsening sea state on small-scale fishers. EXEBUS Workshop. October 2022, Swakopmund, Namibia.
- Sweijd, N., Gaines, S., Smit, A.J., Freeman, P., Mehta, A. Winds of Change: Impacts of Extreme winds on the Port of Cape Town. Sustainability Research and Innovation Conference. June 2022, Tshwane, South Africa.
- Mehta, A. Cultural contributions of South African kelp forests. Global Ecosystem Assessment of Kelp (GEAK) Workshop. June 2022, Arendal, Norway.

Scholarships, Awards & Accomplishments

- Selected from over 250 applicants as a participant on SEAmester VI: South Africa's Class Afloat Program onboard the SA Agulhas 2023
- Taurus Cape Kelp Seaweed Development and Innovation Award at the 33rd Congress of the Phycological Society of Southern Africa (R 2000)
- Initiated the establishment of the MarSocSci Southern Africa Chapter (<https://www.marsocsci.net/regional-marsocsci-networks/marsocsci-southern-africa/>) 2022
- Bioeconomy Research Chair Master's Studies Scholarship (R 25,000) 2021
- University of Cape Town Faculty of Science International Student Bursary (R 49,950/year) 2020 – 2021
- South African National Research Foundation Coursework Master's Bursary (R 90,000) 2020

Skills

Languages: English, Hindi

Software: NVivo, RedCap, Kobo Toolbox, MS Office, WordPress, iMovie, Canva, Asana

Research: Participatory Learning and Action, Qualitative and Quantitative Survey Development, Desktop Research

Ethics: Certified by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Program in Human Subject Research (Group 1: Social, Behavioural)

Field skills: PADI Divemaster, PADI Emergency First Responder

Communication: Trained in science communication (articles, reports, videos, photos, infographics, etc.), Experience in public speaking and presenting

Past Professional Experience

Project Manager

Muizenberg Improvement District, Cape Town

January 2024 to July 2024

Ghostwriter and Digital Content Specialist

Page One Power, Boise, Idaho & Remote

January 2015 to December 2019

Divemaster and Assistant Manager

Dive Goa, Goa, India, and Temple Adventures, Pondicherry, India

March 2016 to December 2017