

Richards Bay Humpback dolphins are a true tourism treasure

Weekend visit by researchers pays excellent dividends

Shanan Atkins

HUMPBACK dolphins are rare, coastal dolphins that are wellknown at Richards Bay.

They are endangered and shark nets are considered a major threat to the population in KZN.

The KwaZulu-Natal Sharks Board has been working with dolphin researchers to reduce the number of dolphin deaths and the most successful method to date has been the replacement of the net that caught the most dolphins with drumlines (in 2005).

In 2017, the Sharks Board gave dolphin researchers from the University of the Witwatersrand the use of a video camera and a hydrophone (an underwater sound recorder) so that we could study the occurrence and behaviour of humpback dolphins at the net that currently catches the most dolphins.

In addition, we will map how swimmers and surfers use the Richards Bay beaches. All this information will be used

to design a strategy to prevent further dolphin deaths.

This past weekend, we renewed the boat-based aspect of the research project and the Dolphin Research boat was launched after many years of being land-bound.

Being on the boat puts us in an excellent position to study the dolphins and their habits.

We are better able to track their movements and we are able to take photographs which allow us to identify individuals.

We were so lucky to have found and followed a large group of dolphins that included many of the dolphins we used to see in the 90s and 00s, like G'n as well as some humpback dolphins we'd never seen before.

We followed the dolphins from the New Mouth area all the way into the port. They swam far into the harbour, past the Cassuarinas into a restricted area which meant that we had to leave them, but not before taking a spectacular photo of a playing youngster spyhopping and showing us a toothy grin.



The dolphin known as G'n fin, seen over the weekend with her new baby

Mark Atkins



This youngster gave a toothy 'spyhop' for the researchers

Mark Atkins

Visit the dolphin viewing platform

For those who are keen to see these special animals with their own eyes, the dolphin viewing platform is the place to go.

It was built in the late 1990s by the Endangered Wildlife Trust and TNPA using funds raised by the Richards Bay Surf Lifesaving Club.

If you are patient and lucky, chances are good that you will spot a dolphin surfacing to breathe as they hunt for fish at the entrance to the port.

But you do have to be observant because dolphins spend most of their time underwater and come to the surface to take a quick breath.

Occasionally, the luckiest observers are treated to spectacular jumps.

Over the past weekend humpback dolphins were seen on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday. Observers on Saturday morning saw bottlenose dolphins - they are becoming a more frequent

sight than in the previous 2 decades.

Continual exposure to the harshest elements caused some deterioration of the sign at the platform.

DPA Specialist Consulting Engineers, Rodcol and Sika worked together to repair the sign and the platform pro bono.

Community-minded Inspector Quinton du Preez has volunteered to paint and polish the signage. Many thanks to all involved!

Identifying individuals

Tagging a shy and endangered species like humpback dolphins is not an option.

Instead we use natural identification features to achieve the same objective.

Many of the dorsal fins and humps have nicks and notches that make individuals identifiable and some fins have a distinctive shape. Scars help too.

Take for example the 5 dorsal fins in this series: each one is different; some are quite obviously different while others are only subtly different.

We give some of the frequently seen or particularly distinctive dolphins names



Zipper



Mohammed



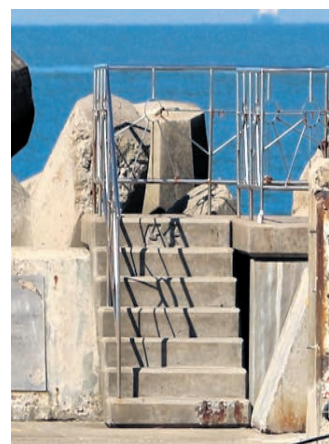
Venus



LineL



Ivory



Thank you

We are supported by many people at Richards Bay that we would like to thank, particularly Shakes Hiranman and his team of lifeguards, Yusuf Suliman and his team at DHL and Vanessa le Roux and her Umhambi Lodge team and dolphin devotee Dave Savides and team at the Zululand Observer. Our major sponsors are the German Society for Dolphin Conservation, without whom none of this would have been possible.

- Shanan Atkins



Marine biologist Shanan Atkins with 'citizen scientist' Dave Savides at the platform