



From her home in Tirol, Austria citizen scientist Judith Leiter monitors Richards Bay's endangered dolphins via the live feed from Alkantstrand

Dolphin alarm raised from afar

Dave Savides

A DOLPHIN 'spotter' raised the alarm last week after she saw what she believed to be an endangered Humpback dolphin ensnared in the shark nets at Newark beach.

What made the observation significant was that Judith Leiter was at the time about 10 000km away from Alkantstrand!

Judith, born in Germany but living in Austria, is devoted to the Richards Bay Humpback dolphin project, headed by researcher Shanan Atkins, marine biologist at the Wits School of Animal, Plant and Environmental Science.

As such, Judith spends hours scanning the live feed from Alkantstrand.

And so, when she saw a large object in the nets, the WhatsApp chain was lit and was fuelled when later pictures showed the Natal Sharks Board boat engaged in hauling activities at that section of net.

The fear had been that following the lifting of the nets after the 8 August tragedy that saw three NSB crew members drowned, the dolphins may have become used to the open water and thus less aware.

There was a collective sigh of relief when Sharks Board spokesperson, Mike Anderson-Reade, set the record straight on Friday.

'A ragged tooth shark was tagged and released on Tuesday morning from that net.

'It was visible on the surface when the staff got there and had survived the night, which is not uncommon for them as raggies are able to ventilate themselves by gulping water,' said Mike.

'The shark was belly up, which I suspect is what can be seen in the picture, and our staff spent quite a long time

getting rid of the air from the shark's gut prior to release.'

Distance no barrier

Judith was overjoyed at the news that it had not been a dolphin and that the NSB had successfully freed the shark.

Her connection with Richards Bay is an interesting one.

'I was a farmer for 12 years, but three years ago I left the farm and was going through very difficult times. I was looking for something that could help me get back on my feet again and give my life new meaning.

'I began to look for NGO organisations and I ended up with the German Society for Dolphin Conservation.

'Last year in April, when the GRD started to support the Humpback dolphin protection project in Richards Bay, I learnt that they had installed a beach camera which is accessible for everybody all around the globe,' said Judith.

'I think I literally fell in love with McCam (the camera), Richards Bay, the ocean, the dolphins, whales and birds the first time I connected.'

Having made contact with Shanan and sent her first snapshots of dolphins, her enthusiasm as a 'citizen scientist' has grown.

'We began to chat and this was the beginning of our very special friendship

'I appreciate and admire her love, enthusiasm and deep commitment for the animals and the project.

'I also feel so blessed to be part of the team now and love to help wherever I can, even though I'm so far away from Richards Bay.

'Distance doesn't matter.'
• Google: 'Conserve dolphins' to access the live feed.

Leguaan pops into school for masterclass

Richard Springorum

TINY Tots Daycare and Playgroup pupils and staff were treated to a visit from a friendly reptile on Thursday, which resulted in a learning opportunity for the youngsters.

A vehicle passing by the school situated in Cassia Road, Empangeni, noticed a 1.2-metre leguaan making its way from the canal in the nearby greenbelt to the school's premises and immediately notified gardener Dumisani Mnguni.

Mnguni sprung into action and called owner Bernie Perini to come and assess the situation.

'The leguaan was hiding deep in thorny plants, so I asked my son Tristan van der Spuy to help me catch it,' said Perini.

'I was concerned about the children's safety, but also scared that someone would kill or hurt it.'

Perini called the Empangeni SPCA but they were on a call-out at the time, so experienced reptile catcher Fred Lubbe was approached to assist.

'Tristan managed to get the leguaan out of the bush by pulling it out by the tail, but it twisted very quickly and attempted to bite him. Tristan dropped it and it quickly scampered back into the bush.'

Lubbe arrived and swiftly caught the reptile and bound it before placing it into a bag.

The learners then had the opportunity to rub its tail under supervision.

'People need to be aware that these creatures live in the greenbelts and near rivers or canals and often branch out in search of food and water,' said Lubbe.

'The important thing to know is that these reptiles are extremely strong and fast and have very sharp claws.

'Once they bite you, their jaws lock and they do not let go.'

According to Lubbe, a leguaan feels threatened when approached and its first line of defence is a tail whip or a bite.

'If one spots a leguaan in the garden, one can throw a large blanket over it to calm it down or stay indoors and monitor its movements until a professional with the right equipment arrives.'

'If it is in a park or greenbelt, one can leave them alone unless they become a nuisance.'

For professional help call Fred Lubbe on 082 4417708 or 066 2433377, or the Empangeni SPCA on 071 1744746. For any emergencies contact Debbie on 083 4823866.



Tiny Tots learners Lee-Che Cloete, Asibonge Hadebe, Leah Steenkamp and Ronin Herselman point out the spot where the leguaan was found on Thursday

Richard Springorum



Fred Lubbe contains the reptile before placing it into a bag

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