



## Halting humpback dolphin bycatch: A conservation research & action project focussed on humpback dolphins & mitigating the threat of shark nets

A summary of the first half of 2019's activities

2019/08/16

So far we have had an exciting year with some interesting progress. Notably, 2 shark nets at



Richards Bay were replaced with 9 baited hooks, i.e. **net 99 is gone**, replaced with 4 hooks. At first, the surfers were unhappy, fearing the bait would attract sharks, but they seemed to have settled down. Although the hooks sound worse, they do the same thing as the nets but with reduced bycatch and are therefore preferable. Other Sharks Board news is that Geremy Cliff, Head of Research, has retired after 36 years. He built the Research Department into the well-respected establishment it is today. Luckily for us, he remains a member of our team. George Thusi has taken up the permanent position as skipper of the Richards Bay crew and we communicate nicely. The talk of new shark nets at Port Durnford has quietened as the area falls within a Marine Protected Area, precluding the use of lethal devices.

Before net 99 was removed, we conducted a **study on beach use** at Richards Bay and found that Newark Beach is used only infrequently (<10times/month), mainly by the surfers. Only once in 160 observations was Newark beach designated the safe bathing area by the lifeguards. **Newark Beach is far less popular than Alkantstrand.**

I have begun interviewing stakeholders, exploring their attitudes and knowledge of the shark nets. So far I've **conducted 20**

**interviews** and I've sampled a good mix of people: Sharks Board staff, some local and provincial officials, and conservationists. I would like to interview some national Dept. Environment officials. It's been fascinating to listen to all the perspectives and good to connect with everyone.

**Our video camera worked well** out in the harsh salty wind for more than 2 years. But lately we had to reboot frequently to get it to look in the right direction. KZB Sharks Board gave us a new video camera which Brett Atkins, our IT expert, put up and reprogrammed. It is working better than ever. The Nerospec Network equipment has worked brilliantly, making a huge difference to our video quality and ability to control the camera remotely when dolphins are spotted. We really appreciate the ongoing support of Shakes Hiramani, uMhlathuze Municipality's Chief Sport and Recreation Officer, who is in charge at the beach, for housing our equipment safely and keeping it clean.



**Our hydrophone has worked well too** and our external battery has been replaced, thanks to the KZN Sharks Board. Until it arrived, technically-savvy volunteer, Rodger Doust, downloaded the data and maintained the hydrophone every 2 weeks for a few months. With this support, we have recorded the underwater acoustics in the Richards Bay harbour mouth nearly continuously this year, >5000 hours of recordings. We have been making plans for the SouSA Acoustics project, led by bioacoustician Dr Tess Gridley from Stellenbosch University, which is set to begin later this year. We have also secured our own MSc student, Natasha Shilubane, to contribute to this project in 2020.

**Our citizen science programme continues** and dolphins were reported 73 times, mostly by our #1 enthusiast, Judith Leiter, but including sightings in Durban. Our local dolphin champion, Dave Savides, continued to visit the Dolphin Viewing Platform where he talked to many visitors about the dolphins; and he sent 451 photographs.



The International Whaling Committee invited me to Kenya to present our work on humpback dolphins. I confess surprise at how worried the international cetacean community is about humpback dolphins. The primary recommendation by the Small Cetacean committee was to form a **Task Team to focus on "Sousa in Africa"** - the Atlantic humpback dolphin *Sousa teuszii* and our Indian Ocean humpback dolphin *Sousa plumbea*. I am on this team. We have a good idea of what needs to be done and our first task is finding significant funding so we can take the conservation actions required.

I also visited **Reunion** Island, most expenses paid, **to join IndoCet**, a consortium of Indian Ocean cetacean biologists. Besides the incredibly useful networking opportunity, one of the main benefits was access to a photo-identification platform call Flukebook (like Facebook for cetaceans) which facilitates sharing between projects and, in the future, may develop automated detection algorithms. I also visited the **Centre for Shark Risk Reduction**. Over the past decade, Reunion has experienced a drastic increase in shark attacks and it was interesting to see how they deal with the problem. We've begun a collaboration to compare and contrast the Reunion operation with KZN's.

We continue to operate **thanks to funding from the German Society for Dolphin Conservation** (Gesellschaft zur Rettung der Delphine) **and the German Foundation for Marine Conservation** (Deutsche Stiftung Meeresschutz), with some help from Wits University and Endangered Wildlife Trust. I've submitted funding applications to Waitt Foundation, Rufford Foundation, and National Geographic and I've approached some service providers for support with larger expenses, e.g. Kulula.com for travel. We are still waiting to hear from all except the Waitt Foundation. We are lucky to receive assistance in kind and at reduced rates for many things, especially in Richards Bay.

Thank you everybody for all your time and support. It is much appreciated!

Shanan Atkins

Project Coordinator

shananatkins@gmail.com

