

Dolphin research expands to whales

Dave Savides

BY request, the Richards Bay humpback dolphin research project is now also assisting with international whale studies.

And it's all thanks to the webcam that scans the ocean from its perch on the lifeguard house at Alkantstrand and sends the live feed to all parts of the world.

'This year we were invited to join IndoCet, a network of cetacean (whale and dolphin) biologists working in the south-western part of the Indian Ocean,' said project leader Shanan Atkins, marine biologist at the Wits University School of Animal, Plant and Environmental Science.

'The primary goals of the IndoCet consortium are to advance understanding of cetacean biology in the south-west Indian Ocean and promote their conservation.

'Many of these researchers study humpback whales, including their population ecology, migration behaviour and their fascinating songs, and we are happy to assist them with information from our own observations,' said Shanan.

Recorded sights and sounds

'The humpback whale migration season recently came to an end and several research groups in different locations recorded fewer numbers compared to previous seasons,' said Shanan.

'Counts were markedly lower in Kenya, Tanzania, Madagascar and the Mascarene Islands, so they put out a call to all IndoCet members to

ask for feedback on any humpback whale observations we might have had during this season.

'While we study humpback dolphins rather than humpback whales, we have seen and recorded humpback whales via our webcam, so we've offered to share our video footage so that they might search through it.

'We don't yet have the technology to automatically detect whales in the footage, but it isn't impossible, it's just expensive.

Most of the whale data gathered

off Richards Bay is courtesy of a 'citizen scientist' living in Austria, who monitors the webcam (named 'McCam') and logs sightings from the live feed.

Via McCam, Judith Leiter spends countless hours scanning the coast off Alkantstrand, forwarding her recorded statistics of dolphin and whale sightings, along with screenshots, to

Shanan via the German Society for Dolphin Conservation, who are partners in the humpback dolphin protection project in Richards Bay.

'Very importantly, Judith notes the times that she watches as well as the times that she spots whales and dolphins, so we have an important scientific measure - a measure of 'effort' - which is the number of whales seen over the time spent watching.

'This gives a good indication of the numbers.

'Since August 2018, Judith has

spent more than 800 hours watching and has recorded humpback whales on 74 days.

'These data are potentially useful measures of the timing of the whale migration (most of the studies begin in June), and we've submitted the monthly sighting records to IndoCet.'

Whale charter assistance

Shanan shared another new dimension to the local humpback dolphin project, related to 'Jingles' - the hydrophone (underwater microphone) installed at Newark beach - which picks up dolphin and whale soundings.

'I recently sent acoustic data to Reunion to form part of a study of humpback whale song structure.

'The acoustic analysis aims to improve our understanding of connectivity between humpback whale breeding sites.

'Our South African data will be compared with data from study sites in Tanzania, Madagascar and Reunion. It's all pretty exciting!'

Meanwhile, local whale watching operators, Advantage Tours, who submit monthly logs of whale sightings and behaviour, confirmed the change to the migration pattern this year.

'It basically started and ended two weeks earlier than normal,' said Riette Bennett.

'While we saw a significant number of whales this year, our observation was that they did not migrate as far north as usual.'

Riette said they would gladly share their log book information with the IndoCet consortium.



A superb photo of a humpback whale, taken by Brett Atkins off Richards Bay



Marine biologist Shanan Atkins, who heads the Richards Bay humpback dolphin research project, with local citizen scientist Dave Savides at the viewing platform



Sitting 10 000km away in Austria, citizen scientist Judith Leiter faithfully records humpback dolphin and whale activity off Richards Bay

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