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 Shanah 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.

‘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,’ says Judith.

‘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 it literally fell in love with McCam (the camera). Richards Bay, the ocean, the dolphins, whales and birds are the first time I connected with them,’

‘Having made contact with Shanah 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 admire and admire her love, enthusiasm and deep commitment for the animals and the project all around the globe,” said Judith.

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 Menguni.

Menguni sprung into action and called owner Bernie Perini to come and assess the situation. ‘The leguaan was hiding deep in brorny 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 bushes by pulling it out by the tail, but it twisted very quickly and attempted to bite him. Tristan dropped it and it quickly scrambled back into the bushes.’

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

‘The learners then had the opportunity to rub it’s 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 it’s 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 it 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.

Fred Lubbe contains the reptile before placing it into a bag.

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