



Press release: Cetacean project information and collaborations

7 March 2011

Handing over of the Mossel Bay whale and dolphin project.

By Bridget James, MSc. Student

On behalf of Oceans Research and the Mammal Research Institute, University of Pretoria

The running of the Mossel Bay Cetacean project will be taken over by Bridget James, as part of a Masters degree, in association with Oceans Research and the Mammal Research Institute of the University of Pretoria.

The study will continue the work started in January 2010 by Edith Mertz, investigating the behaviour and distribution of whales and dolphins in the Mossel Bay area. This second study will focus on collecting data after the commencement of operations of the PetroSA desalination plant, and a comparison will be done between the movements and behaviours of the animals before and after the activation of the desalination plant, so that we are able to measure the effects of this plant on whales and dolphins. The study is also ready to monitor any impacts if other industries expand in Mossel bay such as the I&Jtm finfish farm or the PetroSA LNG facility. Humpback dolphins (listed as near threatened on the IUCN red data list) and bottlenose dolphins will be the focal species of this study because both are found in nearshore areas and are the most likely to be impacted by human activities. The most important potential impact of a desalination plant on Mossel Bay is that the effluent produced during the desalination procedure and discharged into the bay could potentially change the bottom dwelling fauna which support the fish communities which the dolphins rely on for food.

Six shore-based field stations around the Greater Mossel Bay area, between Cape St. Blaze and the Groot Brak River, are used to collect data on the movements and habitat use of the animals. Animals are tracked using a surveyor's theodolite which allows for the precise estimation of the distance between the animals and the observation site and thus the animal's location. Shore based observations using a theodolite do not in any way affect the behaviour of the animals that are being observed and are thus an ideal method for measuring possible impacts or changes in behaviour and habitat use. Plans are currently underway to extend the current cetacean research in Mossel Bay further along the coast, to Vlees Bay in order to determine the areas the animals use in bay with fewer human impacts. We would like to thank the community for their continued support. The Mossel Bay lighthouse, the ATKV holiday resort, the Garden Route Boutique hotel and day spa and several private home owners have very kindly allowed us to work from their properties. We would also like to extend our thanks to Fred Orban of the Oystercatcher Trail (www.oystercatchertrail.co.za) in Vlees Bay for providing logistical support and accommodation. Various materials and surveying data were provided by Maracon Civil contractors and a car was sponsored for a year by Moss cars. We would especially like to thank Rhenia Niemand of the Dana Bay conservancy for all her hard work and support in securing the vehicle for the project at the beginning of last year. Unfortunately this sponsorship has come to an end and the project is urgently trying to source another vehicle for getting to and from the observation sites. If anyone is able to assist us in any way to secure vehicle for the project please contact (Bridget James 083 707 2227; bsjames@zoology.up.ac.za or Katie Cummings 079 266 7883; k.cummings@oceans-initiative.com). Members of the public are always welcome to talk to us in the field as we value the opportunity to tell people about our work and the need to protect whales and dolphins in South African waters.

Photographs for press use on the Mossel Bay Cetacean Project



The surveyor's theodolite set up to track whales and dolphins (foreground), Mossel Bay.

Photo by Bridget James



Humpback dolphins socializing near Hartenbos. There are probably less than 1000 individuals along the South African coastline.

Photo by Ida Torum



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The surveyor's theodolite set up to track whales and dolphins, Springer Bay. Photo by Bridget James



The original vehicle sponsored by Moss Cars. The sponsorship is coming to an end and the project is urgently seeking another vehicle to continue the field research. Photo by Bridget James



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