Dolphin- and whale research conducted in Mossel Bay

■ **Dr Simon Elwen and Edith Mertz**

The Mossel Bay Cetacean Project is being run as part of a Masters degree by Edith Mertz, a young scientist based at Oceans Research and the Mammal Research Institute of the University of Pretoria.

The project is overseen by Dr Simon Elwen and Prof Marthán Bester of the University of Pretoria. The Mossel Bay Cetacean Project is a shore based study gathering baseline data on the inshore movement patterns and behaviour of three dolphin and two whale species found commonly in the Western Cape.

Goals of the project

The goals of the project which is funded by the University of Pretoria and Oceans' research are to produce data on the patterns of spatial and temporal habitat use, to identify areas of critical importance to the animals such as resting areas and to describe natural variations in the behaviour and interaction of these species.

This data will allow researchers to develop a baseline against which to measure the potential impacts, such as changes in habitat use and ecological relationships of future human activities such as aquaculture and expansion of the Petro-SA (oil refinery) infrastructure in the region.

Research focus

The research will focus primarily on humpback dolphins (listed as near threatened on the IUCN red data list) and bottlenose dolphins, as these nearshore residents are the most likely to be impacted by human activities in the area, especially developing aquaculture. Potential predator avoidance behaviour of dolphins to great white sharks will also be investigated by combining shark tracks from acoustic follows with visually observed cetacean tracks.

Data will be collected from a series of five shore-based field stations between Mossel Bay Lighthouse and the Great Brak River. Animals will be tracked with a surveyor's theodolite which allows Edith and her team to precisely estimate distance from the observation site and thus the animal's location and speed.

Importantly, shore based observations do not in any way affect the behaviour of the observed animals and are thus ideal for measuring possible impacts or changes in behaviour and habitat use.

Fieldwork will be continuous throughout 2010 and will end in March 2011. The project write-up and the bulk of scientific publications will be produced in 2011. For more information, visit the project page on our website **www.oceans-research.com**

Special thank you's

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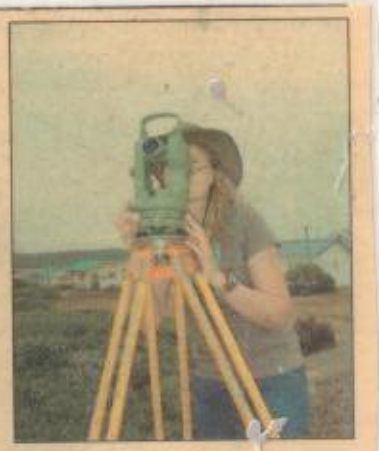
* Mr Rod McGregor Mann, owner of the Glasgow Pont Hotel at the Gariep dam, who is sponsoring a car for the project
* Private property owners and the ATKV resort for granting access to the locations from which fieldwork is being conducted.

A humpback dolphin spotted in Mossel Bay.
Photo: Oceans archive



MSc-student, Edith Mertz, tracking dolphins from land using a theodolitein the Little Brak River mouth area.
Photo: Simon Elwen

This Humpback dolphin was photographed in the waters of Plettenberg Bay.
Photo: Simon Elwen