

WHALETIME – a multi-faceted approach towards the conservation, research and sustainable tourism of humpback whales

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Background

Whale Time is a special time of year (June to November) on the East Coast of South Africa when we are privileged to observe some of the whale species that frequent the KwaZulu-Natal coast. In particular, the Humpback whales migrate close inshore along the coast of KwaZulu-Natal between their summer Antarctic feeding grounds and the coastal waters of Mozambique, Tanzania and Kenya, Madagascar, the Mascarenes and the Western Indian Ocean Islands where they give birth to their calves. Previously decimated by whaling, protection measures have resulted in a strong recovery for these ocean giants that can be seen as early as May and through to December.

The WILDOCEANS WhaleTime Project's goal is to bring science, conservation, tourism and community together around the key phenomenon of the annual migration of humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) along the east coast of South Africa.

Methods

This multi-faceted project contributes to three main areas of work:

- (1) the coordination and support of research done on the population status of the east coast C1-stock humpback whales in order to gain a better understanding of population trends and any threats to the population;
- (2) tracking the population increase of humpback whales as they recover from commercial whaling pressure that ended in the 1970's in South Africa;
- (3) build and maintain partnerships with permitted boat-based whale watching operators to promote and sustain responsible whale watching in KwaZulu-Natal, and the generation of youth employment in local communities through eco-tourism-based opportunities; and
- (4) providing quality public awareness information around whales and related marine conservation topics.

Results

Since its inception in 2017, the project has made big strides. The project is currently curating South Africa's first east coast humpback whale catalogue of fluke images, photographed in their breeding grounds in Mozambique and in South Africa *en route* to and from their feeding grounds in the Antarctic, and continues to expand the catalogue with collaboration from the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA).

WILDOCEANS also spearheaded the latest of a long-term survey of the population status of migrating humpback whales, carried out in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park in July/August 2018. The survey forms part of a long-term survey of humpback whales which was designed and initiated in 1988 to track the population increase of humpback whales as they recovered from commercial whaling pressure. Results between 1988 and 2002 suggested a population increase rate in the order of 9% per annum (Findlay et al. 2011). However, this work has not been updated for over a decade. The aim of this survey is to provide a relatively inexpensive and accurate means of updating the increase rate estimate of humpback whales migrating along the east coast of southern Africa, thus adding value to an existing data set.

Fourteen youth have been trained as Whale Guides, hosting over 100 schools at the Port Natal Maritime museum and participated in over 30 boat-based whale-watching tours on the KZN Coast in the past two years. Eight of the ten alumni guides are either full-time or part-time employed or have chosen to further their studies.

Lastly, the project is currently working to facilitate Durban in meeting criteria to become a World Whale Heritage, which actively promotes cultural links with cetaceans through arts, music, science and education. This will allow sustainable development for coastal communities that depend on the marine environment by inspiring them to value their marine heritage.

Conclusion

Ultimately the WhaleTime project will continue to conduct local and interregional research, facilitate conservation efforts and promote responsible whale eco-tourism, which are all essential for the preservation of cetaceans in the South African and South West Indian Ocean.

Keywords: Whales, eco-tourism, capacity development

Theme: Marine Biodiversity and Threatened Marine Species