



SAVE OUR SEAS FOUNDATION

SHARK EDUCATION CENTRE

ANNUAL REPORT 2013

Extracted from the Save Our Seas Foundation Annual Report 2013



save our seas
shark education centre



SOSF SHARK EDUCATION CENTRE

PHILIPPA EHRLICH

It is 9am in the quaint seaside fishing village of Kalk Bay at the southern end of Cape Town. The tide has been pulled far from the land, revealing a flat outcrop of smooth rock eroded by numerous shallow pools and crevices. At the edge of the water, kelp stalks twinkle with the movement of the gentle swell. The air is bright and still and the ocean is a deep blue. In a nearby parking lot, surfers stand around skittishly, frustrated at the lack of a decent wave. In the distance, a burnt-orange fishing boat is sitting low in the water as it pulls slowly into the harbour followed by scores of white seabirds.

The view is briefly obscured by a screeching, mustard-coloured train travelling towards the city centre. It rumbles past a pedestrian crossing where 19 uniformed eight-year-olds are lined up ready for a visit to the Kalk Bay Shark Centre. The centre opened in 2008 and over the past five years it has become a hub for marine education, research and dialogue.

Kalk Bay is home to a community whose lives have been determined by rising and falling ocean tides for centuries. The town's name is derived from the Dutch word for lime. Kalk Bay's first residents were 17th-century lime-burners who used kilns to extract lime from seashell deposits. In the 1840s a Filipino ship was wrecked off Cape Point. The survivors settled in Kalk Bay and it grew into a thriving fishing village. Many colourful commercial boats still dock in Kalk Bay harbour and tourists visit the town to watch fishermen offloading catches of yellowfin tuna, yellowtail and snoek.

The area is also South Africa's oldest ocean research and education hub. In 1902 the country's first marine aquarium and research station was established in nearby St James. Sadly, the marine aquarium was demolished in 1954. It seems appropriate that the Save Our Seas Shark Education Centre should fulfil this valuable role in modern day Kalk Bay. In early 2013, the centre redefined its mission 'to connect the public to the marine environment through experiential education programmes focused on sharks and local marine ecosystems, in order to nurture ocean awareness and environmentally responsible actions'.

'People need to know why we need sharks in the sea. We're surrounded by ocean users in Kalk Bay and many of them don't know much about conservation.

This centre is an awesome resource in a relevant location,' explains facilities manager Heidi Thormählen.

The green man at the pedestrian crossing lights up and the children file across the road and into the building. Like a huge, gurgling magnet, the aquarium immediately draws them in. They push each other aside to get a better look, pressing their hands and faces up against the glass. 'They're just swimming round and round,' a boy says dismissively. His friend is indignant: 'That's what fish think of the human world. Just walking round and round!'

Paul Millar, the centre's chief educator, loves seeing this kind of interaction among his learners: 'I enjoy being involved in what for many kids is the awakening of a new way of seeing the world as a beautiful and fragile home to be nurtured. For the children who already see the world this way, I enjoy sharing their excitement and fascination for marine life.'

After a 30-minute talk about rock pool ecosystems, the children trail out of the building for a few hours of hands-on rock pool discovery. They are immediately captured by the starfish and try to remember the names of the three different species they were taught. One little girl squeals, pointing at a purple anemone, 'It's like a cup with hair on top!'

I pick a flat dry spot next to the children's teacher, Maria Doyle, and we watch as child after child picks something up for Millar to identify and explain. He is careful to ensure that each little sea creature is put back exactly where it is found. 'This is my favourite outing,' says Doyle. 'We used to take them to the aquarium but it's dark and everything is contrived. Here they really get an interactive, authentic experience.'

I look back. The swarm of eight-year-olds is being led closer and closer to the kelp by Millar. One little girl is trailing at the back, thinking carefully about every footfall. Doyle follows my gaze, 'It's funny. She lives 20 minutes from the sea, but I don't think she's ever learned to walk on rocks.'

South Africa's complex history has created an unjust and largely dysfunctional social structure. It is a country where your education, well-being and even understanding of nature are determined by where you fall on a steeply graded

socio-economic scale. Walking from one end of Kalk Bay to the other, you will see SLR-wielding tourists browsing boutique galleries and chatting in coffee shops. You will also notice barefoot, ragged children banging on homemade instruments and belting out 'When the Saints go marching in' in a desperate attempt to earn some money.

With an unemployment rate of 25%, many children cannot rely on their parents for food and clothes, let alone an introduction to the natural world around them. Thousands of Cape Town's children live within walking distance of the sea but only set foot on the sand once or twice a year, usually at Christmas time. It is a reality that saddens Millar, who believes that marine education is as important for the environment as it is for the children themselves: 'More and more South African children do not have a direct connection to nature. Apart from the emotional and health benefits of living a life that is connected to the natural world, individuals who grow up engaging with nature are more likely to understand the importance of healthy natural systems and make environmentally responsible choices.'

Luckily for the children from Forres Primary, they are privileged to have good teachers and, for the most part, ocean-minded parents.

On Friday afternoons, a very different group arrives at the Shark Centre. A scruffy-looking minibus pulls up and 11 excited 12-year-olds tumble out and head for the garage, where they find a line of brand-new wetsuits. They are from the nearby Capricorn Primary and this is their second time at the centre. They are from a far less privileged part of Cape Town and grow up under leaky tin roofs, playing in dusty, potholed streets.

They are part of a new Shark Centre initiative called The Marine Explorers Club. It took a few months for Millar to identify the right school from which he could recruit an enthusiastic team of trainee snorkellers. Before the list of marine explorers could be confirmed there was a trial at St James tidal pool. Of the school's 16 strongest swimmers, only 11 were strong enough to become part of the club. 'Most people from the township are scared of sharks. They tell their children not to go into the sea because they will be eaten by sharks,' explains Zanele Mayiya, the Shark Centre's assistant educator.

Mayiya lives in Khayelitsha township and has unique insights into how many South Africans view the oceans and sharks. She started work as a house-keeper, but her interest in the marine world grew. She started reading books in the centre's library and became increasingly enthusiastic about talking to people about marine conservation: 'I noticed that most people from townships don't know much about the sea or about sharks. I like to pass information on and tell them that sharks are not aggressive.' When the course began, the young snorkellers were mostly afraid of the sea. 'I find sea animals like sharks scary, even though people who are divers claim that they're harmless,' said Alulutho Tomsana suspiciously.

By week four their confidence has grown as has their respect for and interest in marine life. 'I think sharks are cool. It's just the great white shark I'm worried about. I love snorkelling and I would love to see one of those shysharks,' smiled Shannon Draai after hearing Millar's Shark 101 talk. Steven Sankona was a little disappointed to spend a whole afternoon in the classroom and is excited to get back to the sea: 'I love it when we duck-dive with the snorkelling and I want to see a leopard shark, catshark, blue shark and ragged-tooth shark.'

Millar is extremely encouraged by reactions like this. He believes that exposing children to the sea in this way will inspire a love of the ocean and encourage environmentally responsible behaviour: 'All kids know they shouldn't litter, but by creating a bond between them and the ocean we're giving them a reason to look after nature.'

CREDITS

Extracted from the Save Our Seas Foundation (SOSF) 2013 Annual Report

Editorial team: Michael C. Scholl, Peter Scholl and Nadia Bruyndonckx

Book design: Peter Scholl

Content coordinator: Philippa Ehrlich

Sub_editor & proofreader: Leni Martin

Additional editing & proofreading: Sunnye Collins, Nadia Bruyndonckx and Lisa Boonzaier

SOSF Shark Education Centre

28 Main Rd, Kalk Bay, Cape Town, 7945

Photo credit: SOSF Shark Education Centre: Cover photo





save our seas
shark education centre



Save Our Seas Foundation
Shark Education Centre



@sharkcentre



SOSF Shark
Education Centre



@sharkcentre

www.saveourseas.com/sosf-shark-education-centre