



SAVE OUR SEAS FOUNDATION

SHARK EDUCATION CENTRE

ANNUAL REPORT 2015

Extracted from the Save Our Seas Foundation Annual Report 2015



save our seas
shark education centre





SOSF SHARK EDUCATION CENTRE

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2015 was a year of making things happen for the SOSF Shark Education Centre. Plans that had been put in place in 2014 were implemented and there was real change on the ground.

The year started off on a very inspirational note for me as the manager of the SOSF Shark Education Centre, when the assistant educator Ntombizanele Mayiya and I jetted off to the annual Marine and Coastal Educators Network conference in early January. This was my first introduction to the network. The conference was held in the very unlikely location of Pretoria in the Tshwane Metropole, the executive capital of South Africa. Pretoria is nowhere near the sea, so it's an odd place indeed to find a gathering of marine and coastal educators! However, South Africa is unusual for a country with a long coastline in that most of its population lives inland, where the rich mineral resources that fuel the economic hub of the country are found. Any environmental education that is going to have any real impact needs to take that into account. And, of course, the conference's location in Pretoria was a wonderful platform to introduce the concept of connectivity and how our actions all over the planet impact our oceans.

Over the course of five days we were introduced to many wonderful educators working in all spheres of education, from government to school and parastatal to non-profit. They shared their work with us and took us through some of the activities they have developed for use in and out of the classroom. It was truly inspirational to see how much amazing work is happening around the country, to be recharged with new ideas and to think about the year ahead. In addition, we were taken on excursions to places that left us in awe of our natural environment and acknowledging how lucky we are to live in South Africa. As well as botanical gardens and nature reserves, we visited the Maropeng Centre in the Cradle of Humankind (a major influence in our own centre's revamp) and the Sterkfontein Caves, which gave us something to think about in terms of where we come from.

On our return to Cape Town it was time to step up the process of renovating the centre's exhibition space. This was the major focus of my work during the year and we made huge progress, surpassing even our own expectations.

First up was the garage, which we had turned into a ship-themed classroom late in 2014. Watching this project take final shape was extremely exciting. We had custom-built furniture installed and hung 'porthole' picture frames on the wall, with underwater creatures and lamps, ropes and other marine-themed items giving the impression of the inside of a ship. This immersive, themed classroom creates just the right atmosphere for learners visiting the education centre to feel that they are having a whole experience rather than merely a lesson. Plus, the seating capacity has improved enormously and we can now seat 48 children at tables in the classroom and many more just on chairs. Additional benefits are that having tables means that we can use them for activities, crafts and projects, and with the newly refurbished and painted garage floor we can do wet-work or get messy and then just wash off the floor!

Moving to the main building of the Shark Education Centre, the floor plan and layout proved to be challenging because the centre is located in a very beautiful, old building with heritage status and structural changes to it are not permitted. The first thing to do was embrace a theme based on our mission statement from which to work. This theme then had to be fleshed out into a storyline so that a cohesive and logical flow of information, exhibit content and progression could be followed as each part of the centre was developed. The theme we decided on was 'Sharks are awesome, not fearsome'. This helps those who are afraid of sharks to realise that being afraid is completely acceptable, yet you can be afraid of something and still find it fascinating and appreciate its awesomeness! It takes nothing away from the very real fear of sharks that many people have, but at the same time showcases the wonderful creatures that they are. The theme also gave us room to expand on the context in which sharks occur and thus bring the rest of the marine ecosystem into focus. We explored 'Sharks are awesome, not



fearsome’ further and developed it into a storyline that highlights what we want people to learn and incorporates the information that we provide, thus enabling us to use the centre itself as a teaching tool that supplements our lessons.

We lost no time in getting going with the various exhibits we had lined up. Firstly, we had two exceptionally talented artists come in and paint two beautiful murals for us. One is an interactive, three-dimensional mural painted and built in the short passageway under the stairs. Its touchable kelp, realistic-feeling kelp forest animal models and reef structure are superimposed on an immersive backdrop and give visitors the impression that they are really underwater, enabling them to explore the sub-tidal environment of False Bay without ever having to go diving themselves. This mural segued into the second one, a pelagic seascape rising up the stairwell that features some of the best-known and best-loved local pelagic predators. These two murals immediately gave a new feeling to the centre and we couldn’t wait to get on with the rest of the exhibits.

Up next was the revamp of the aquarium tank, with a focus on ‘Sharks in the Intertidal’, ‘Shore Sharks’ and ‘False Bay Ecosystem’. We had emptied the tank and returned its much-loved creatures to the sea at the end of 2014 and had put the new tank stand in place. We now added a custom-made, starfish-shaped

touch-pool and the two were joined and re-plumbed. Some white wooden cladding was attached, linking to the garage’s ship theme, and the new aquarium was ready to roll! After a few collecting expeditions we were able to stock the tank and touch-pool with all sorts of weird, wonderful and wacky creatures.

To complete the intertidal and tank area, a special microscope neck was built and a powerful dissecting microscope added, connected to a large high-definition screen mounted on the wall. Now not only can visitors and learners look at and touch the various tide-pool animals, but also we are able to put the creatures under the microscope and project them to a group of people, sharing the wonders and beauty of close-up details that just can’t be explained: the moving spines of a sea urchin, the tube-feet of a cushion star, the stinging tentacles of a sea anemone. We stocked the shelves nearby with a range of exciting marine items for investigation under the microscope, and signage around it showcases some of the ‘up-close’ wonders of ocean animals and plants.

In addition, a new exhibit called the ‘scratch patch’ was designed and built for the Shark Education Centre. Representing the sandy shore of a beach, it has items that might be found there, such as shells, shark eggs, shark teeth, sponges and pieces of coral. Each item matches up to a drawer below with a specially built handle in the shape of the item. The drawer contains more examples and information. This is a multi-tiered exhibit: young children can merely hunt through the sand to find treasures; older children can put items under the magnifying plate and examine them more closely; and those wanting to know more can find a wealth of information and interpretation in the drawers.

By now the centre was looking and feeling very different and the reactions we were getting from school groups were very positive indeed. But we were not done yet! The arrival of a large, touch-screen table with a custom-designed, high-tech interactive ‘shark game’ generated huge excitement. The game comprises a vast amount of information about a number of shark and ray species – their appearance, unique features, habitat, size and distribution – a gallery of photos and videos, and news about Save Our Seas Foundation projects relating to each of

those species. Designed for up to four players, it was an instant hit and is still one of the most popular of the new exhibits.

One of the aspects of learning that we wanted to incorporate in the new exhibits was the use of all the senses, so that people learn in different ways (and don’t get too fatigued with reading!). So we focused on touching and hearing in addition to reading the signage and looking at the murals and aquarium tank. The touch-pool enables visitors to feel live animals, but there are a lot of other creatures that we are not able to keep in a touch-pool and that many people will never have the chance to get their hands on. We introduced touch panels, which are hinge-mounted frames hanging on the wall, each containing a model of different marine animal skin. Visitors can feel the skin and try to guess what animal it belongs to before lifting the panel to read the identity of the animal and some interesting facts about how the skin is adapted to oceanic conditions. This has proved very popular and many people are astounded by what a shark, penguin, southern right whale, Cape fur seal, yellowtail, lobster or porcupine fish really feels like!

Another new exhibit, which is just waiting for its wall mounts before going on display, focuses on hearing. It is our ‘dial-an-animal’ phone, which enables visitors to choose a local marine species from the directory and call it. The species will then ‘speak’ to the caller via the phone’s handset, explaining about its life. We can’t wait to put it up and see how much excitement it generates and how it opens up a whole new way of learning.

Towards the end of the year, although we were by no means finished, we had accomplished enough to announce with great excitement that we would soon be reopening the education centre to the general public. We did this during National Marine Week in October and the response from the community has been overwhelmingly positive! Much more is still in the pipeline, with some truly incredible exhibits and displays having been commissioned or in development and production. But that is for 2016, which is sure to be an even more exciting year as all our exhibit plans come to fruition.





With so much focus on the changes happening at the Shark Education Centre, you might think that there wasn't much else going on, but that was not the case at all! Living up to expectations, the education team put in a solid – and successful – year of hard work: teaching, experiencing, doing outreach and having fun. During 2015 more than 65 school groups visited the education centre for a day of exploring the rock-pools and learning about sharks and what we can do to help conserve our oceans and marine environment. These groups ranged from Grade R through to Grade 12 and comprised about 1,500 learners from a wide range of economic, social and cultural groups from all over Cape Town. In addition, the Save Our Seas Foundation sponsored more than 600 children from disadvantaged schools to visit the centre, providing both financial support for transport and a meal for each child. When school groups were not able to come to the centre, the education staff went to them, visiting on average one school a month in 2015 and reaching about 650 children between the ages of five and 18.

We also continued our very successful Marine Explorers Club programme, running two six-month clubs in 2015. One club was run with Capricorn Primary School and the other with Muizenberg Junior School, both located close to the shores of False Bay. During these programmes, 12 Grade 5 learners in each club were introduced to surfing for three months and then snorkelling for three months. We found that getting them into the gentle waves at Muizenberg, where they could stand safely and were still able to get used to being ducked under the waves, was a perfect introduction to having fun in the sea. Although all the participants are carefully selected and are able to swim before starting the Marine Explorers programme, we have found that being able to swim in a pool is a far cry from being a confident swimmer in the sea. With generous support from Xpression on the Beach, a surf shop in Muizenberg that sponsored board rental for the programme, and vigilant supervision by the wonderful volunteers from the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Underwater Club, we soon made enthusiastic surfers out of all the participants. Next up was their introduction to

the underwater world with a course in snorkelling. Here we were very grateful to Pisces Dive Centre and PADI, who not only gave us access to their pool and training centre facilities, but provided an instructor and dive master to teach the necessary skills and supervise pool and sea dives, making sure that by the end of the three months every participant was awarded PADI diver certification. Once again, we were supported by UCT's Underwater Club volunteers, without whom we would not have been able to run these programmes. Reef Wetsuits also came on board, and we purchased all the equipment for the programmes from them at very generous rates.

Building on the Marine Explorers programme, we once again ran two Marine Awareness Camps at the Soetwater Environmental Education Centre in Kommetjie during the year: one in the mid-year school holiday and one at the end of the year. These camps were run for the same schools as the Marine Explorers and also with Grade 5 pupils. Because 30 children from each school attended the camp, we were still able to expose those who were not able to participate in the Marine Explorers Club to some of the wonders of our coastline, immersing them for three days in the best kind of learning: experiential, field-based, active and fun! The residential camps were fully sponsored, which meant that those who would normally never have the opportunity to do these kinds of activity were given a chance to experience them. On both camps we were joined by UCT's Underwater Club volunteers and on the December camp we partnered with the Save Our Seas Foundation's Youth Ocean Ambassadors (YOA) programme, offering its participants a chance to get involved in environmental education and see what it is all about – and, of course, offering the camp attendees an opportunity to meet young women from South Africa and the Seychelles who are passionate about the ocean and about making a career from their passion.

During three of the South African school holiday periods we again offered our popular Holiday Clubs for children aged between six and 11 who want to have fun and learn about the ocean. As has been the case previously, the clubs proved extremely popular and were fully booked long in advance, with 20 children





attending each day. Each Holiday Club varied between two and four days in length and included such activities as lessons about sharks, rock-pooling, science experiments (in our newly refurbished ship-themed garage classroom), beach hunts, coastal walks, harbour tours and, naturally, a lot of swimming.

Many other events that took place in 2015 formed part of the Shark Education Centre's activity calendar. We took part in National Science Week, exhibiting at the Expo for Careers in Science; Eleanor was one of the panel for the \$0Fathoms Film Festival in celebration of World Oceans Day; we joined forces with Plastics SA, Saudi Basic Industries Corporation and Star of the Sea School in St James to host a very successful International Coastal Clean-up Day event under the auspices of the Ocean Conservancy; and we celebrated Nelson Mandela Day by coming together with the SOSF Conservation Media Unit to bring sharks, seas, snacks and sing-alongs to a crèche in Masiphumelele (a nearby township). In addition, we gave many, many public talks to clubs and associations over the course of the year and as a direct result have already been inundated with requests for bookings – and outings to the education centre – in 2016.

One event that must be mentioned is the 3rd Southern African Shark & Ray Symposium, which was hosted by the Shark Spotters and Save Our Seas Foundation in False Bay this year. It was a wonderful conference, with excellent scientific talks, events and networking opportunities. The Shark Education Centre and the Conservation Media Unit, together with our researcher-in-residence Lauren De Vos, ran a highly popular 'Science Communication' workshop at the symposium. The Shark Education Centre hosted the welcome evening, our first opportunity to showcase the amazing new exhibits and the centre's redesign. It was agreed by all that this was the best (and biggest) of Southern African Shark & Ray symposiums so far and it has set the bar high for those in future.

To end off the year we participated in the annual Wavescape Film Festival, of which the Save Our Seas Foundation is a key sponsor. Once again we ran our

extremely popular 'Edutainment' area at the Wavescape Fish Fry event and this year for the first time we were invited to enter a team into the Sustainable Seafood Braai-off, a barbecue competition run by WWF-SASSI and Pick 'n Pay. Although we didn't win the main prize, we had a lot of fun and walked away with the award for the best work station and an invitation to come back next year for a rematch!

All in all, it has been a year of getting things done, enjoying the rewards that come with real change and sharing everything we have done with the community and the public at large. However, it has also left me with an overwhelming sense of anticipation for 2016. I simply cannot wait to see everything that lies ahead for the SOSF Shark Education Centre and am eagerly looking forward to the expressions of awe and wonder that I know await us.

CREDITS

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