

FROM CARNAGE TO CONSERVATION

The passage of time and a respite from relentless hunting has allowed the humpback whale to come back from being classified as critically endangered and, once again, grace the Durban coastline. These whales are bubble-net feeding, a complex, highly synchronised set of hunting behaviours that involves communication and cooperation.

AT THE WELCOMING OF THE WHALES FESTIVAL IN DURBAN, **RYAN ENSLIN** UNCOVERS THE REMARKABLE STORY OF THE RISE AND FALL OF WHALING IN SOUTH AFRICA AND HOW THESE GENTLE GIANTS ARE MAKING A COMEBACK THANKS TO THE JOINT EFFORTS OF SCIENTISTS AND EVERYDAY PEOPLE

RIGHT Whales pass closer to the Durban shoreline than any other city in the world.

FAR RIGHT In addition to being critical to life on Earth through the biological pump, humpback whales make a variety of spectacular displays along the Durban coastline between June and November each year, although they can be spotted year-round.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM The ruins of the world's largest and most advanced whaling station are along the Bluff in Durban. Today, they make for a sore sight as nature takes back control of the site once home to scenes of whale carnage.



Whaling dates to 875 AD and was initially employed by many First Nations peoples worldwide as a subsistence practice. This continued until the 16th century, when whaling began to spread more intensively. The heyday of whaling, from the 17th century to the early-mid 20th century, was marked by a feverish sense of bonhomie for the supposed limitless supply of these majestic mammals. But, as with most things that appear too good to be true, the industry was to learn that no supply is ever truly limitless.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONNECTION

South Africa was a significant player in the whaling industry back in the day, primarily due to its location along several what would in later years come to be known as whale superhighways, as the migratory route of mammals such as humpbacks led them to

the warmer waters of the Indian Ocean to feed and calf. The first shore-based whaling station in South Africa was set up in Table Bay in 1792 and would usher in a remarkable period that would see the industry grow to 14 such stations, with a run lasting until 1975. The industry thrived as various species of whales were decimated.

The Union Whaling Station, located on the Bluff in Durban, was one of these 14 stations and was once considered the world's largest and most advanced whaling station. Commencing operations in 1909, the business was to experience a never-ending roller-coaster ride of alternating successes and misfortunes as operations moved between profitable and loss-making over the years. Various factors fuelled this ride, including a demand for whale oil to extract glycerol, used in the manufacture of dynamite during World War I and increasing international pressure on the South African



government to ban whaling along our coastline during the '70s.

THE DECIMATION OF WHALE SPECIES

The '30s would see further advancements in the field in the form of pelagic whaling, the practice of catching and processing whales at sea on large factory ships. Today, scientists believe this practice was a significant driver in the decimation of many whale populations, including humpbacks. The Union Whaling Station operated their factory ship, named the *Abraham Larsen*, which recorded the processing of 2 200 whales in 1955 alone. During the modern whaling age (1930–1975), 210 000 humpbacks were believed to have been hunted and removed from the southern oceans.

Eventually, a combination of financial and environmental pressures saw the Union Whaling Station close in 1976. Today, buildings stand in



RIGHT Tourism in Durban is doing its part to work towards ongoing whale conservation. A trip with responsible local operator Isle of Capri is an ideal way to see these magnificent mammals at close quarters.

BELOW RIGHT Citizen scientists are essential in the conservation of all marine life – your holiday snaps could greatly assist in scientists' efforts to monitor whale movements in our oceans.

a somewhat drab state of disrepair, vegetation claiming back the various structures.

MOTHER NATURE DOES HER THING

The successful banning of whaling locally and an increase in pressure internationally to restrict whaling in the Antarctic have allowed these magnificent mammals the opportunity to recover their population numbers naturally. While counting and estimating whale numbers is complex, the humpback population was fewer than 600 in the late '70s. But time has been kind to them, and a recent study undertaken at Cape Vidal in 2018 now puts the population at between 35 000 and 40 000 mammals.

The recovery of their population has been hailed as the greatest conservation success story of our time. At the turn of the 21st century, scientists began to study humpbacks in more detail, attempting to understand what was happening to the population that migrated north each year from Antarctica.

But humpback whales are more critical to our ecosystem than many of us understand. In fact, they form an integral part of the mechanism, defined by ScienceDirect, by which carbon-containing compounds are exported via biological processes from the ocean surface to the deep ocean, known as the biological pump.

Basically, humpback whale faecal matter, high in iron and nitrogen, fertilises phytoplankton (a form of algae), releasing oxygen into the atmosphere while trapping carbon dioxide and moving it to the ocean





floor. So much so that every third breath we take is thanks to whale poop.

THE RISE OF CITIZEN SCIENTISTS

Scientists also believed that whales were present in local waters between late May and early February each year. But, when they began receiving photographic evidence from whale-loving citizens of whales outside of these months, they were required to rethink what they thought they knew. The role of citizen scientists has become invaluable to the continued efforts to understand and conserve whales.

Apps like Happywhale, Flukebook and Seafari allow ecotourists to play their part as citizen scientists. The concept is simple: snap a shot of a whale’s fluke (tail) and submit it on the app. The fluke has markings such as dots, scratches and scars as unique as our fingerprints. The app processes your submission and matches it against an existing entry in the database or adds it as a new whale sighting. The apps also allow you to track the history of whales you may have spotted. Ampersand, a female humpback whale, was first sighted on 15 January 1988 in St Helena Bay, north of Cape Town. Earlier this year, on 11 February, she was sighted again off Dassen Island along the Cape West Coast. Ampersand thus holds the world record for the longest sighting period of 35 years, with scientists

estimating her age between 38 and 41 years. All thanks to everyday people like you and me.

TOURISM GETS INVOLVED

Other conservation efforts are making a mark in the drive towards the education and conservation of whales. Community tourism organisation Sodurba, which promotes tourism in the South of Durban, is eager to spread the good news about humpback whales and get us to travel to their neck of the woods. Humpback whales migrate past Durban’s shores each year as they feed and calve, with more whales passing closer to the Durban shoreline than any other coastal city in the world.

In the spirit of promoting local tourism, Sodurba dug deep into the whaling heritage of the Bluff, establishing three whale-watching sites along a predetermined route. ‘In 2019, Sodurba established the Bluff as a joint-first Whale Heritage Site,’ shares Sodurba Chairperson, Helga du Preez. Helga was my host for The Welcoming of the Whales Festival, which I recently attended in Durban. By all accounts, the festival has been a remarkable success, with more than 7 000 feet exploring the festival set up between Ansteys Beach and Brighton Beach along the Bluff.

Part of the festival was a tour of the old Union Whaling Station, which excited me. The ruins are on a military base and are notoriously inaccessible through legitimate channels. Sadly, the site is in need of rehabilitation. It could easily serve as a museum and information centre to further drive the education and awareness efforts put in place by Helga and her team.

— **ABOVE** The Welcoming of the Whales Festival on the Bluff in Durban sees plenty of visitors.

BELOW One of the three whale watching sites set up by local tourism body Sodurba, an ideal spot from which to take in the gentle giants of the sea.



In contrast to the operations that once took place at the Union Whaling Station, today, a giant whale is painted on exposed brickwork to pay homage to the many gentle giants slaughtered on the site at the Bluff in Durban.

*I looked back to see **A GIANT BLUE HUMPBACK WHALE** painted on an exposed brick wall. The mammal **SEEMED SAD TO ME**, perhaps reflecting on what once went down in this place*



PHOTOGRAPHY RYAN ENSLIN, LLOYD EDWARDS/RAGGY CHARTERS, GALLO/GETTYIMAGES, SHUTTERSTOCK, COURTESY IMAGES, SCIENTIFIC INPUT FROM MARINE BIOLOGIST DR DEBORAH ROBERTSON-ANDERSSON. PRICES CORRECT AT THE TIME OF PRINT AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE

WHALING IN 2023 TAKES MANY GUISES

The efforts to conserve whales are as important today as ever. Whaling still occurs in certain nations that defy regulations implemented by the International Whaling Commission. Ship strikes cause an estimated 20 000 whale deaths each year. Abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear plays an enormous role in the unnecessary deaths of whales, as we lose an estimated 650 000 whales, dolphins, seals and other sea life each year to this scourge.

Thanks to the efforts of the South African Whale Disentanglement Network, started in 2006 and supported by the National Sea Rescue Institute and the KwaZulu-Natal Sharks Board, old whaling techniques are being used to free whales caught in abandoned fishing lines. To date, 212 whales have been disentangled, with 170 NSRI volunteers trained and an average of 15 whale call-outs per year. It's a drop in the proverbial ocean, but it has meant the gift of life for those 212 whales.

The Durban whale-watching season runs from June to November each year. The three Bluff whale-watching sites are on Airlie Road, above Brighton Beach, along Netford Road, and above the Union Whaling Station ruins on Finnemore Road along the Bluff. To truly appreciate these magnificent mammals, book yourself on one of two daily whale-watching cruises operated by Isle of Capri Boat Cruises, operating from Wilson's Wharf in the Durban Harbour.

While walking through the ruins of the Union Whaling Station, I looked back to see a giant blue humpback whale painted on an exposed brick wall. The mammal seemed sad to me, perhaps reflecting on what once went down in this place. But, for a moment, I sensed we shared the same frustration that more is not being made of the area, as my heart went out to the continued plight of cetaceans in our oceans. Here's hoping that the greatest conservation success story of our time continues to be just that and not one consigned to the history books. **G**



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THE OYSTER BOX HOTEL

When travelling to Durban to take in the migration of these gentle giants, there is no better place to call home than the grand dame of Umhlanga, The Oyster Box Hotel. On the site of the first cottage in the uber-popular seaside town, The Oyster Box will keep you ensconced in luxury among trinkets celebrating uniquely South African heritage. The famed Lighthouse Bar, which allows access to an extensive balcony, is the ideal location from which to while away a warm Durban afternoon as you keep an eager eye out over the Indian Ocean for a spot of tail lifting or perhaps a breach further out to sea. Don't forget to do your bit by submitting your snaps to one of the apps.

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