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Article · July 2018

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To know where you are going, you must know where you have been. Reviewing archival news media for information on Namibia's marine life.

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A Sei whale mother and calf.
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USING THE ARCHIVES

To know where you are going, you must know where you have been. Reviewing archival news media for information on Namibia's marine life. Titus Shaanika tells us how to use history in science

In a data poor area such as the Namibian coastline, archived newspapers can be a priceless source of information. In search of historical records about the marine life off the Namibian coast, especially recordings of whale and dolphin strandings, the Namibian Dolphin Project (NDP) looked at the archives of the *Namib Times* newspaper held at Walvis Bay Municipal library. A review of newspapers from 1965 to 2012 provided some interesting findings.

WHALING, CETACEANS AND STRANDINGS

Since the start of the *Namib Times* newspaper, there have been intermittent articles on whales and dolphins (cetaceans) reflecting the change in popular attitudes towards this charismatic group of animals. We found three articles on commercial whaling. On the 15 January 1965, an article reported the poor whaling season, stating that the 36 Norwegian catchers (whaling vessels) had lower catch results compared to the preceding year. Another article on 20 January 1967 reported the banning of Blue Whale harpooning around Antarctica, mentioning that Blue Whales had been nearly hunted to extinction in these waters by Norwegian, Japanese and Soviet Union (Russian) whalers.

On 17 January 1971 there was a report of sperm whales being caught off South West Africa (Namibia's colonial name) by three whalers, Oom Kappie, Run and Sao Nicolau (a Danish factory ship), with the author recognising that 'whales are seldom seen in the bay nowadays but outside, at various places along South West Africa coast there are an increasing number of Sperm Whales …'. These articles reflect some of the modern history of whaling and Walvis Bay's part in that.

Southern Right Whales were once a common sight in the bay where they were thought to breed, hence the name Walvis Bay (Afrikaans for Whale Bay). The species was decimated in Walvis Bay from 1788 to 1803 by 'open boat whalers' operating from sailing vessels, while the faster baleen whales including the Humpback, Sei and Blue Whales were decimated during uncontrolled hunting in the 20th century from 1919 to 1979.

Reports from the public and in the media on strandings and rare sightings can be a useful source of information for researchers. Since 1965 the *Namib Times* has frequently reported sightings and stranding of several marine species, included a Basking Shark, Frill Shark, Pygmy Right Whale, Humpback whales, Sperm whales, Strap-tooth or Layard's Beaked Whale, Fin Whale, Killer Whale, Cuvier's Beaked Whale, Southern Right Whale, Heaviside's Dolphin, Dusky Dolphin, Bottlenose Dolphin, Elephant seals, Leatherback turtles and Rock-hopper penguins. In many cases, these articles were the only record of the species and are a useful addition to the long-term database of strandings within Namibia.

A Southern Right Whale seen off Hermanus, southern Cape. *Wikimedia Commons*

What is not widely known is that several of the dolphins held in the dolphinarium in Durban, South Africa were caught in Walvis Bay in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this time, wild capture of dolphins was more common-place than today. An article on 12 July 1983 reported that Bottlenose dolphins were first caught off Walvis Bay in 1976, which was publically criticised. Plans to capture two more dolphins in 1983 were also not well received and were opposed by the Cape Town-based Dolphin Action and Protection Group, in two articles on 2 and 18 August 1983. However, at this time a dolphin expert was quoted saying '… although there would be a certain amount of disturbance to the remaining family of dolphins off the Walvis Bay coast, the value gained from research to be carried out on these mammals would atone this upset'. The animals that were captured were later reported to be happy and settled on 25 November 1983. Two captured dolphins are still alive in the dolphinarium today – Kelpie was born to one of the captured females, and Gambit who has fathered many offspring while in captivity. The NDP's research in Namibia has shown that despite these early concerns, the Walvis Bay Bottlenose Dolphin population, although remaining small (less than 100 animals), continues to be stable over 30 years later. However, this population is facing growing human impacts in the area, including boat-based tourism, harbour expansion, pollution and there was even a threat of further capture for the live trade industry in 2016.

Most of the recent articles have either been about stranding events or reflotation of stranded cetaceans, showing a clear shift in public engagement with these animals over the last few decades. For instance, two stranded Bottlenose dolphins and Pygmy Right whales were rescued on 1 March 2002 and 8 February 2005 respectively by the members of the public in the Walvis Bay lagoon, while on the 13 February 2009 over 60 people unsuccessfully attempted to rescue a stranded Humpback Whale at Paaltjies beach on Pelican Point. Sightings of Killer Whales (6 June 2006) and even the birth of a Humpback Whale (10 July 2010) both very rare occurrences, were reported in Walvis Bay. The Humpback Whale birth was particularly rare as most whales off the East Atlantic coast only breed and calf in the warm waters north of Namibia.

FISHERIES, JELLIFICATION AND SEALING

Walvis Bay is primarily a fishing town and since 1965, the *Namib Times* has documented the decline of one of the major industries in the country – the small pelagic fishing industry which focuses on sardines (pilchard) and anchovy. In the 1960s, the pilchard fishery statistics and reports appeared frequently, highlighting the town's interest. One fisherman even reported the incredible sighting of a pilchard shoal of about 46 km wide between Swakopmund and Henties Bay on 2 June 1967. The pilchard fishery was highly productive in its early years, with figures regularly above 200 000 tons per season and catches peaking at over 800 000 tons for the 1968 season. These figures, however, declined rapidly to below 50 000 tons per year by 1977. An article on 24 January 1978 blamed the collapse of the fishery on overexploitation – a combination of the local industry, 70 plus Russian trawlers operating in Namibian waters and environmental anomalies, while an article on 25 April 1980 blamed the decline on mismanagement, greed and a lack of research. By 28 August 1990, the *entire* Namibian pilchard stock stood at 750 000 tons (estimate by the Norwegian fisheries research vessel the Fridtjof Nansen), less than the annual catch of 1968. During this period (1990-1995) catches averaged over 90 000 tons per year. In 2017 the pilchard stock was

A Humpback whale in the Southern Ocean. *Wikimedia Commons*

estimated to be 183 000 tons, and the total allowable catch (TAC) was set at 25 000 tons, just 3% of the 1968 catches. In an effort to help the pilchard stock to recover, the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR) recently (12 December 2017) announced that it will not allocate a pilchard quota for the following three years (2018 to 2020).

These days, the Northern Benguela ecosystem off the coast of Namibia is characterized by massive numbers of jellyfish and they are a cause of concern as large catches can cause mechanical problems for fishermen, such as breaking fishing nets and blocking pumps. The leading theory is that jellyfish have taken over the role in the ecosystem formerly occupied by small pelagic fish such as anchovy and pilchard, so large numbers of jellyfish are often assumed to be a sign of major changes in the ecosystem. This 'ecosystem shift' may be irreversible. Historic data on actual jellyfish numbers is very poor, however an article in the Namib Times as long ago as 3 March 1967, reported that a fish load of 50 tons had 30 tons of jellyfish among it. This report suggests that the increase in jellyfish numbers may have occurred prior to the collapse of the sardine fishery, as the article further reads "however there is no scarcity of pilchards off the coast". Additional anecdotal reports such as this may help scientists shed light on historic patterns.

The interaction between fishermen and seals is nothing new, on 16 October 1970 the controversial topic of seals versus fishing industry first appeared in the *Namib Times*, with seals reported as a menace to the fishing industry and sealing was carried out to restore a 'favourable balance in the seal population off the coast'. However, just days later (25 October 1970) sealing was criticised by Mrs Irene Kleyenstüber, 'for thousands of years seals have been catching fish in the area without overfishing, the extermination of seals cold upset a balance of nature'. Although an emotional subject, seal harvesting happens seasonally in Namibia, providing much-needed employment and foreign currency through exports.

More recently, on 15 June 2007, the Namib Times reported on marine life that is unintentionally killed during the fishing process. Thousands of untargeted (by-caught) seabirds, turtles and sharks are killed every year by the long-line fishery. This figure can be reduced significantly by implementing mitigation measures and educating the fisherman about the importance of conserving seabirds. The Albatross Task Force, funded by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and supported by the Namibian Nature Foundation has since 2007 made significant inroads into solving the problem of seabird by-catch in Namibia. Today fishing vessels are requied to deploy bird scaring lines or pay fines of up to N$500 000.

These are just some of the interesting findings among the archives. The *Namib Times* has shown the value of archival records for filling the gaps in some scientific data series or providing a starting point for further investigations. The Namibian Dolphin Project continues its dedicated research activities in Namibia and greatly values the continued input and support of the community to their work.

Blue whales in the Southern Ocean. *Wikimedia Commons*

Titus Shaanika was born in Iitananga village, Northern Namibia. He has been involved in marine conservation since 2014, as a volunteer and consultant, working on conservation of seabirds and marine mammals as well as doing outreach activities. He holds BSc (Hons) Fisheries and Aquatic science from the University of Namibia and an MSc Zoology from the Nelson Mandela University. Titus is also a JNCC certified Marine Mammal observer. He currently lives in Walvis Bay, Namibia.

LANGUAGE TRANSLATION

Science archives

Ukwazi lapho uya khona, kufanele wazi lapho uqhamuka khona. Ukubheka izindaba zakudala ukuze sithole ulwazi ngempilo yasolwandle lwase Namibia, sibheka ukuthi singawusebenzisa kanjani umlando kweze science. Kukhona amabhuku omlando achaza ngempilo yasolwandle yasogwini lase Namibian, ikakhulukazi ukuqoshwa kwemikhome, lomsebenzi wase Namibia ubuka ukuqoshwa kwakudala kusukela ngo 1965 kuya 2012 kwiphephandaba i *Namib Times* elibekwe kumtapo wolwazi okumasipala wase Walvis Bay. Ukubalulwa kokubonakala okungajwayelekile kwalemikhome kuleliphephandaba, kusiza ukuthi sibone isithombe esiphelele sempilo yasolwandle esogwini lase Nambia.

CURRICULUM CORNER

GEOGRAPHY GRADE 12:
Settlement geography.

LIFE SCIENCES GRADE 11:
Environmental studies: Biosphere, biomes and environment