



SHIP WRECKED IN HUMPBACK DOLPHIN HOTSPOT

6th September 2013

Start

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) would like to congratulate the South African Maritime Safety Authority (SAMSA), South African-based maritime services company, Subtech Group, SMIT Salvage and Towage, and the Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs for the swift and efficient action taken to protect the Richards Bay Harbour's waters and shoreline after the wreckage of the MV Smart, a ship laden with coal and just refuelled. Although the Richards Bay Harbour is a busy commercial port, it is still a functioning estuarine ecosystem. It is home to the rare Humpback Dolphin, a shy cousin of the well-known Bottlenose Dolphin. Southern Africa's Humpback Dolphins were classified as Vulnerable to extinction in the 2004 Red Data Book of Mammals and threats to the species include habitat degradation, accidental death in shark nets, loss of prey base due to fishing pressure and habitat degradation, and chemical and industrial pollution.

Boat-based research in the 1990s and a recent study of Humpback Dolphins caught and killed in the shark nets has shown how important Richards Bay is to Humpback Dolphins in KwaZulu-Natal. It is possible that this area is of national importance to this species, as is Algoa Bay in the Eastern Cape although updated information is required.

Knowing the importance of the Richards Bay area to Humpback Dolphins, the Endangered Wildlife Trust funded and conducted research in collaboration with the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Pretoria, to understand how Humpback Dolphins use the area. This study left no doubt about the importance of the harbour entrance to Humpback Dolphins; it forms the core of dolphin's feeding area and threats to this area, and the marine and estuarine fish and other creatures that form part of the Humpback Dolphins' food web, threaten this apex predator.

As the coal spills out of the wreck of the MV Smart, coal 'dust' suspended in the water column is drifting towards the harbour entrance. Direct effects of coal dust on the health of Humpback Dolphins are probably minimal - though, like in humans, it could cause constipation. Of greater concern are the indirect effects. The coal particles may block the gills of fish, essentially suffocating them, further diminishing the dolphin's prey which is already pressured by overfishing and habitat degradation.

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The Endangered Wildlife Trust is a non-profit, public benefit organisation dedicated to conserving species and ecosystems in southern Africa to the benefit of all people.

NPO Number: 015-502, **PBO number:** 930 001 777, **Member of IUCN** - The International Union for Conservation of Nature
The Endangered Wildlife Trust is US 501(c)(3) compliant under **US IRS Registration number:** EMP98-0586801.



The Humpback Dolphins that have been caught in KwaZulu-Natal's shark nets are being studied so that we can better understand their biology. Diet is an important part of the investigations and, over the past 30 years, there has been a change in the species of fish consumed by these dolphins. Just how this may affect them is still being analysed but a parallel study on the health of these animals may give some insight. The parasite load (number of parasites harboured in the stomachs of the dolphins) is high, perhaps indicating that elements lower down in the food chain have changed). Further studies need to be conducted to elucidate exactly what this means as this is often a good indicator of health, not just of the host species but of the entire ecosystem, and may indicate degradation of the marine environment in the area. The research so far shows an already stressed population of Humpback Dolphins but we only have very few pieces of the puzzle.

All oil on board the vessel - an estimated 1,769 tons of fuel oil and 129 tons of diesel - has been removed, without spillage, ending phase 1 of the salvage. This is good news for the dolphins and the marine ecosystem in general. Preparations are now underway to discharge about 10,000 tons of coal slurry from the MV Smart's broken No. 9 hold and then remove the 137, 650 tons of coal that remains in the other, apparently still watertight hatches. We believe that protective measures should be taken to contain the coal dust and prevent excessive contamination in the local environment, hopefully allowing this situation that had such potential for environmental disaster to conclude without major mishap.

End.

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