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MEDIA RELEASE

WWF and UP team up to keep watch on southern right whales

CAPE TOWN – The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) South Africa and the University of Pretoria’s (UP) Mammal Research Institute Whale Unit are partnering up to support research on southern right whales, which are facing a variety of new threats, not least the impact of a warming climate on their food supply.

The Whale Unit, which falls under UP’s Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, has been monitoring southern right whale populations since 1969. Using annual surveys, including photo-identification photography, their research is one of the longest continuous datasets for any marine mammal in the world. As such, it is an extremely valuable dataset that is of national and international importance.

Up until about a decade ago, southern right whales had made a remarkable recovery from commercial whaling. But now, warming oceans and consequent changes to ocean processes appear to be having a negative impact on the available food supply. This is having a noticeable effect on the number of whales visiting South African shores.

In partnering with UP’s Whale Unit, WWF South Africa hopes to enable the facility to continue its vital research into the well-being of these iconic whales, which are at the heart of South Africa’s coastal tourism industry, generating both direct and indirect income for the country.

“Since commercial whaling stopped, the recovery of the southern right whale population was a great conservation success story,” said Dr Els Vermeulen, research manager at the Whale Unit. “But now, the science is telling us that these marine mammals are coming under renewed pressure from a more modern problem likely linked to climate change. Over the past decade, we have been finding that the whales are getting thinner, are calving less often and are leaving their breeding grounds earlier.”

In October last year, a three-day aerial survey from Nature’s Valley to Muizenberg counted some 414 whales, among them 191 mother-and-calf pairs, mainly between De Hoop Nature Reserve and Walker Bay near Hermanus. This number is higher than recorded in 2019 and 2020, but remains well below what is regarded as normal.

In addition, since 2009, the number of unaccompanied adults (males, resting females and receptive females) has been noticeably lower, indicating that non-

calving right whales are still not migrating to the South African coast as readily as they used to in years gone by.

A worrying trend is that whale mothers also appear to be leaving South African breeding areas earlier than normal, which could be having a negative effect on the chances of calf survival.

Southern right whales rely heavily on their foraging success and stored energy supplies to support their reproduction and migration. Their body condition (or “fatness”) is thus extremely important to ensure successful pregnancy and calf rearing. Recent research has shown that right whale mothers have decreased in body condition by 24% since the late 1980s, indicating clearly that their feeding has been less successful.

“We strongly believe this lack of energy reserves lies at the basis of the increased calving intervals and a reduced migration towards our shores of the non-calving individuals,” Dr Vermeulen said. “But in order to understand the dynamics behind this, we need to continue our ongoing research. We are deeply grateful to all the organisations and individuals who have supported this work over the years. It is now more important than ever for us to keep providing the information that will promote the protection and conservation of this iconic whale species.”

“There is no doubt that we are experiencing major changes in our oceans as a result of climate change, which in turn could have severe implications for marine species and livelihoods,” said Craig Smith, senior manager of WWF South Africa’s Marine Programme. “We need to understand these changes better to allow for improved forecasting and building of resilience for people and marine ecosystems. To this end, southern right whales may prove to be a very useful indicator for changes in our oceans. The funding of a long-term southern right whale dataset is priceless in helping scientists to understand these changes, and to help advocate for reduced greenhouse-gas emissions so that the southern right whale can continue to thrive along our coastline.”

What you can do to help

You can support the conservation of southern right whales by symbolically adopting a whale. In doing so, you will be supporting whale research and conservation in South Africa. All funds raised go towards covering the costs of whale fieldwork. Follow this link to find out more: <https://donate.wwf.org.za/adoption/adopt-a-whale>

Learn about the Whale Unit’s research here: https://www.up.ac.za/mammal-research-institute/news/post_2839612-2019-southern-right-whale-aerial-survey

ABOUT THE MAMMAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE WHALE UNIT

Established in 1985, the Mammal Research Institute Whale Unit of the University of Pretoria does extensive research into whales and dolphins in southern Africa. Its main focus is on monitoring the South African population of southern right whales, for which the unit holds an impressive 43-year-long database of individually identified animals. This allows researchers to follow these whales over time, and learn extensively about their life history.

ABOUT WWF SOUTH AFRICA

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) South Africa is a national office that is part of the WWF network. For 50 years, the local NGO has worked towards inspiring South Africans to live in harmony with nature for the benefit of the country and the well-being of its people.

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 114-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only University in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, ranked top in Africa. Overall has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Centre for World University Rankings. It is ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology, and law) and the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In May 2020, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond University and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training.

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