

NEWS RELEASE

UP Mammal Research Institute plays key role in launch of global network to protect endangered Indian Ocean humpback dolphin



A humpback dolphin in a South African harbour (Photo: Brett Atkins).

HERMANUS – The University of Pretoria’s (UP’s) Mammal Research Institute (MRI) Whale Unit, based in Hermanus outside Cape Town, is playing a leading role in a new global network aimed at galvanising conservation action for the increasingly vulnerable Indian Ocean humpback dolphin.

Dr Shanan Atkins, a post-doctoral researcher at the MRI Whale Unit, is coordinating the Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphin Conservation Network (HuDoNet), a network of 77 scientists and conservationists from 17 countries along the western Indian Ocean and Arabian Seas who are collaborating on research that provides evidence for positive conservation decisions and actions.

“Most people may have never heard of Indian Ocean humpback dolphins,” Dr Atkins explains. “As South Africa’s most endangered marine mammal, they are shy and elusive, and inhabit a narrow strip of water on our coastline. Their range extends from South Africa to other countries in southern and eastern Africa, the Middle East, to western India and Sri Lanka, as well as islands like Madagascar and Mayotte. Many of these 23 countries are low-income countries.”

In most places, humpback dolphin populations are small and declining because of their proximity to highly populated coastlines. “They are affected by human activities that occur on land, in fresh water and in the ocean. The dolphins die in fishing nets, their habitats are altered by port and harbour construction, coastal development, dredging, and land reclamation. They are susceptible to pollution, such as chemicals and loud underwater noise,” Dr Atkins says. She adds that these activities threaten the survival of the dolphins in ways that are challenging to understand and measure, but likely to be impactful.

HuDoNet was launched this year as a way of fostering and facilitating collaborative research and management efforts, and sharing expertise to support conservation initiatives for the humpback dolphins across the member organisations’ geographical range. The University of Pretoria, through its MRI Whale Unit, along with the University of St Andrews (Scotland) and Zayed University (United Arab Emirates), were among the founding partners.

Action scope and research challenges

Dr Els Vermeulen, Senior Lecturer and Research Manager at the MRI Whale Unit, which forms part of UP’s Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, works alongside Dr Atkins and the other members of this global network. “HuDoNet is not a research project alone – the ultimate goal is to collaborate and jointly create a conservation action plan for the species across its range; to collaborate, work with governments and share resources, knowledge and experience,” she says.

“HuDoNet’s goal goes beyond research – it is to use research to inform precise and accurate conservation actions, and to raise public awareness of the plight of this endangered dolphin.”

Across the range of countries involved, the dolphin researchers face various challenges:

Ketki Jog, a PhD candidate from Australia’s James Cook University who is working in India, reports that, “Our major challenge is a lack of resources.”

In South Africa, Dr Vermeulen says, “Due to the elusive nature of these dolphins, data collection is challenging and limited by a lack of resources.”

Other challenges include a lack of data, limited technical support, a lack of awareness of the species and its poor conservation status, and a lack of action by the authorities. “It is so difficult to get the authorities involved in conservation matters,” says Yusuf Bohadi, a researcher at Kuwait University.

Local research

The UP researchers’ primary contribution to HuDoNet is centred around their work on SouSa, a national consortium working for the conservation of the species, also under Dr Vermeulen’s lead. She describes the group’s fieldwork as entailing predominantly small-boat work for photo-identification and biopsy sampling of humpback dolphins along the coast in Richards Bay (KwaZulu-Natal) and the southern Cape coast.

“I am proud that the MRI Whale Unit is playing a leading role in the establishment of a collaborative network across 23 countries,” Dr Vermeulen says. “It is gratifying to help galvanise collaboration and sharing, and to provide inspiration to the younger generation. As part of our UP team, I have been working on the establishment of this network for more than two years, and I am proud that we are at a stage where we have launched and are actively working together across 77 members from very different cultural backgrounds, with the sole purpose of better conserving these endangered dolphins.”

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Media enquiries can be directed to Mr Sashlin Girraj - Public Relations & Events Manager

Email: sashlin.girraj@up.ac.za | Cell: +27(0)72 447 3784

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 its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers 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, which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The [2024 Times Higher Education subject rankings](#) placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of Law, Veterinary Science, Accounting and Finance; Agriculture and Forestry and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za

ABOUT HUMPBACK DOLPHIN CONSERVATION NETWORK (HuDoNet)

The mission of HuDoNet is to foster and facilitate collaborative research and management efforts, sharing expertise to support conservation initiatives for Indian Ocean humpback dolphins across their range. We strive to work together and attract resources to support local initiatives, while unifying and amplifying our voices to draw the attention the species' needs.

Visit hudonet.org to learn more about humpback dolphins. The setup of HuDoNet has been made possible with the support of the University of Pretoria, Zayed University, St Andrews University, TechyApes and EACOP Ltd.