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# Bay's humpback dolphins under scientific scrutiny

■ Research by visiting Dutch master's student follows similar study 16 years ago

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A YOUNG Dutch student is busy with a research project that could help protect one of the icons of Algoa Bay – and boost plans for a long-awaited tourism development.

Based at Bayworld, Renee Koper, 23, of Groningen University, is doing her humpback dolphin study under the auspices of the SA Environmental Observation Network (Saeon), and the supervision of marine mammal specialist Dr Stephanie Plooi.

The study will go towards Koper's master's degree, but the results will also be shared with Saeon and Afri-Coast, the engineering and environment consultancy working on the Humpback Dolphin Sanctuary and Humpback Dolphin Trail.

The sanctuary was mooted for the Port Elizabeth beachfront a decade ago as one of the off-sets for the loss of humpback dolphin habitat around the eastern off-shore islands as a result of the Port of Ngqura.

Planning is under way between the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, Transnet National Ports Authority and Afri-Coast as to how big it will be and where it will lie.

Flowing from the sanctuary plan, the humpback trail will extend from Pollok Beach to Flat Rocks.

Koper's study is aimed at monitoring and recording the size of the humpback dolphin pods, and how they react to different human activity.

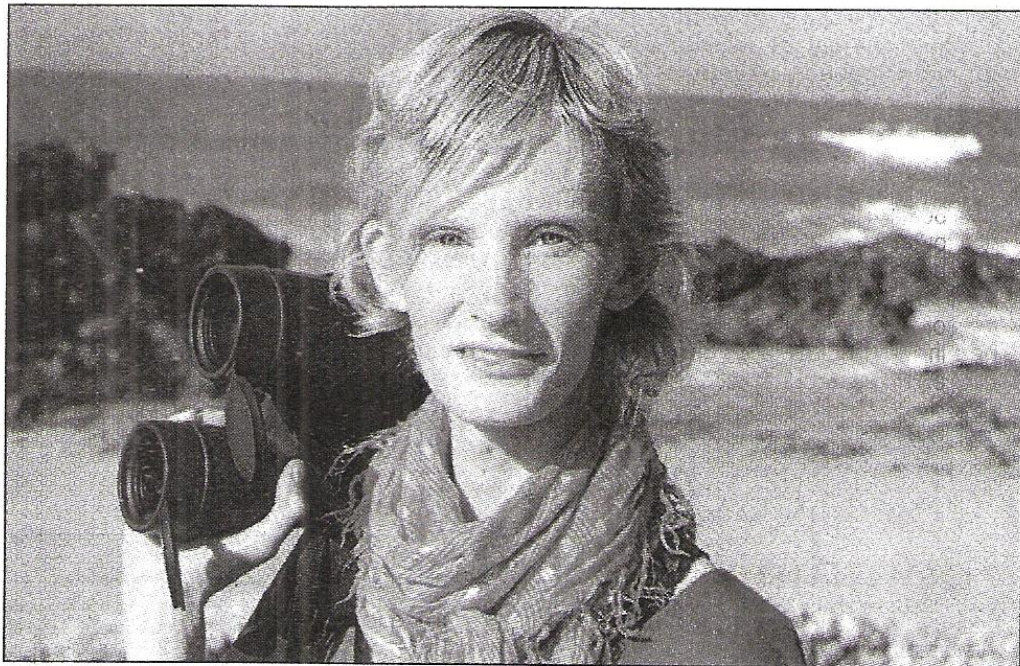
The idea is that the results will be compared against those from a similar study done by Dr Leszek Karczmarski 16 years ago when he was based at Bayworld (then the Port Elizabeth Museum Complex).

She said humpbacks were relatively easy to pick out among the various creatures surfacing and moving around the bay.

"I look for the distinctive hump with a small dorsal fin in the middle of the hump and light grey spots on the hump. They also surface at a much sharper angle than bottlenose dolphins, for instance. Often I see just a single adult, while at other times there will be four to six in a group.

"My study began only in May and I don't have much data yet, but early indications are the group sizes have got smaller than they were in the previous study."

If this proved to be so, the hypothesis



WAVE-WATCHER . . . Dutch researcher Renee Koper at Port Elizabeth's Pollok Beach while monitoring the humpback dolphins of Algoa Bay. Picture: B-JAY PIERCEY

might be that it was related to reduced prey stock, meaning less to share among a big pod, she said. "This is a threatened species, so our findings will be important when we finalise them.

"Once we get good data and establish why the pods are smaller – if that does turn out to be the case and if it is found to be a negative – then we can propose what to do about it. If it is a decline in prey stock, then the proposal might relate to the fishing industry. If it is human activity, then perhaps it is a matter of establishing human no-go areas."

In terms of human activity, Koper is looking at various ways people use the bay, including jet-skiing, swimming and canoeing. The reaction of humpbacks to these different pursuits was marked, she said.

"With surfing or canoeing, they do a slow dive displaying no shock or fear and they come out going the same way as before. With high-speed vessels like jet-skis, they disappear suddenly and sometimes come out going the other way or I just

don't pick them up again at all."

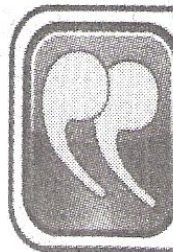
Koper uses four observation posts on the beachfront. The spots were chosen because they allow for "visual overlapping".

It is tiring work. She visits at least two, sometimes three posts a day and spends 2½ hours at each one scanning the bay with binoculars and the naked eye, at five minute intervals, for 10 minutes at a time.

It was not clear initially how feasible the study was going to be and it was going to run through just to mid-November, but the results have been good and the hope now is that it can be extended through to May next year.

Koper knew she wanted to focus on a marine subject for her masters. She e-mailed research centres all over the world, and ended up in Port Elizabeth.

She said she was thrilled to be in the Friendly City. "I'm from the Netherlands, where there is not much to see in terms of nature. Most European natural science students do not get the chance to work on a project like this – so I am very happy."



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