On Friday, 31 March 2017, a mass stranding of 38 common dolphins was reported to have occurred along a remote stretch of coast under the protection of Addo Elephant National Park, between Sundays River Mouth and Woody Cape in Algoa Bay, Eastern Cape. The local authority dealing with all whale, dolphin and seal strandings, the Port Elizabeth Museum at Bayworld, was alerted. A site visit on the day by South African National Parks (SANParks) and Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) officials ascertained that the animals most likely had been stranded four to five days earlier and were all dead.

A team of seven people, comprising members from Bayworld and the Cetacean Research Unit at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) set out from Port Elizabeth early on Saturday 1 April to respond to the stranding event. Staff and volunteers from Addo Elephant National Park provided support.

The animals were found to be spread out over a 2km stretch of coastline. There were 28 adults and 10 juveniles, of which 12 were male and 26 female. The response team was split up into three teams, each comprising an experienced marine mammal researcher and a number of interns and volunteers. Over the next two days, the teams collected basic information such as sex, length and maturity status from each individual dolphin. In addition, carcasses were dissected to obtain vital information on the cause of death of the dolphins.

Dr. Stephanie Plön, a member of the African Earth Observation Network (AEON) at NMMU, has been researching dolphin and whale health in Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal waters for the past nine years and indicated that all animals appeared healthy and in good condition. However, multiple samples were collected from all individuals for further analysis.

Dr. Greg Hofmeyr, curator of the marine mammal research collection at Bayworld, secured tissue samples as well as skeletal material for the extensive marine mammal research collection at the museum. This data will add important information on the taxonomy of this species in South African waters.

This section of the coastline appears to be a unique spot on the southern and eastern coasts of South Africa for mass strandings, with four other such events recorded by Bayworld since 1977. However, this stranding event comprises the largest one yet. Dr. Plön and Dr. Hofmeyr regularly attend to marine mammal stranding events along the Eastern Cape coastline, each one providing a challenge. While such events are tragic for the animals concerned, they are very valuable for research on these animals.

Dolphins are at the top of the marine food chain and as such are important indicators of the health of our oceans. No obvious cause for this unusual stranding event could be determined, but no evidence of foul play was found. Further analysis may provide additional information. However, in order for the researchers to pinpoint the cause of individual stranding events it is imperative that strandings are reported as soon as possible to the local authorities so that better information can be gathered.

Members of the public are encouraged to report any marine mammal strandings (whales, dolphins, seals), dead or alive, to the Bayworld stranding hotline: 071-724 2122.

Photographs: Port Elizabeth Museum at Bayworld
Message from 
Dries Engelbrecht, 
Regional General Manager

It’s a sad day not only for us here at SANParks, but for the broader public, when we get word of a mass stranding of dolphins along our coast. What’s more disheartening is that although it’s not the first, it certainly is the largest. And as there seems to be no clear indication as to the cause thereof, it may not be the last case. We are extremely thankful for the work done by the staff from Bayworld in Port Elizabeth for taking over at the site, as well as all the other volunteers who assisted in gathering vital information.

In other news, in our water scarce society, we are doing all we can to eradicate alien invasive species not only from our national parks, but in the areas around our parks too. At the Garden Route National Park, partnerships are key to getting ahead of the growth of the Medeira vine or Anacardes cardiophora, as you’ll read on pg 3.

On a lighter note, though, employee wellness is one of SANParks’ key pillars when it comes to its staff. As we all know, a healthy body = a healthy mind, and physical activity among our staff members is encouraged. You will notice on the back pages that we’ve had entries in a number of different sporting codes recently. Be it in team events or individual challenges, our men and women took to the playing fields and nature trails and gave it their all while enjoying our natural assets at the same time.

Compliments received

Addo Elephant National Park
- In all the various SANParks we have stayed at, we were most impressed with the dedication of the staff here to South Africa’s natural heritage!
- Always a pleasure to visit Addo and it is a must when we have overseas tourists.
- We were in the mobility challenged unit. The provision of ramps rather than steps was very useful, as was the provision of adequate railings in the bathrooms. Thank you so much, it made all the difference.

Camedeboo National Park
- Love Camdeboo - wonderful stopover. Thank you.
- We enjoyed our stay very much. Will definitely visit again.
- Eet hee lekker gebl, die sitte geniet en die ablusie asook terrein is baie netjies. Dit sprek van dissipline deur die parkhoof en werkers. Alles word goed onderhou in die ablusieblok. Ek sal beslis weer gaan om langer daar te vertoe.

Garden Route National Park
- The information signs in the forests are excellent and the area was generally pristine. (Krynysa)
- Thank you very much for providing a fridge in the forest huts. It makes it summer 5 stars! (Storms River Mouth)
- Was delighted and amazed that I hadn’t stopped there before, but certainly will in the future. Thank you for providing these lovely spots. (Natures Valley)

Karoo National Park
- The staff members are always courteous and efficient. Everything was extremely well organised with very friendly and helpful staff.
- We thoroughly enjoyed our couple of days’ stay in this Park and would recommend it to anyone enquiring regarding our stay there.
- Best of the SANParks accommodation we visited so far. Next time we will stay longer and rent a 4x4.

Mountain Zebra National Park
- We had car trouble so requested a late entry. The staff members were extremely friendly and helpful in handling the situation. They allowed us late admission and met us at Reception to explain how to get to our accommodation. Thank you for all the help.
- The Mountain Cottage is fantastic. All staff members were extremely friendly and helpful. Well done Mountain Zebra for an awesome couple of days’ vacation. Next time we will be back for a longer stay.
- This is one of the most spectacular and rewarding reserves I have visited. I just hope that SANParks keeps it as it is and does not try to make it another ‘Big 5’ reserve. It is a fantastic 2-3 night nature experience (with a 4x4 especially).

Compliment of the month: Karoo National Park
Firstly, I apologise for writing to you so long after my belongings were recovered by your staff and you very kindly arranged for them to be delivered to a courier in Beaufort West. We have just recently returned home from our holiday in the Cape.

I would like to thank you for your kindness and highly commend your staff after I accidentally left a bag in the composite bathroom on 7 March. In particular, Sanet Olivier, who handed in the bag containing my medication, toiletries, a camera, binoculars and new smart phone to Patricia Sazela at Reception. Patricia traced me and really were out of her way to parcel it all up so it could be couriered to Cape Town. I am so appreciative of the team effort and exceptional and highly efficient service.

Our whole experience of National Parks was first class, and sometimes we tourists are unaware of the staff who make it so. These ladies in particular were amazing. Please commend them for me. I am also posting a copy of this letter so you can give them the small personal gifts enclosed.

Sincerely
Gill Woods

Women in SANParks

Garden Route National Park hosted some special guests during the last week of March, and they had the Park’s social media platforms buzzing!

Garden Route National Park

Daisy Masangoako (Woolworths), Mantombi Makhubele (Travel editor: Independent Newspapers), Kim Jade (Glamour model) and Thuli Mbatha (Photographer: Independent Newspapers) explored and enjoyed the area to the max, and documented their travels from beginning to end. And that’s not all – keep your eyes peeled for articles in upcoming newspaper supplements as well!

With its creation, SANParks committed itself to the empowerment of female staff from all levels within the organisation. In SANParks, women certainly have made significant progress in this regard with the Chairperson of the Board being female and 40% of the Board members being female as well. The Chief Operational Officer (COO), the ME of Tourism, the Head of Human Capital Management, the Acting Head of Socio-Economic Development, the Head of Legal Services, the Senior GM of Strategy and Business Performance, the GM of Infrastructure Development to name but a few, are all women who form part of SANParks Management.

Today, women make up more than 37% of the people employed by SANParks and more than 37.3% are in managerial positions throughout the organisation.

In addition, six parks are managed by women, considering that a Park Manager role was formerly predominantly a male role. Furthermore, there are 74 female Rangers and 21 female Scientists. This showcases SANParks’ commitment towards employment equity for women.

The SANParks Women’s Forum celebrated its first anniversary on 8 March.

Women in SANParks
Addo Elephant Trail Run 2017

Another year, another successful Addo Elephant Trail Run! It was a weekend of new records, the biggest field ever seen at this event and the hottest ever, with temperatures of 31 degrees Celsius measured at specific points on the Saturday!

The weekend of 10 – 12 March saw records broken in both the 100 mile and 76km races. Tom Adams (2016 joint winner from Angola) broke his own record by over an hour, finishing in 20h33. Naomi Brand (RSA) ran her first ever 100 mile race and won the ladies title, beating the 2016 record by five hours! The second lady and (only other female finisher), Rosie Carey, also beat last year’s winning time by about four hours.

In the 76km race, South African ultra-running legend, Ryan Sandes, took 40 minutes off the previous record in a blistering time of 6h54.

This year, athletes booked approximately R180 000 worth of accommodation in the Park. Race organiser, Free Spirit Adventures (FSA), sponsored six 44km entries and two 76km entries for SANParks community athletes. FSA will be making a donation to the SANParks Honorary Rangers from the Addo Region for their work over the race weekend in manning various checkpoints. Going forward, they will also work with the Park’s conservation department in building and developing the trail in certain areas.

Results:

100 mile podium men
1. Ryan Sandes 20h33min (new record)
2. Andrea Biffi 22h34min
3. Martin Malherbe 24h00min

100 mile podium women
1. Naomi Brand 24h00min (new record and third overall)
2. Rosie Carey 24h38min (seventh overall)

76km podium men
1. Ryan Sandes 04h54min (new record)
2. Stewart Chaperon 07h54min
3. Zigar Hamees 07h57min

76km podium women
1. Suzette van Bremsen 09h37min (eighth overall)
2. Anouk Baars Mezes 09h44min (ninth overall)
3. Kate Swanepoel 11h00min

44km podium men
1. Mohutu Gugaga 03h54min
2. Vincent van der Heijden 04h08min
3. Pieter Conradie 04h15min

44km podium women
1. Danielle van den Dries 03h59min (seventh overall)
2. Adeline Du Toit 04h15min
3. Charmaine Lamprecht 04h30min

Results of the team members entered by Addo Elephant National Park

Ndlebele Qwakanisa 13h47 (34th man in the 44km)
Ishmael Mtshwana 50h36 (20th man in the 44km)
Khuyalethu Stokwe 5h38 (27th man in the 44km)
Ishmael Mtshwana 50h36 (20th man in the 44km)

100 mile podium men
1. Mvuyisi Gcogco 03h54min
2. Ishmael Mtshwana 04h15min
3. Khuyalethu Stokwe 04h30min

100 mile podium women
1. Naomi Brand 03h54min (new record and third overall)
2. Andrea Biffi 03h57min
3. Martin Malherbe 04h00min

44km podium men
1. Ryan Sandes 03h54min (new record)
2. Stewart Chaperon 07h54min
3. Zigar Hamees 07h57min

44km podium women
1. Danielle van den Dries 03h59min (seventh overall)
2. Adeline Du Toit 04h15min
3. Charmaine Lamprecht 04h30min

The date for next year is 2-4 March 2018, with entries opening on 1 May.

Karoo’s camping site bandit

One wonders how many guests have been done in by the Park’s notorious camping site thief since he started his shenanigans.

The culprit’s modus operandi: snatching guests’ cooler bags filled with yummy foodstuff before making away with it towards the fence and the hole where he seems to live. It would appear as if he has a particular penchant for soft cooler bags left on the ground or within his reach – most likely because it’s easier to smell through to what’s inside and the fact that it’s easier to drag away than the more rigid ones.

As you can imagine, the case of the disappearing coolers initially led to a lot of suspicion among visitors of theft. However, being sure it wasn’t staff members or guests, park staff went into ‘detective mode’, which always led to the same conclusion: the cooler bags were always found either against the fence or close to the hole/home of a certain hedgehog. Visitors often get a kick out of the fact that when their (empty) coolers are returned to them, there is evidence of teeth holes as proof.

Senior Housekeeper, Sorina van der Walt, was lucky enough to fleetingly spot the culprit one night, and she says she was shocked to see how big he actually is.

In August last year, BSP established additional partnerships with Professor Christo Fabricius from the neighbouring Bird Sanctuary. “This is a battle we have to win and we are training everyone we can,” says Carlo. Other partnerships include the one with Oom Booi who is from TouwsRanten.

How to deal with Madeira vine

• Every piece of plant material removed is ‘double bagged and incinerated’.
• SANParks is planning to release a biological agent to combat Madeira when it starts flowering.
• If you have this pest in your garden you will need expert advice and assistance in clearing it. It should definitely not be used as compost or discarded with other garden refuse, as this simply helps to facilitate it spreading even further.
• Should you require assistance with the removal of Madeira vine, please contact SANParks for guidance on how to go about it.

If you have seen Madeira vine, record your sighting at https://www.ispotnature.org/projects/spot-madeira-vine-garden-route

Madeira vine threat to water and land

SANParks has been fighting to free the Garden Route National Park from a new invader for years now. Madeira vine or Aredera cordifolia is a South American alien plant invader which can be seen from Wilderness eastward towards Port Elizabeth. It has fleshy, heart-shaped green leaves and spikes of white flowers (February to April). It produces multiple aerial tubers along the stems and each one of these is capable of growing and flourish in the Garden Route. “We have partnered with the Constantia Kloof Conservancy near Wilderness as this pest is also invading the southern fringes of the conservancy along White Road and Constantia Drive,” he says.

Biodiversity Social Projects’ (BSP) Carlo de Kock says removing this invader will free up water where it occurs close to sources and allow more space for indigenous plants to grow and flourish in the Garden Route. “We have partnered with the Constantia Kloof Conservancy near Wilderness as this is also invading the southern fringes of the conservancy along White Road and Constantia Drive,” he says.

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NatGeo makes key Garden Route announcement

South Africa’s southern N2 from Cape Town in the Western Cape to Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape was voted among National Geographic’s (NatGeo’s) 12 Global Destinations recently. The Garden Route was recommended by NatGeo’s Maryellen Kennedy Duckett who was encouraging Northern Hemispherians to visit the Garden Route.

Maryellen referred to the route as the ‘road trip that will break your instgram.’ The picturesque route is popular for its estuaries, lakes, beaches and mystical forests. Other highlights on NatGeo’s list includes Australia’s Great Barrier Reef, New York City’s Central Park and the Balkan Express through Eastern Europe.

This is great news not only for SANParks’ Garden Route National Park (GRNP) but also for Tourism Boards, independent tourism consultants and other establishments in the Garden Route. According to WESGRO’s barometer report for winter, 2016 indicated an increase of local visitors (58.4%) and overseas (45.5%) to the Garden Route. These were both day visitors and overnight stays.

“NatGeo’s announcement is positive in pointing visitors in the right direction. The audience targeted by the message is key for the region,” says GRNP Manager, Paddy Gordon.

“This is also significant for eco-travellers, who make up a growing segment of visitors who want to explore the environment, the mystical forests and waterscapes,” Paddy continued.

GRNP recorded 188 238 gate arrivals between April 2016 and February 2017, an increase from the same time last year, when 177 890 gate arrivals were recorded.

Addo Night Owls conquer Midnight Express mountain bike race

Frontier Region Admin and Finance Manager, Esther Truter and her husband, Duane, both avid mountain biking enthusiasts, tackled the inaugural 2017 Midnight Express mountain bike race on 8 and 9 April. The 135km journey started at midnight in Steytlerville and ended just in time for breakfast in Patensie.

Starting at midnight and riding through the Karoo is a star studded experience – with shooting stars, moonlit roads and animal calls – a thrilling experience on bike. This meant the riders exited the Karoo as the sun was rising and entered the extension to the Baviaanskloof in the early morning. All of this over a climb of 2 160m.

A total of 180 entries were received – with the race open to two person teams, as well as solo riders.

Esther and Duane, representing Addo Elephant National Park as the “Addo Night Owls”, fished seventh out of the ten mixed groups who finished in a time of 9:53:25, despite Esther taking a nasty fall at 95km.

Well done and good luck with your next challenge, the Nanaga mountain bike race, on 23 April.

Campers to Mountain Zebra National Park outside Cradock will now have paved camping sites to choose from. A total of 13 of the Park’s 6 x 5m sites have been paved to-date, and the rest should be done going forward.

Guests have been requesting paved sites for a while and Park Management has now obliged.

Not only does this new measure provide guests with a better camping experience, but it will lessens the burden to water the grass sites, during a water-scarce period.

MZNP staff news

Please join Mountain Zebra National Park’s management in welcoming the following new staff members as from April:

Ennah Manganye
Room attendant

Ntombekhaya Madolwana
Room attendant

Mxolisi Amage
General worker

Also, congratulations are in order for five years’ long service

Pamela Mazwai
Room attendant

Happier camping at Mountain Zebra

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Graduation 2017

Congratulations to Obed Maluwa, Hospitality Manager at Tsitsikamma. Obed graduated from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University at the beginning of the month with a Masters in Tourism Management.

Addo Elephant–Mountain Zebra sporting weekend

For the first time since their formation at the beginning of the year, Mountain Zebra’s soccer and netball teams travelled to Addo Elephant National Park for friendly matches during March.

The hosts welcomed the visitors with a hearty potjiekos and roosterbrood supper, before tucking in early ahead of an exciting day ahead. After an early breakfast the MZNP teams went on a game drive through Addo, which was a first for most of them.

After some time in the Park they got down to the business end of their trip – travelling to the Vusumzi Primary School in the neighbouring Nomathamsanga community for their matches. Mountain Zebra’s netball team excelled over Addo’s, winning 10 – 4, while Addo’s soccer players levelled the playing field with a 4 – 2 win over Mountain Zebra. The team members then relaxed over a braai before the visitors headed back home.

Many thanks to Liberty Life who sponsored bottled water, lanyards and water bottles to the MZNP netball team.

Dawid Momberg, formerly Addo Elephant National Park Hospitality Services Manager, took office in his new position as Tourism Standards Manager: Frontier Region, at the beginning of April, based in the regional office in Port Elizabeth. Dawid will be responsible for assisting the park’s Tourism Departments to implement best practice to ensure the highest standards for our visitors and to increase guest numbers to the parks so that SANParks may fulfil its core function of conservation.

Tourism standards get prioritised

Farewell Bulelwa

Staff based in the Knysna office gathered to wish Communications intern, Bulelwa Dassie, farewell at the end of March. The team agreed to take a few ‘selfies’ to emulate the daily selfies Bulelwa took. We wish Bulelwa only the best for her future endeavors!