

# Bringing science to kids

Local businesses joined forces towards the end of this year to introduce local children to the environment of Mossel Bay - through outings designed to introduce them to the amazing work of various local science projects.

"Many of the kids who live here aren't aware that Mossel Bay's environment is unique - and that as a result it's given rise to some very unique scientific projects," said the Oystercatcher Trail's Fred Orban, who has played a leading role in facilitating the tours.

"But it goes deeper than this - because, in fact, many of the kids know very little other than the hardships and risks of the township streets: so we decided to show them that there is a world beyond hardship and poverty.

"For some of them, it was the first time they've ever been down to the sea - which is only 3 kilometres from their homes."

Three outings have been organised so far: a walk along the St Blaize Trail, a visit to the Pinnacle Point Caves and a visit to the Dias Museum Complex to learn about the sharks of Mossel Bay.

"We've also used the opportunity to allow children from different backgrounds to meet and mix with each other," said Mr Orban.

"For the talk given by Ryan Johnson and Stephan Swanson of SAMPLA (the South African Marine Predators Lab) and Fiona Ayerst of Shark Life, we brought a cross-section of pupils from three schools - the St Blaize Private School, KwaNonqaba's Garden Route Primary and the Hartenbos Laerskool, as well as 10 kids from the Agape Centre for Street Children - to the



Prof Curtis Marean (left) spoke to a group of children from KwaNonqaba about the work at the Pinnacle Point Caves; Joanne Ranger (back to the camera), a member of the MAP team, translated.

Museum.

"The talk and videos focused on the sharks in general and the great white sharks of Mossel Bay in particular.

"Few bathers realise that very often they're swimming among the sharks - and the fact that there are so few incidents across the world underlines the fact that sharks aren't the monsters they're made out to be.

Rather, they're part of a very fragile, essential and balanced natural marine system.

"Fiona Ayerst made one point that the kids really responded to: she said that although about 100 million sharks are slaughtered annually round the world - mainly for their fins - shark bites were responsible for a worldwide total of only about five human deaths every year.

"But what astonished and pleased me was that many of the kids had an excellent general knowledge of sharks, dolphins and whales - which must be due to a high level of environmental education plus a real interest in the ocean near which they live," he said.

For another outing, organised together with Beverly Boer of the Mossel Bay Environmental Partnership (and a trustee of the Pinnacle Point Conser-

Orban and Oystercatcher Trail Guide Willie Komani took a group of fifteen kids from the Mossel Bay Agape Shelter for Street Children in KwaNonqaba to meet Professor Curtis Marean and his team at the Pinnacle Point Caves.

"Curtis is the leader of the largest project of its kind in the world today - the Mossel Bay Archaeology Project (MAP), which is studying the origins of modern human behaviour and human responses to climate change in the caves at Pinnacle Point," said Mr Orban.

"Joanne Ranger, a member of the MAP team, translated (Prof. Marean is an American and the Professor of Anthropology at the Institute of Human Origins at the Arizona State University), and the kids learned about the rules of visiting an archaeological site and what goes on at a dig.

"The kids learned about how the finds have helped to increase our knowledge of human origins, saw tangible evidence of our history from 165,000 years ago (including stone tools, shell middens and the remains of prehistoric fires) - and heard why the climate and geology of Mossel Bay provided the perfect conditions for humans to begin their journey towards the

Mr Orban.

Ms Boer later wrote that the experience "may perhaps inspire some children living on the streets of Mossel Bay to return to school with the prospect of becoming a researcher, scientist or archaeologist. Or, at the least, it had them look beyond their daily circumstances."

"What is very heartening is that the commercial sector of Mossel Bay is prepared to make very welcome contributions in the form of food and transport," said Mr Orban.

"Delfinos especially must be thanked for their support - at the SAMPLA / Shark Life Lecture, they made sure that the kids went away as filled with pizzas as they were with newfound knowledge."

Neels Zietsman, chairman of Mossel Bay Tourism, said that the environment of Mossel Bay was its greatest asset - and that protecting it was everyone's responsibility.

"But it's also there for everyone to enjoy - although, because of cost, time or limited resources, it's sadly often only tourists who can access it and really experience it.

"That's why, From Mossel Bay Tourism's side, we'd like to congratulate and thank

Trail, SAMPLA, Shark Life and everyone else for arranging these tours for local children."

Mr Orban said that he was hoping to put together many more outings during 2009. Individuals and businesses who'd like to contribute in any way should contact him on 044 699 1204.