

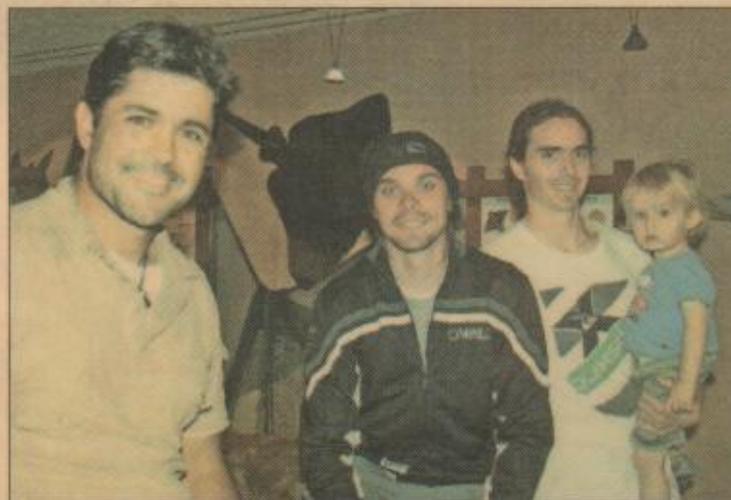
Science joins forces with aquarium

One of Mossel Bay's traditional attractions - the Point Aquarium (recently upgraded and re-opened to the public as the Mossel Bay Shark & Ray Aquarium by the owners of the nearby Dros Restaurant and Big Blu Tapas Bar) - has begun to benefit from a new arrangement with a local scientific institute.

SAMPLA - the South African Marine Predators Laboratory - is generally more concerned with research into the behaviour of larger animals, but when a call for help came from the owners of the Aquarium, the Laboratory's scientists immediately saw an opportunity to develop one of the main pillars of their mission - conservation through education.

One of the scientists - Ryan Johnson - "was approached by the aquarium management to advise on the health of the exhibits, particularly the sharks it contained, and about the possibility of creating a partnership with SAMPLA to help manage and run the aquarium", said Adam Johnstone, an aquarist who is presently serving an internship with SAMPLA.

Ryan was quick to spot the potential of using the aquarium for scientific research, education public lectures and



Scientist Ryan Johnson (left) with interns Adam Johnstone and James Anderson - and SAMPLA's youngest intern, Sony - at the Mossel Bay Shark & Ray Aquarium.

goal of engaging the public, improving awareness and promoting the protection of marine species.

Currently the main attractions at the aquarium are a 16,000 litre tank which contains a spotted gully shark and a butterfly ray and a touch tank which is home to two pyjama sharks, a leopard cat shark, a Puff adder shy shark and three sand sharks," he said.

Together with resident aquarist Nihodimus Choga, Mr Johnstone and his fellow interns have addressed issues relating to the electricity supply and will soon begin installing a re-designed and upgraded filtration system using pumps and piping donated by local businessman Johan Duvenhage of Leisure Pools.

"In keeping with modern best prac-

tice, the aquarium will act as a kind of shark hotel, with the fish only staying here for a few months at a time," said Mr Johnstone.

"Future plans are for SAMPLA to manage and implement the day-to-day running of the aquarium, to produce education and conservation material, to utilise the partnership to stimulate interest from local businesses, public and tourists and to reinforce the importance of conservation and research issues.

The long term aspiration will be to develop a dual-purpose shark research and exhibition facility and to create an additional reason for everyone to visit The Point."

Mossel Bay Tourism's marketing manager, Debra Bouwer, said that bringing SAMPLA on board was a stroke of genius for the aquarium.

world to observe the movements of a troop of seals during a full 24 hour period.

"Our interns watched the animals on the south side of Seal Island from the top floor of the Diaz Beach Hotel during the day, and during the night our scientists joined them by watching from a boat anchored close to the 'launch pad,' where the seals gather before starting their feeding journeys out to sea," said Mr Johnson.

"We learn many things from exercises like this - amongst which the fact that seals do most of their hunting at night - and the cooperation of local businesses like the Diaz Beach Hotel helps enormously in this regard."

The Mossel Bay Shark & Ray Aquarium is open to the public every day from 09:00 to 17:00. Entrance costs R5.

"Everyone is fascinated by the ocean and its creatures," she said, "and Mossel Bay Tourism has recently increased its marketing of our waterborne activities because our ideal weather makes this a perfect year-round beach destination.

"But we also have to protect our unique marine environment, and conservation begins with education - and who better to undertake this task than the people who are doing their research right here in Mossel Bay?"

She noted that The Point had undergone radical improvements over the last year which, she said, "have returned it to its rightful place as one of Mossel Bay's prime tourism destinations."

In a related development, SAMPLA scientists recently became the first research group in the