

Mossel Bay Advertiser, Friday February 27, 2009



Measurements are taken for monitoring purposes at the aquarium.



Final photo-shoot on board for identification.



Minutes before helpful intern and free shark part ways.

Sharks swim away unscathed

It is well established that Mossel Bay is one of the finest holiday and tourist destinations in South Africa. The Shark Lab (previously known as the Mossel Bay shark and ray aquarium), with its unique position on the edge of the ocean (The Point, Mossel Bay) presents a great location to house a marine aquarium and research facility.

However with changing times, and climate, the shark lab has undergone a many ups and downs of late, with the most noticeable setback having been the flooding and destruction of the facility last August.

However, after months of hard work and rehabilitation the Shark lab has bounced back better than ever, and has been hosting visitors and school groups for the past few months. During the same time, Oceans Education (a division of Oceans) joined with Big Blue Tapas and local businessman Albert Wiffen to re-design and focus the Shark lab into an education and research facility that is open to the public.

The Oceans team then set about restocking the tanks with an array of puff adder sharks; leopard shy sharks; spiny dogfish; soup fin shark, as well as a diversity of other marine life such as octopi, puffer fish, and Romans.

As part of their commitment to respecting ocean life, the Oceans Education team developed an operational plan that treated the

residence sharks as guests into the aquarium, a 'shark hotel' of sorts. Sharks brought into the aquarium were to be temporary visitors and stay for a duration of three months. For them, this would simply be a short break away from the rigours of living in the wild, hunting food yourself and having the constant threat of a great white appearing over your shoulder.

During their stay, the sharks entertained the guests to the shark lab, but also fulfilled a vital role for the Oceans researchers to conduct observational studies on their behaviour, and in particular their learning ability.

On Friday, the new and improved shark lab reached a milestone when three of its initial guests (Bruce, Oli and Adam) reached the three month limit of their term. Their time for free lunches was over, and it was time to release them!

I was invited to attend the release.

I could almost hear the small sharks saying "We need to break out of this Aquarium.. we need to get home, to the ocean where we belong"! If that was indeed what was going through their minds, the little sharks need not have worried. In the capable and caring hands of Oceans Education, some final data was collected in their size and length, and their transport back to their homes at Mitchells reef began.

The last activity before taking their short journey home, was receiving a fin

clipping so that if captured later they could easily be re-identified. On the boat they had another photo session so that their spotty marking can be recorded, as there is a possibility that the clipped notches in their fins may grow back making re-identification impossible.

Extremely enthusiastic interns from Oceans Research were eager to observe and help in every way, including the final transportation from the transport containers into the sea. The commitment of Oceans Education to stick to a policy of returning their sharky guests to the wild after a short visit is a positive development that is being implemented by aquariums throughout the world.

It represents a change in philosophy in which we appreciate that aquariums do play important roles in the education of humans, but that the inhabitants ultimately belong in the wild.

After all the hard work, our shark friends were safely deposited back into the ocean by the willing interns.

At the end of the day happy sharks; happy researchers and relieved journalist parted ways without incident... another job successfully completed by the compassionate researchers.

On a final note, Oceans Research scientists Stephan Swanson and Ryan Johnson captured three more sharks two days later - so perhaps it is time for you to visit the aquarium and see them before they are released back into the ocean?