

Elephant seal visits Diaz Beach

■ Edith Mertz, Oceans Research

To the surprise of locals, a female southern elephant seal hauled out on Diaz Beach last Tuesday, 12 October.

These seals are rare visitors to the South African coastline as they normally occur in the southern ocean around Antarctica and its islands.

Local authorities and marine scientists inspected the seal's condition and a preliminary demarcation with signs was put up for the public's safety.

Elephant seals are normally quite placid when resting undisturbed on a beach, but can become dangerous if provoked.

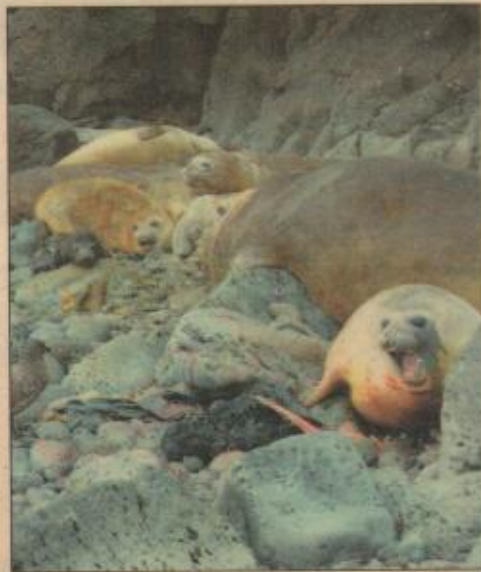
Dominant bulls guard their females during the mating season in harems and may charge at anything they deem threatening - including people.

They can also move surprisingly fast on land despite their bulk. Bulls can tip the scales at 3 000 kilograms while females average around 550.

The seal at Diaz had some cuts on her face and a tear in her abdomen but her injuries were not serious and she was healing well over the next few days. The wounds were not consistent with a shark bite and may have been caused by entanglement in fishing gear or rope. The abdominal wound could also have been caused by a boat's propeller strike. Nonetheless, overall she was in good body condition and probably just needed a rest on the beach to recover. Unfortunately several members of the public ignored the demarcation and signs and harassed the animal in several instances. We received reports of people trying to touch her or waving their arms and shouting to coax a reaction from her. There was even one report that three boys tried to put a rope around her neck. The local municipality posted a security guard to ward off beachgoers on the Friday and Sat-

urday.

We urge the public to remember that any wild animal is potentially dangerous to humans and that it should be granted its personal space whenever possible. Luckily no one was hurt and the seal seemed to get enough rest during her stay. She returned to the sea on Saturday morning. She may still decide to haul out on another beach and if she is spotted in or around Mossel bay people can contact the local authorities or the Oceans Research head office (044 690 5799) or Amanda Human at the Diaz Museum on 044 691 1032 to report it. We would like to thank Rhenia Niemand of the St. Blaize Conservancy for her help in managing the situation during the seal's visit.



Southern elephant seals at Marion Island (SA). The nose of the mature males gives them their name. The newly born black pup in the foreground is still attached to the umbilical cord.

Photo: Edith Mertz



The female southern elephant seal that was resting at Diaz Beach had some minor injuries including this cut on her upper lip.

Photo: Beverly Oh, Oceans Research