

The story behind Sacred Ocean and the



dolphins of the Benguela



Artist Noel Ashton

In the literature it is identified as the Heaviside's dolphin, a small species exhibiting a triangular dorsal fin, no beak and complex colouration on its small body, but I prefer to call it the Benguela dolphin, an endemic species found nowhere else on earth. This is a very special little cetacean, and I have often pointed my car northwards along the N7, and in the cold mists of the dawn, from rocky headlands or long windswept beaches I have found them. Although they are often overlooked by visitors to this coast, they are fortunately surprisingly easy to see, keeping to small groups just beyond the breakers in the mornings, either milling around, or somersaulting and jumping, showing off their acrobatic natures and distinctive white markings on the belly.

And during these trips in search of the dolphins of the Benguela, I often encounter other species as well, as these waters and their incredible abundance of fish create ideal dolphin habitat, and large schools of dusky dolphins crossing the bay urge a trip out to sea in my kayak and time with this very active species, and the bottlenose dolphins, so much larger than their warm-water cousins.



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This is one of the reasons for southern Africa offering such incredible cetacean diversity, for the contrasting warm and cooler ocean currents support different dolphin species, such as dusky's and Heaviside's in the Benguela, and the humpback dolphin, aduncus bottlenose and common dolphins on the east coast. The whales are much less influenced by temperature, and so an incredible range are to be seen around our coastline; best known are the right whales, the migrating humpbacks, and Bryde's whales, but in the deeper waters, sperm, blue, fin and many other whales and dolphins can be seen as well. In fact over half of the world's eighty-four species either live in our waters or pass through during their annual migrations.

But with this abundance came the interest of the whalers, and along the west coast signs of their whaling stations are slowly decaying with time, a legacy of hunting fortunately at an end in our protected waters. In other oceans the killing continues, and working with cetaceans and the incredible experiences I have had with them are tainted by the knowledge of this killing, and so in 2008 I invited Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu to launch Sacred Ocean, an anti-whaling initiative which is centred around the Sacred Ocean sculpture permanently positioned in the foyer of the prestigious Two Oceans Aquarium in Cape Town.

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Alongside the campaign, which was created in partnership with the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), is the Great Whaling Debate, an electronic voting campaign allowing the public, for the first time in the world, to either vote for or against whaling, offering us a true indication of



global sentiments towards whaling. And the results bear testimony to what I have always felt, that with less than three percent of national and international visitors voting for whaling, the time has come to say no to the ongoing killing of whales, a very clear message which will now be carried around the world with the Sacred Ocean travelling exhibition and sculpture.

The ancient whale bones in the sculpture evoke another message as well, for they point towards a need for us to become more aware of our capacity for cruelty, not only to whales, but to the many other lives with which we share this planet. It was Archbishop Tutu's words at the campaign launch which best expressed this sentiment when he said - "For our own sakes, even more than for the whales, we need to reclaim our humaneness, our humanity, and our Ubuntu, and say no, no, no to the killing of whales".

This tells me that whaling, although a crisis for whales, is actually a much deeper crisis for humanity, for it has shown us our capacity and unchecked ability to allow this cruelty to be expressed, and not held in check by deeper moral and ethical considerations. This debate and other issues facing us at this pivotal time are included in a new Audio-Visual public presentation, 'Journeys in Search of the Whale – Rethinking our Place in a Changing World', which is the voice of Sacred Ocean. My original intention was for the sculpture to become a silent iconic symbol, inviting people to contemplate these issues, but the need to speak out and encourage debate has necessitated this new public talk.

Not all of the work that Belinda and I do is so emotionally challenging, some of it merely wishes to share the incredible privilege and opportunities we have had working with whales and dolphins. Apart from our books and artworks, the Benguela cetacean boards aim to raise awareness and instil a greater appreciation for whales and dolphins of the West Coast region. Positioned in the West Coast National Park, and coastal vantage points from Cape Town to Strandfontein, these IFAW-sponsored boards aim to raise awareness and aid in identification of many of the fascinating and often-overlooked West Coast species.

And so the next time you look out across the Benguela waters in the cool hours of the dawn, keep in mind the small acrobatic Heaviside's dolphin, for it might then remind you to keep a close eye on the surface of the sea throughout the day, with the possibility of seeing a right whale, the passing blow of migrating humpbacks, a school of dusky dolphins chasing one of the abundant shoals of fish crossing the bay, or encourage you to visit the Two Oceans Aquarium to see the Sacred Ocean sculpture.

Noel Ashton is an internationally recognised whale and dolphin specialist illustrator, sculptor and speaker, sharing his stories and experiences through books, presentations and television appearances.

For more information go to www.noelashton.com

OCEANS OF AFRICA | WHALE & DOLPHIN CONSERVATION
 Noel and Belinda Ashton | PO Box 760 Noordhoek 7979 Cape Town South Africa
 Mobile +27 082 382 2118 | studio@noelashton.com | www.noelashton.com

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Noel and his wife, **Belinda** runs the **Oceans of Africa** programme, a conservation & education initiative.

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