Final Evaluation Report

We ask all grant recipients to complete a project evaluation that helps us to gauge the success of your project. This must be sent in MS Word and not PDF format. We understand that projects often do not follow the predicted course but knowledge of your experiences is valuable to us and others who may be undertaking similar work – remember that negative experiences are just as valuable as positive ones if they help others to learn from them.

Please DO NOT fill in and submit this form until the project has been completed.

Complete the form in English. Note that the information may be edited before posting on our website.

Please email this report to jane@rufford.org.

Your Details	
Full Name	Olga Alejandra Vargas Fonseca
Project Title	Integrated approach for the conservation of the Indian-Ocean Humpback dolphin in South Africa
Application ID	43695-B
Date of this Report	19 Nov. 25

1. Indicate the level of achievement of the project's original objectives and include any relevant comments on factors affecting this.

Objective	Not achieved	Partially achieved	Fully achieved	Comments
Assess the level of awareness, knowledge, and cultural connection that five coastal communities in South Africa and Mozambique have with whales and dolphins.			x	All five coastal communities were interviewed successfully and outputs were documented There were 56 participants in total, including fishermen, local stakeholders, sangomas (traditional healers), mussel/oyster/crayfish harvesters, elderly persons, women homemakers, tribal chiefs, conservation rangers, tour operators, locals, local shop employees and government employees.
Identify and document key community informed components that can support and strengthen the conservation of whales and dolphins along the coast.			x	We documented shared values, traditional practices, and local insights from the communities. All data collected is under analyses for publication. I am expecting to have all data analysed by mid-year with a first draft by the end of the year. Key insights include: - Participants reported strong Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), demonstrating intimate, place-based awareness of cetacean behaviour and its ecological context. - Cetaceans' usage in traditional practices include the use of oils for healing or spiritual rituals into daily life and livelihoods. - Cetaceans were consistently described as culturally and spiritually significant. - Emotional and relational knowledge emerged strongly, with participants expressing joy, awe, and reverence toward cetaceans.
Integrate Traditional Ecological Knowledge of dolphins into formal conservation decision-making processes, including contributions to		x		Insights have been documented in the "Ecosystem and Cultural Services" section for the Indian-Ocean humpback and Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins in the most recent 'Red List of Mammals of South Africa, Swaziland,

recognised conservation documents				and Lesotho. South African National Biodiversity Institute and Endangered Wildlife Trust, South Africa'. We are exploring other avenues for further integration. Links to the published assessments can be found here: - Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin: ewt.org/project/indian-ocean-bottlenose-dolphin - Indian Ocean humpback dolphin: ewt.org/project/indian-humpback-dolphin
Share the knowledge gained during this research back with participating communities to enhance awareness of the cultural significance of whales and dolphins, and to support local stewardship.		x		The information was shared and validated with two communities; sharing and dissemination with the other two communities is still pending. In the fifth community, only one person was interviewed, and the interview transcript was shared with them via email.
Provide actionable conservation recommendations, covering habitat protection, community-based initiatives, and regulatory measures, based on combined TEK insights and scientific threat assessments, including outcomes from the Threats and Population Viability Analysis Workshop and the development of a spatially explicit threat map for humpback dolphins		x		An effort that has been partially achieved through the ongoing Ridge-to-Reef project, which integrates land–sea connections to address upstream and coastal threats in Plettenberg Bay area. The Ridge-to-Reef project was developed in 2025 to address land-based pressures affecting the coast and humpback dolphin habitats. The workshop was postponed to March 2026 to ensure that key individuals are able to attend, but all stakeholders are very engaged for the coming meeting, which will be hosted by the University of Pretoria's Mammal Research Institute Whale Unit, in collaboration with the SouSA consortium. Additional outreach materials are being finalised to communicate the links between TEK insights and conservation outcomes.

2. Three Most Important Outcomes of the Project

a) Documentation and dissemination of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) on whales and dolphins

The project successfully documented diverse TEK from coastal communities regarding the cultural significance of whales and dolphins. This knowledge was shared through symposiums and conferences attended by policymakers, conservation practitioners, and researchers, ensuring that community perspectives directly inform those who have a stake in the formulation of conservation strategies. By elevating local knowledge into national and regional discussions, the project strengthened connections between science, policy, and community engagement.

b) Integration of TEK into conservation documents and assessments

The TEK collected was incorporated into influential conservation outputs, including publications such as the formal regional Red List assessment for two coastal dolphin species (humpback and bottlenose dolphins) and the WIOMSA Magazine: "People and the Environment: Ocean Literacies in the Western Indian Ocean". This integration elevates the possibility that community-informed knowledge can meaningfully shape decision-making processes and conservation priorities, hopefully narrowing the gap between traditional knowledge and formal scientific frameworks.

c) Addressing cumulative land pressures through catchment and coastal management

The project contributed to catalysing a local project aimed at mitigating land-based threats that affect coastal ecosystems, such as sedimentation, nutrient runoff, and other pressures on inshore fish populations, which are critical for humpback dolphin habitats along the coast. By linking upstream catchment management with downstream marine conservation, this project is applying a "Ridge-to-Reef" (source to sea) approach.

3. Explain any unforeseen difficulties that arose during the project and how these were tackled.

The most significant challenges were:

1. Access to some communities (namely in Zululand) which required extensive formal processes via traditional councils and local chiefs to enter and speak with community members, were unlikely to have been fully representative of the knowledge that might exist within in the community (for example, in one village, only male fishermen were invited to speak with us). Also, some of these communities had unfavourable experiences with outsiders so it was critical to take time to build trust and to feel comfortable with the research process.
2. Language barriers and cultural protocols with the various communities for the principal investigators. We mitigated through the use of experienced research assistants and translators, who understood the cultural context and protocols.
3. The ability for the research team to return to one location. Coffee Bay (on the Wild Coast), experienced delays due to periods of social instability and some violence. Such events required flexibility in scheduling and adapting timing of deliverables.

4. Describe the involvement of local communities and how they have benefitted from the project.

Local communities were engaged throughout the project, both as knowledge holders and as participants in data collection. Elders and other community members provided valuable insights into historical presence, behaviour, and cultural significance of these species. The project helped facilitate intergenerational knowledge transmission, with elders sharing their experiences with younger

community members through the interviews, workshops and storytelling. This would spark discussion around topics that were otherwise rarely addressed in daily community life. There was often a kind of "calibrating of recollections", which was interesting to witness. Hopefully, this process helped to strengthen knowledge retention among elders and cultural connections to marine biodiversity while nurturing awareness among the youth.

Documented knowledge has been compiled into accessible formats, such as plain language summaries, and transcripts in their own language (Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans or English) and handed back to the communities as a reference. This ensures that the information remains a resource for local education, future research, and community-led conservation initiatives. These discussions helped to foster greater awareness and appreciation of whales and dolphins in their daily contexts.

5. Are there any plans to continue this work?

Yes, we are currently extending the Ethics permit at the University to complete the project with 2 outstanding communities, which experienced delays as mentioned above, and where the feedback session in a follow-up workshop is still needed.

The Ridge to Reef project is progressing well, with active engagement across multiple stakeholders, including private landowners and key government partners such as CapeNature and SANParks, who oversee conservation areas and stewardship initiatives.

6. How do you plan to share the results of your work with others?

The results of the project will be disseminated through multiple channels, targeting different audiences:

Local Communities

The knowledge gathered from communities will be shared back with them in accessible formats and in their own languages. To date, the interview and workshop findings have already been shared with two of the communities, and plans are underway to return this knowledge to the remaining two communities. An illustrated cetacean-themed children's book in local languages was also given to interviewed communities for their village libraries. Currently we are working on illustrated infographic and a script for a short visual that highlights key findings.

Scientific Community

For the scientific community, findings were shared via reports and magazines (WIOMSA), regional conference and a public symposium. We are still planning to publish an article and/or policy brief.

Policy and Management Stakeholders

Results were already included in the "Ecosystem and Cultural Services" section for the Indian-Ocean humpback and Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins in the Red List of Mammals of South Africa, Swaziland, and Lesotho. South African National Biodiversity Institute and Endangered Wildlife Trust, South Africa.

We are currently working on ways to incorporate the TEK results into the conservation planning for Indian Ocean humpback dolphins. In the longer term, these insights could contribute to the Biodiversity Management Plan of the species, ensuring that both scientific and community-informed knowledge directly support effective conservation measures.

7. Looking ahead, what do you feel are the important next steps?

Continuation of the Ridge-to-Reef Project:

In The Crags area, near the Tsitsikamma region, we aim to further integrate upstream catchment management with downstream coastal processes. This ridge-to-reef approach (or source to sea) will help mitigate some anthropogenic pressures originating from the land and contribute to the protection of the coastal habitats.

Local Marine Stakeholder Workshop:

Pressures from the marine environment will be highlighted during a key stakeholder workshop in the Plettenberg Bay area in April 2026, aimed at collectively identifying practical and shared solutions for a sustainable use of the Bay.

Contribution to the Upcoming Threat Analysis Workshop (March 2026):

The project will actively contribute to a collaborative workshop involving experts that will provide a foundation for future research and targeted conservation interventions, integrating cultural perspectives to establish a conservation plan for protecting Indian Ocean humpback dolphins in South Africa.

Species Monitoring:

In parallel, we intend to continue species monitoring through both boat-based surveys and acoustic methods, which remain the most cost-effective and appropriate approaches for this elusive species. The former is currently underway, while the latter is dependent on equipment availability.

Community Knowledge Sharing:

We are currently developing a script for a short film that highlights key findings from the project, as well as an illustrated infographic that communicates community knowledge in an accessible and engaging way. These formats have been identified as effective for reaching younger generations, where TEK is less robust than among older community members.

8. Did you use The Rufford Foundation logo in any materials produced in relation to this project? Did the Foundation receive any publicity during the course of your work?

Yes, the Rufford Foundation logo was included in materials for one symposium (Plett Ocean Festival, Marine Science Symposium), one conference (Garden Route Interface Network Meeting), and one publication in the WIOMSA Magazine: People and the Environment, Ocean Literacies in the Western Indian Ocean. It was also acknowledged in social media posts (e.g. LinkedIn) which referred to the project.

9. Provide a full list of all the members of your team and their role in the project.

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10. Any other comments?

We are sincerely grateful for the Rufford foundation's generous support of this project. Without this funding, this explorative study and dissemination of this work would not have been possible. The contribution provided was very timely in the context of this work, enabling us to put this largely neglected work "on the map" and to raise awareness at various levels. We wish to again convey our deepest appreciation for your support, which was obviously critical to this initiative.

ANNEX – Financial Report

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