

whale watch



South Africa is known as being a top destination for whale-watching, thanks to the southern rights that visit its south-western coast in the austral winter. But there is, notes **John Hanks**, a potential 'new' kid further along the block, and one that isn't seasonal.



GWENITH PENRY

THE REVENUE FROM WILDLIFE-related tourism in Africa and the sustainability of direct and indirect jobs created in the industry are increasingly being used as powerful arguments to counteract competing land-use proposals, particularly from the mining sector. And, of course, this form of tourism depends on the conservation of key flagship species and their habitats.

The value of its marine component tends to be overlooked but is growing each year, with commercial whale-watching (both shore- and boat-based) taking place in no fewer than 119 countries around the world, attracting more than 13 million visitors and generating a direct revenue of over US\$872-million, with an additional US\$2113-million being spent by whale-watchers in tourism-related businesses (see the IFAW report 'Whale watching worldwide' at <http://bit.ly/QeMuxA>).

South Africa has built up a well-deserved reputation as the continent's premier whale-watching destination, and is arguably one of the best in the world. Southern right whales are a prime attraction, arriving in June from their feeding grounds in Antarctica. For almost six months they give whale-watchers an extravaganza of water acrobatics and provide superb opportunities to observe mating, calving and the nursing of their newborns. The good news is that this species is growing at seven per cent annually, giving us a much-needed conservation success story in the daily diet of species loss and habitat destruction.

For people looking for a different must-see sighting, however, the southern Cape coast centred around Plettenberg Bay has what could become a major attraction in the form of a resident population of Bryde's whales, a solitary and shy species that was described in 1912 from specimens off the coast of South Africa. These whales can grow to a length of

15 metres and weigh up to 20 tons, although the ones closer to shore in South Africa tend to be smaller. Bryde's is the only permanently resident large whale in these waters, on which it is completely dependent for feeding and breeding.

The species was recently the subject of a long-overdue study by Gwenith Penry of the Mammal Research Institute at the University of Pretoria. Studying whales requires a strong constitution and an ability to observe and record in strong winds and rough seas, conditions that often prevail along this stretch of coast. It's a difficult enough task for even the casual observer, as I can testify from a recent

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thoroughly enjoyable pelagic birding trip in a constantly pitching boat. Penry has certainly developed her sea-legs, and through her photo-identifications, mark-recapture work and biopsy sampling she is starting to fill in many of the gaps in our knowledge about Bryde's whale.

'We still know so little about these animals, due to their elusive nature, but we suspect that there are probably no more than 600 of them,' she says. 'The examination of stomach contents from the whaling catches of the past revealed that they feed entirely on pelagic shoaling fish, particularly anchovies and sardines, species that are commercially important.'

Regrettably, these fish stocks have fluctuated dramatically and shifted distribution over the past 30 years. The impact of these changes on the African penguin has been well documented, but far less is known about their

Bryde's whales off the south coast of South Africa could prove to be as popular with human observers as their southern right cousins.

effect on other species that prey on anchovies and sardines. Understandably, Bryde's whales can travel much greater distances in search of food than penguins can, but still, there are concerns that the prey is insufficient for this small population.

'Ideally, I would like this project to inform fisheries management about the number of whales in the South African inshore population and what their dietary requirements are,' says the researcher. 'This is being done for African penguins, and I feel it should also be done for all the major predators of pelagic shoaling fish.'

The data she is gathering have the potential to be a valuable tool for the conservation and management of marine resources for the simple reason that the population models that are used to set fishery quotas have no 'predator allowance' incorporated into them. Linked to this is one of the more important findings from Penry's PhD research. The genetic study she undertook has shown that the inshore form of Bryde's whale is almost certainly a subspecies of the offshore form, which makes its conservation even more important – and, of course, adds to its tourism value.

Such a small population size inevitably increases the vulnerability of South Africa's inshore Bryde's whale, a vulnerability exacerbated by its dependence on commercially important fish stocks. Getting conclusive evidence about just how big the population is, its taxonomic identity and its dietary requirements will make a significant contribution to the development of a conservation plan for this country's only resident large whale.