

ITHONGO LAMANZI: CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON CETACEANS

Abstract to be presented in local symposium: 7th Garden Route Interface and Networking (GRIN), Knysna South Africa

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Recognising and legitimising Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) – the knowledge, practices and stories that have been passed down through generations to frame and guide human interactions with the environment – is central to biocultural diversity and the integrity of social-ecological systems (SES).

This exploratory research is focusing on the largely unexplored cultural significance of whales and dolphins in the South African context. Through semi-structured interviews, we have been speaking with community representatives and knowledge-holders in Garden Route communities and selected villages from the Wild Coast to better understand TEK, beliefs and relationships with cetaceans.

Historical displacement of peoples from coastal areas which held multigenerational ties has led to trauma and erosion of TEK. Yet it is evident that various oral traditions and knowledge systems have persisted among certain communities, particularly those who have retained or regained coastal access. Emerging results find both commonalities and differences in the nature of the historical and contemporary relationships. They also point to the entanglement between different ways of knowing where, e.g., dreams and contemporary experiences can reshape cultural connections. For some isiXhosa speaking coastal communities, different types of spiritual entities reside in the ocean (and may take the form of cetaceans). For local communities identifying with their Khoe ancestry, perceptions of cetaceans may be shaped by past and present relationships with the coast through fishing practices.

With this study, we aim to identify opportunities that can support the maintenance and intergenerational transmission of TEK as well as finding avenues for more inclusive conservation decision-making processes, particularly those that affect policies shaping the future of our oceans and South Africa's shared heritage. We also hope that this preliminary work may open new avenues for SES research that may address the uncomfortable questions that can arise when worldviews collide.