

## ***Column for FEBRUARY 2016***

### ***The Animal Angle***

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#### **If it's worth doing at all, do it now**

One of the saddest things one can tell oneself when it is too late is: "I meant to do it, but I didn't have time." It is especially sad when doing something could have made a difference in the life of a person or animal. It takes a real effort not to put things off. We all do it, and sometimes it doesn't matter much. But sometimes it does.

Our volunteers are among those who didn't "put things off". They decided to make a difference, and they do.

On 2 December 2015, the *Daily Maverick* quoted the inimitable and extremely gifted Hugh Laurie (the grumpy doctor from *House* who refuses to suffer fools gladly, and the outrageous, foppish twit from the *Blackadder* series): ***"It's a terrible thing, I think, in life to wait until you're ready. I have this feeling now that actually no one is ever ready to do anything. There is almost no such thing as ready. There is only now. And you may as well do it now. Generally speaking, now is as good a time as any."***

#### **Protecting our marine turtles**

A welcome move in the conservation field at the beginning of 2016 is the upgrading of the global conservation status of loggerhead turtles from "endangered" to "vulnerable" by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

The great loggerhead and leatherback turtles heave themselves ashore to build their nests and lay their eggs at the foot of sand dunes on our northern KwaZulu-Natal beaches, returning to those Maputaland beaches where they themselves hatched.

Many years ago, I had the privilege of watching turtles meticulously building their nests on moonlit beaches between Kosi Mouth and Bhanga Nek, laying their eggs, and then filling in the nests and swishing sand over the area to disguise the locality. I was with a group led by Jeff Gaisford, then a senior Natal Parks Board conservationist. Others in our small group were two members of the Jacques Cousteau diving team, a German freelance photographer, and Joan Gaisford (Jeff's accomplished mother and my close friend).

The turtle nesting area between Kosi Mouth and Bhanga Nek falls entirely within the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, which is protected and managed by Esemvelo KZN-Wildlife.

Sitting in silence on one of those magical nights under a silver sky and watching a mother turtle lay her eggs, I happened to notice a tag on her – No 167. Jeff checked it out the following morning at the Bhanga Nek turtle station. She was fifteen years old.

Those quiet hours on the lonely moonlit beaches watching this ancient biological ritual are imprinted on my mind. My book for young readers, *Mandla and the Great Turtles of Zululand*, based on this experience, is due out in a couple of months.

In many areas elsewhere in the world where marine turtles come ashore to make their nests, human predators lie in wait to steal the eggs and often ruthlessly kill the turtles. Our rural people living along the northern KZN coastline have never been turtle

slaughterers, and this has considerably helped with turtle conservation. Many local people are employed by Esemvelo KZN-Wildlife and are involved in turtle protection.

A recent *Berea News* article reminds us that Dr George Hughes began his PhD research on South East African sea turtles in 1969, when he was with the Oceanographical Research Institute (ORI) in Durban. His research contributed significantly to the longest running, and still continuing, turtle monitoring project in the world, begun in 1963.

In addition to ORI's research activities, the SA Association for Marine Biological Research's uShaka Sea World division has a worldwide reputation for its success in rehabilitating turtles that become stranded on our KZN and Cape beaches.

The survival of the ten sub-populations of loggerhead turtles continues to be dependent on committed conservation efforts. It is estimated that as few as one turtle hatchling out of every thousand survives to breeding age. They are subject not only to predation by other species, especially as hatchlings and juveniles, but many lose their lives through ingesting floating plastic and other detritus that pollutes the ocean.

### **Please... don't buy your child a pellet gun!**

Why would any adult with even a smidgeon of concern for small wildlife and birds allow a pellet gun anywhere near a younger member of the family? We know only too well that there are adults – mostly men, but also a few women - who so enjoy killing wild animals that they will pay immense sums to use their high-powered rifles with telescopic lenses to kill beautiful specimens from positions of perfect safety. It appears that a 'trophy' on the wall achieves a particular state of personal satisfaction for some that is fortunately neither understood nor craved by most of us. But encouraging a child or young person to kill or painfully wound the small creatures that inhabit or pass through our gardens blunts their compassion just when we should be encouraging it. It is wantonly irresponsible.

A letter published in the *Daily News* a few weeks ago pleaded with "anyone whose child has been given one of these dangerous pellet guns for Christmas" to warn of "the distress and suffering they cause, not only to animals, but also to people, and to advise of the dangers of aiming them at any living creature".

"If any one of my neighbours is spotted shooting such a device," the writer says, "you can be certain I will report them."

Teach your children compassion. There is nothing admirable about inflicting pain or wantonly killing birds or small wildlife. Pellet guns should be banned at least within municipal boundaries.

There seem to be more vervet babies than usual this summer. One fears for them, especially since the drought is reducing food supply and increasing foraging in gardens and sometimes intrusions into kitchens. Monkeys seldom enter enclosed spaces unless they are hungry.

### **Monkeying about with a camera leads to weird copyright case**

Naruto is a six-year-old Indonesian macaque monkey who became famous after he took selfies with a camera belonging to British nature photographer, David Slater, who owns the British copyright and published the photographs along with others in a book. The selfies were snapped in the Tangkok's Reserve on the island of Sulawesi in 2011.

An American activist group called People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals opened a case in San Francisco on Naruto's behalf on the grounds that the monkey owned the copyright to the pictures he had taken of himself. They were seeking monetary damage for property infringement from Slater.

US District Judge William Orrick ruled against them, but that was not the end of the issue. The judge then went a step further and said that this was a matter for Congress and the President. If they think animals have the right to own copyright, they're free, "in terms of the Constitution", to go into the issue.

PETA's argument is that American copyright law does not prohibit animals from owning copyright. (At a guess, that was one kind of prohibition that probably had never entered anyone's mind before this.) However, according to reports, the US Copyright Office had stated in 2014 that Slater cannot own the rights to the images as works "produced by nature, animals or plants" cannot be granted copyright protection in the USA.

If both Slater and the monkey have no rights over the photographs, that puts them in the public domain.

Slater told the BBC in 2015 that it had taken three days to accustom the monkeys to the presence of the team and the equipment and that the PETA case had seriously affected sales of his book in which the selfies appear.

Some news media, like the Wikimedia Foundation, argue that the pictures can be used in the public sphere because Slater does not own the copyright. A grinning selfie accompanies most published versions of the story.

We have lions bred for canned hunting, elephants slaughtered for ivory, rhino butchered for their horns, visitors with powerful telescopic rifles paying huge sums to gun down helpless fleeing game from protected vantage points, vervets peppered with pellets in our suburbs, and much, much more. Let those who are truly concerned for the ethical treatment of animals turn their attention to real problems and not worry about whether a wild Indonesian monkey should properly own the copyright for the selfies he took with an animal photographer's camera.

It's really annoying for David Slater, of course. The monkey is rather less concerned!