

# Understanding Cultural Perspectives in Marine Conservation

## **Rufford Foundation: September 2024 Update**

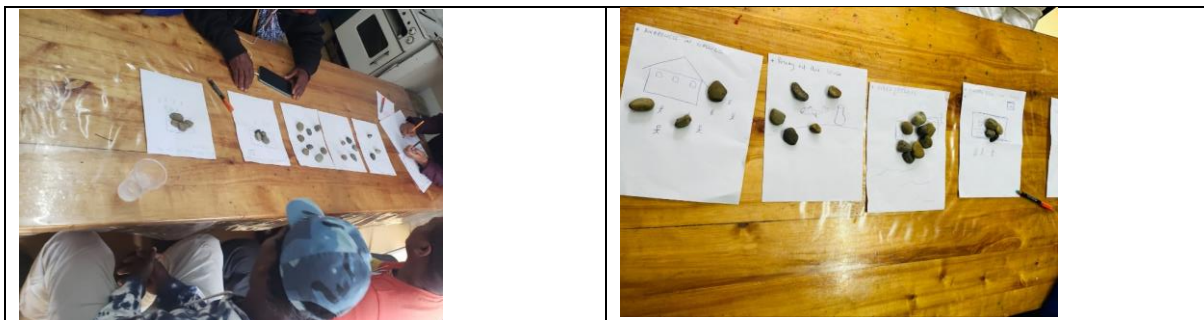
Thanks to the support of the Rufford Foundation, we recently embarked on our fieldwork. This action research project aims to investigate the cultural knowledge, legends, myths, and folklore involving whales and dolphins in four coastal areas of South Africa. The methods involve collecting information that can contribute to a more transdisciplinary (and therefore community-based) marine mammal conservation approach with locally relevant outputs.

The most recent trip was to Coffee Bay, a coastal community along the Wild Coast in the Eastern Cape. We interviewed 11 community members in June and returned in early September to hold a group feedback workshop with interviewees. During the workshop, participants provided feedback on the results shared (i.e. validating the key themes emerging from the interviews), and discussed perspectives and priorities between them. Several rich cultural themes emerged, highlighting the significant role dolphins and whales play in local spirituality and traditional practices. After further discussion, participants decided that the best way to share these traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) insights to the broader community (and future generations) would be through a short film - which would interview knowledge-holders - aimed at reaching a younger audience. Other options considered included an art centre, school awareness programs, and a children or history book. See figure 1 below.

Interviewees view dolphins as joyful beings, life saviours and sources of traditional medicine. Both dolphins and whales are considered messengers of ocean-based ancestors. Participants expressed the need for greater awareness and education about whales and dolphins in the area, even though they believe the populations of these species are stable and do not require urgent protection.

The ocean is considered a sacred space, where communication with ancestors and traditional ceremonies practices takes place, reinforcing the deep connection between the community, marine life, and cultural heritage. The ocean is also viewed as a source of life, healing, and spiritual connection. However, the group collectively voiced concerns about the deteriorating state of the ocean and adjacent coastline, and the impact of changing climatic conditions, such as the severe flooding events in Coffee Bay in recent years

In general, this belief system highlights the holistic view of the relationship between people, animals, and the environment, emphasizing the community's respect for the ocean and its inhabitants. This cultural heritage could serve as a foundation for more inclusive approaches to marine conservation that effectively integrate and entwine ecological, and social-cultural needs.



**Figure 1.** Participants discussing the best way to preserve TEK in their community and prioritising using “the participatory pebbles” approach. The participants arrived at four possible options (in order from left to right): school awareness programs, an art centre, a short film, children’s and history books.



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