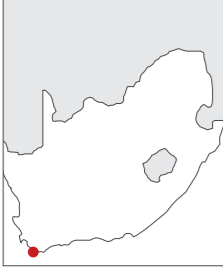




diving **DE HOOP**

PHOTOGRAPHS JEAN TRESFON / PETER CHADWICK

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SITUATED JUST THREE HOURS OUT OF CAPE TOWN, THE DE HOOP NATURE RESERVE IS WELL KNOWN FOR BEING ONE OF THE BEST LAND-BASED WHALE WATCHING SITES ON THE PLANET. FAMOUS FOR ITS WHALE TRAIL, THE RESERVE IS A TERRESTRIAL TREASURE TUCKED AWAY IN THE OVERBERG. LESS WELL KNOWN AND CERTAINLY LESS EXPLORED IS THE DE HOOP MARINE PROTECTED AREA (MPA), PROBABLY SOUTH AFRICA'S OLDEST AND LARGEST MARINE RESERVE. FOLLOWING THE COASTLINE OF THE RESERVE AND EXTENDING FIVE KILOMETRES OUT TO SEA, THE DE HOOP MPA RUNS FOR 48 KILOMETRES FROM STILBAAI POINT (THE NAME OF A SMALL BAY JUST SOUTH OF SAINT SEBASTIAN BAY AND NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH THE TOWN OF STILBAAI NEAR JONGENSFONTEIN) IN THE EAST TO HALFWAY BETWEEN SKIPSKOP AND RYSPUNT IN THE WEST.

The De Hoop MPA was declared in March 1986 and is a no-take reserve, meaning that no fishing or harvesting of any sort is allowed. The MPA is situated close to the Agulhas Bank, making it a crucial habitat for recovering fish stocks. The MPA has played a crucial and measured role in helping depleted fish species recover from overfishing, specifically our national fish, the galjoen, and other species such as red steenbras (I have personally witnessed 'coppers' of over 20 kilograms while diving in the reserve). The entire area is a nursery for southern right whales as it is also the breeding ground for 40 percent of the world's population of southern right whales. During the months of June and July the adjacent Saint Sebastian Bay (at the mouth of the Breede River) contains 70 to 80 percent of cow and calf pairs on the South African coast, and is probably the most important nursery area for southern right whales in the world. Divers please remember this when boating in the area and don't forget that a permit is required for any vessel to approach closer than 300 metres to a whale.

Many other whale species can also be found in the MPA, including humpback whales and Bryde's whales. The reserve is also home to around 250 fish species as well as several mammalian species such as dolphins and otters. Sharks also occur in abundance, and there are few better places for shark photography. Diving in the reserve is like diving in an aquarium. The fish life is plentiful and the individual fish are all a decent size. Older divers diving here for the first time often remark that it is like diving 'in the old days' when there were still lots of fish around. To me this is clear evidence of the efficacy of the MPA concept.

The diving to be had in the De Hoop MPA is on a par with the world's best dive sites. Whilst being extremely beautiful, the area is also potentially hazardous and the diving is certainly not easy. This is not an area for first-time divers, but more experienced divers should have no issues. It should be pointed out that the conditions are not always consistent and temperatures, visibility, currents and surface conditions can vary greatly, even from day to day. During the summer months the wind often picks up strongly from late morning. The entire piece of coastline is exposed to ocean swell without the protection of a headland. I spent many weekends staring glumly at wild seas unsuitable for diving until I remembered that diving is not the only recreational activity to be enjoyed and there are many other things to do if the sea is not in the mood.

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When conditions are good, there is no better place to dive. When conditions are bad, it is not even worth getting wet.

Although the De Hoop Nature Reserve and MPA are well advertised, there are not many people who have actually dived here. Snorkeling is possible from the shore inside the nature reserve, however for SCUBA diving a boat is the only real option. Access is either from Witsands and the Breede River mouth in the east, or from Arniston in the west. Both launches are potentially hazardous when the swell is running. Often in the summer months, while driving the boat to the dive site, we have come across hundreds of hammerhead shark pups feeding in the surface currents just offshore. Photographer and conservationist Peter Chadwick, and manager of the reserve for five years, noted large schools of up to 1500 hammerheads passing through the MPA. Many times we have seen great white sharks in the same areas and I have long held a pet theory that the hammerheads form part of the great white's diet.

Those fortunate enough to have dived here will have experienced the fact that often while still descending, even before the reef comes into view, divers are surrounded by shoals of small baitfish such as the Karel groot-oog. Many of the offshore reefs are made up of huge rocky structures that stand well proud of the sea bed.

The sheer biomass on the reef is incredible. Game fish such as yellowtail and leervis often patrol the surface near the top of the reef. Musselcracker are in abundance and I have had a shoal of large poenskop follow me around for most of a dive. Big coppers are slightly rarer but are there, and at the bottom some really big yellowbelly rockcod can be seen. These are often the first fish to be caught or speared and their presence is usually a good indicator of a healthy piece of reef. Witsands has long been known for its kob (kabeljou) fishing, but catches have declined in recent years. For many years the local fishermen abused the bounty bestowed by nature and the result is that these fish are now fairly scarce. I have not yet seen them underwater but have seen them shoaling behind the backline of the surf while flying along the De Hoop coastline.

Of course any place that has fish in such abundance also attracts its share of predators. Spotted gully sharks, for example, patrol the top of the reef, often in groups. There are many depressions in the reefs that form natural amphitheatres and at the bottom of

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these areas ragged tooth sharks can be seen circling slowly. It is a truly magical experience to be sinking to the bottom while raggies swim around you, sometimes no more than an arm's length away. Although I have seen great white sharks while snorkeling along the shoreline I have not yet seen any while SCUBA diving on the offshore reefs. The same goes for Zambezi sharks, recently made famous by their discovery in the Breede River. I have even seen a thresher shark while on the surface, but never underwater.

Dolphins also put in an appearance from time to time and I have been lucky enough to see common, bottlenose and humpback dolphins while diving and paddling in the reserve.

Not only is the diving in De Hoop renowned for its fantastic fish life, but the reefs are pretty spectacular as well. Huge gorgonians and fan corals adorn the rocks, and hard and soft corals of every hue can be found. From a photography perspective this place is paradise.

Spearfishing friends have often remarked that the fish in the area seem to know the boundaries of the reserve and do not venture out. Again this is proof to me that the MPA concept really works. In recent years there has been a more focused management approach within the MPA in an attempt to make it more than just a 'paper

park'. Even so, I have seen spearfishing boats on reefs well within the MPA. Usually they up and leave as soon as they see another boat approaching, but given the remoteness of the area and the difficulties involved in policing such a large piece of coastline there will always be those who take a chance. Another telltale sign of people not willing to abide by the rules of the MPA is fishing line snagged on reefs well within the MPA boundaries. This is disappointing and the result of selfish behaviour that can result in diving bans being imposed along our coastline. Thankfully the area is not rich in perlemoen, so at least it has been spared the poaching so prevalent in other MPAs.

Peter Chadwick put it succinctly in a recent article when he wrote, 'Marine Protected Areas are an insurance policy towards healthy ocean systems and are also an investment towards the planet's and our own future wellbeing – please support them!' I've long believed that people will protect what they love. Most divers are ignorant of the beauty that lies beneath the waters of the De Hoop MPA. Once

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