



To: iSimangaliso Wetland Authority & Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife

CC: Sean Sequeira & Paul Hunter, GUPS

RE: Reef Observers – Sodwana Bay Shootout 2009 Reportback

The South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) co-ordinated a reef observer program to monitor the behaviour of underwater photographers engaged in the 2009 Sodwana Shootout, a photographic competition hosted by the Gauteng Underwater Photographraphic Society (GUPS). SANBI took on this role because we were involved in activities related to our Reef Atlas Project in Sodwana over this time and because of the experience of SANBI's Marine Program Manager in reef monitoring within the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. GUPS requested that SANBI assist by conducting an independent assessment of the conduct of photographers and by communicating the need for best diver practices throughout the competition. During the 2008 Shootout, poor conduct by some photographers was brought to the attention of the organisers and it was agreed that this needed to be addressed in a new manner this year. The mandate of SANBI includes advising and consulting on matters relating to aquatic biodiversity and this activity had important considerations in terms of raising awareness of reef biodiversity and in minimising diver impacts on reef ecosystems. A brief reportback is provided here.

The SANBI Marine Program Manager contacted all participants from a research project aimed at testing user-based reef monitoring in the Park. Eight observers were appointed to dive and report back on photographer behaviour. Four were not taking part in the competition in any way and four were not entrants in the competition but were leading dives with clients who were taking part. Other project participants were participants and thus were excluded from the observer program. GUPS took the initiative in providing large luminous yellow reflective tags with an individual number to each competition entrant (Figure 1) and it was explained that it is mandatory for all entrants to wear the identification tag during all scuba dives throughout the competition. This step made it easy to identify individuals underwater and created a sense of accountability for each diver. SANBI gave a presentation on the opening evening of the Shootout and highlighted the importance of responsible diving behaviour, reviewed do's and don'ts for underwater photographers, outlined the rationale of key rules and best practice and explained the observer program. All entrants were invited to assist in monitoring fellow divers and were requested to report any incidences, preferable with photographs, to the SANBI Marine program manager. The identify of other observers was not revealed.

Observers checked that divers wore their identification tags during photographic excursions. Only one incident of failure to wear an ID tag was reported and this was quickly resolved. A great improvement in diver behaviour compared with observations from previous years was observed with many entrants making the effort to avoid and minimise contact with the reef. A total of 16 observer dives took place with no reported incidence of poor diver behaviour by dedicated observers. One competition entrant submitted a photograph along with a report of poor practice at Bikini Reef after the competition. The diver was easily identified by his tag number, demonstrating the effectiveness of the ID tags. However, the image (Figure 2) does not really provide any

evidence of poor diver behaviour and the diver is currently out of the country. SANBI has engaged constructively with the diver concerned.



Figure 1 (left). Photographers displaying luminous ID tags. Photo by Peter Timm.

Figure 2 (below). Image submitted with report of poor diver behaviour.



SANBI recommends that future competitions continue to use an observer approach. Better information on how to photograph evidence of poor diver behaviour should be communicated during the opening brief.

Yours sincerely

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