

Learned survival behaviour of a rehabilitated African Penguin

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During my stint as Assis tant PI to Bruce Dyer of Marine and Coastal Management, on one of the recent Earthwatch Expeditions to research new flipper bands on penguins on Robben Island, we came across a very weak oiled penguin desperately in need of rescue. So Bruce, two Earthwatch volunteers and I carefully planned our tactics. Our strategy was to stalk up to it from all sides to avoid its scampering away from us and evading capture.

But SAFRING Marine L8054 had other ideas. He stood there ever so calmly, gazing impatiently at us as if to say "What took you guys so long?". Bruce gently captured him without a struggle, crated him and took him back to the MCM house on Robben Island, where he was to be imprisoned until we could get him onto a ferry bound for Cape Town the following morning. On the main land he would be met by a volunteer from SANCCOB.

Judging by the emaciated condition of our prisoner, he had been land-bound for some time and was clearly starving. Despite his condition, I must emphasize that he was not in a state of collapse or even especially weak, and that penguins in similar condition are usually quite feisty. We decided to give him some electrolyte solution to combat his dehydration and perk him up overnight before his journey to SANCCOB. After tube feeding him the electrolyte solution we put him back in his crate in a warm dark corner inside the house. But, as we were tucking our captive in for the night, the strangest thing happened. Bruce pointed affectionately at the penguin (as penguin biologists are prone to

do), only to have it start nibbling his finger, *gently!*

Well, anybody who has had even the remotest dealings with penguins will know that they are not the cute, angelic little creatures that they would have us believe, and usually deliver vicious bites with their razor sharp beaks to any human that should cross their warpath. But Marine L8054 had been treated and banded at the time of the Trea sure Oil spill, when rescued birds were kept for a long time while the oil was being cleaned up, and had learnt a thing or two. Somewhere at the back of his little mind he seemed to recall that something resembling that finger had offered him fish before, and fish is what he needed more than anything right now!

We were all amazed that a penguin could recall something that it had experienced two years earlier, and consequently behave against all his natural instincts. Marine L8054 must have realized the condition he was in from his previous experience of being oiled, and also remembered the assistance he got, and it seemed that he may even have been grateful.

So to all the SANCCOB volunteers who helped in the Trea sure Oil spill: be satisfied with the thought that your efforts not only contributed to the conservation of this endan gered endemic species, but were appreciated so much that some of your charges have come to look forward to such treatment when having the misfor tune to be oiled again.