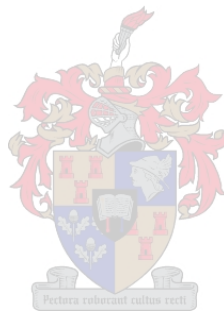


Teaching environmentality: An ethnographic study of an aquarium's environmental lessons in Cape Town, South Africa

By
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Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Social Anthropology in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University

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Declaration

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

December 2022

Abstract

In this thesis, I focus an ethnographic lens on the non-profit arm of one of Cape Town's most iconic institutions, the Two Oceans Aquarium (TOA). Like a number of other aquariums and zoos across the world, the TOA frames itself primarily as a conservation and education organisation. Based on six months of fieldwork at the Aquarium's Education Foundation and inspired by critical approaches in anthropology, this thesis interrogates the narrative and programmatic content of this framing and its imprint on a wider "witnessing public" (Chua, 2018:a). In particular, I analyse the TOA's online mediascape and explore the various environmental classes that the Foundation offered to school children; its on-site, week-long holiday Smart Living programme and its hour-long "outreach" classes in disadvantaged areas of the City. I also analyse the motivation letters of children who applied for the TOA's free holiday courses.

My research shows that the TOA was haunted by the class and racial legacies of local (and international) conservation. I argue that in its embrace of mainstream environmentalism, the TOA unintentionally depoliticised the environmental crisis to offer solutions that trumpeted individualised new forms of consumption that either excluded poor people or framed them as environmental villains. This middle-class, prescriptive environmentalism thus reproduced messages that mapped environmental destruction onto race and class. Through the working of its hidden curriculum, the TOA's lessons to school children repeated this message and shaped the ways in which a new generation related to the environment and "nature"; a relationship in which the privileged retained a proprietary interest in conservation, while disadvantaged children internalised their supposed culpability in environmental collapse. As I show in this thesis, the TOA was not alone in doing this work; as the children's letters to the TOA attested, most of them had been exposed to similar messages from a much wider world of hegemonic middle-class environmentalism.

Opsomming

In hierdie tesis fokus ek 'n etnografiese lens op die nie-winsgewende afdeling van een van Kaapstad se mees ikoniese institusies, die Twee Oseane Akwarium (TOA). Soos ander akwariums en dieretuine wêreldwyd verkies die TOA om hulself hoofsaaklik voor te stel as 'n omgewingsbewaring- en opleidingsorganisasie. Ek bestudeer die verhalende en programmatiese uitdrukking van dié voorstelling en die impak daarvan op 'n groter 'meelewende publiek' (Chua, 2018:a) vanuit 'n kritiese antropologiese oogpunt. Gebaseer op 18 maande se etnografiese veldwerk by die TOA se Opvoedingstigting, analiseer ek die TOA se aanlyn medialandskap en die verskeie omgewingsbewaringsklasse wat die Stigting aangebied het aan skoliere. Die laasgenoemde sluit in die Stigting se weeklange Smart Living vakansieklasse wat op die TOA perseel aangebied is sowel as die Stigting se uurlange "uitreik" klasse wat aan minder bevoorregte skoliere in hulle skole aangebied is. Ek analiseer ook die motiversingsbriewe wat kinders aan die TOA geskryf het ter staving van hulle aansoeke om die TOA se gratis vakansieprogram by te woon.

My navorsing dui daarop dat die TOA se omgewingsbewaringslesse uitdrukking gegee het aan die klasse en rasse nalatenskap van plaaslike en internasionale omgewingsbewaring. Ek argumenteer dat in die TOA se napraat van hoofstroomnatuurbewaringsbewustheid, die organisasie onwetend en onbedoelend die omgewingskrisis gedepolitiseer het. As sulks het die TOA se oplossings vir die krisis 'n vorm van individuele verbuik voorgestaan wat arm mense óf uitgesluit het óf hulle as skurke in omgewingsbesoedeling uitgebeeld het. Hierdie middelklas voorskriftelike omgewingsbewaringbewustheid het dus omgewingsvernietiging geskool op ras en klas kategorieë. Die TOA het hierdie boodskap herhaal in hulle klasse aan skoliere deur die werking van hulle versteekte kurrikulum. Sodoende het die TOA deel gehad aan die skawing van 'n nuwe generasie en hulle verhouding met die 'natuur' en met omgewingsbewaring; 'n verhouding waarin bevoorregtes omgewingsbewaring aan hulself toegeëien het as 'n verdiende erfenis en waar minderbevoorregte kinders hulle vermeende skuld aan omgewingsineenstorting geïnternaliseer het. Die TOA was nie alleen in die taak nie, 'n feit wat duidelik vorendag gekom het in die kinders se aansoekbriewe aan die TOA; hulle was reeds blootgestel aan die hegemoniese werk van middelklas omgewingsbewustheid.

Acknowledgements

My biggest thanks go to my supervisor, Ilana van Wyk. Your mentorship, guidance and unwavering confidence in my abilities has been the greatest gift. It was through your support that I was not only able to complete this project; but also that I learned to believe in myself again.

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Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Abstract.....	i
Opsomming.....	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of abbreviations	vi
List of Figures.....	vii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
The Two Oceans Aquarium	1
A sea change: the evolution of the modern aquarium.....	4
The Aquarium in a divided city	6
Anthropology and the (social) construction of nature	9
Fieldwork	12
Ethical Considerations	13
Chapter Outline	14
Chapter Two: The Two Oceans Aquarium’s Mediascape	16
Building a social networking presence	16
“Higher causes” and conservation in the media	18
Becoming an environmental authority	18
Making activists out of followers with turtles	24
Engaging with a “witnessing public”	35
Conclusion	39
Chapter Three: Smart Living	41
The anatomy of a science class	41
The TOA Marine Sciences Academy	44
The hidden curriculum	46
A class dichotomy	47
Teaching ‘class’	52
A middle- class environmentalism.....	53
The meritocracy myth	58
Conclusion	61

Chapter Four: Discursive Environmental Imaginings	63
The application letters	63
A shared world: Turtles, plastic and Sir David Attenborough.....	65
A global imagination of spectacular doom	70
The conservation of “specific values”	72
Environmental heroes and environmental villains	73
“We need to clean up our mess”: internalising the message	79
Conclusion	82
Chapter Five: Outreach	84
From the Waterfront to the Cape Flats	84
Mandela Day on the bus	87
Inside an Oceans in Motion lesson	89
Inside a Smart Living lesson	93
Word Wetlands Week	95
“We want to change your normal”	101
Conclusion	107
Chapter Six: Conclusion.....	110
Bibliography	115

List of abbreviations

CoCT: City of Cape Town

DEA: Department of Environmental Affairs

EE: Environmental Education

FET: Further Education and Training

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

NPO: Non-Profit Organisation

PETA: People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

SANBI: The South African National Biodiversity Institute

SANCCOBB: The Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds

SANParks: South African National Parks

TOA: Two Oceans Aquarium

V&A: Victoria and Alfred

WAZA: World Association of Zoos and Aquariums

List of Figures

Figure 1: The Two Oceans Aquarium under construction. Image: Two Oceans Aquarium.

Source: <https://www.aquarium.co.za/blog/entry/22-years-ago-the-two-oceans-aquarium-was-born>. (2017).

Figure 2: The Two Oceans Aquarium in 2022. Source: <https://www.aquarium.co.za/content/page/about-us>. (n.d.).

Figure 3: Two Oceans Aquarium Foundation 2020 report highlighting their NPO activities. Source: <https://aquariumfoundation.org.za/the-aquarium-foundation/> (2021).

Figure 4: Map of the City of Cape Town showing the racial demographics in different areas of the City in relation to the location of the TOA Source: <https://mapsontheweb.zoom-maps.com/post/96776039959/racial-distribution-in-cape-town-south-africa> (2011).

Figure 5: Screenshot of a typical TOA Facebook post. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/TwoOceansAquarium/photos/a.480925356109/10160355816196110/> (2020).

Figure 6: Screenshot of the TOA's Facebook post highlighting their "second seal rescue of the day". Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/page/66712831109/search/?q=For%20the%20team%2C%20this%20was%20the%20second%20seal%20rescue%20of%20the%20day> (2020).

Figure 7: The TOA veterinary team pull a plastic bag out of Alvi the turtle's throat after he was rescued. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1kvjQ6Nu4c> (2018).

Figure 8: One of the TOA's "Ocean Pledge Challenge" posts on Facebook. Source: TOA Facebook page. Source: <https://www.aquarium.co.za/content/page/i-pledge-to-say-no-to-balloons-and-plastic-party> (2020).

Figure 9: Yoshi being fed by "Santa Claus" in a post on Facebook highlighting that the Aquarium would be open on Christmas day. Source:

https://www.aquarium.co.za/blog/entry/we_are_open_today_tomorrow_and_every_day (2014)

Figure 10: Yoshi is served her bespoke 'turtle cake' made out of vegetables and fish by TOA aquarists. Picture by Devon Bowen. Source: <https://www.aquarium.co.za/blog/entry/making-a-cake-for-turtles-how-to-host-a-shellebration> (2014).

Figure 11: A follower reacts to the TOA's post about Yoshi being released. Source: TOA Facebook page. (2017).

Figure 12: Simon tickles Yoshi's neck. Source:

<https://www.aquarium.co.za/blog/entry/animal-behaviour-Turtles-bob-and-yoshis-life-with-simon-leigh> (2018).

Figure 13: Yoshi's story was shared on news channel eNCA in an interview with Maryke, CEO of the Aquarium Education Foundation, when the turtle reached Australia. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkmM20Sgon0> (2018).

Figure 14: The plastic pollution found in Marcel the turtle's stomach. Source: <https://www.aquarium.co.za/blog/entry/marcel> (2020).

Figure 15: Examples of marine biodiversity decorated the Aquarium classroom's shelves, walls and ceiling. Source: Photograph by the author. (2018).

Figure 16: Picture in the TOA Smart Living Course class workbook highlighting ways to save water at home. Source: TOA (2019).

Figure 17: Picture in the TOA Smart Living class workbook highlighting ways people waste energy at home. Source: TOA (2019).

Figure 18: Collage of several TOA environmental campaigns found on the TOA website. (2020).

Figure 19: Picture of a Smart Living learners' test paper. Source: photograph by the author. (2018)

Figure 20: Georgia's postscript to her Smart Living application letter. (2018)

Figure 21: Extract from Anya's handwritten Smart Living application letter. (2018)

Figure 22: The Oceans in Motion outreach bus parked in front of the Aquarium. Picture by the author. (2018)

Figure 23: A mural painted on the side of a classroom. Picture by the author. (2019).

Figure 24: The plastic containers filled with "learning aids" after we unpacked the van at the school. Picture by the author. (2019).

Figure 25: The first grade six class gathered around the "rockpools" in the school hall. Picture by the author. (2019).

Figure 26: Thabo showing the children the correct way to "tickle an anemone". Source: <https://www.aquarium.co.za/blog/entry/a-very-aquarium-mandela-day> (2019).

Figure 27: the makeshift Smart Living classroom. Photograph by the author (2019).

Figure 28: The Khayelitsha Wetlands Park looking towards Devils Peak, Cape Town. Photograph by the author (2019).

Figure 29: Children collect water samples from the wetland. Picture by the author. (2019).

Figure 30: An Aquarium staff member gives a lecture on pollution while the school group watches. Picture by the author. (2019).

Figure 31: A staff member gives a PowerPoint presentation at the Aquarium to teach the children about making "environmentally friendly" choices. Picture by the author (2019).

Chapter One: Introduction

The Two Oceans Aquarium

In the early 1990s, two brothers, Richard and Geoff Starke, dreamed of establishing a world-class aquarium in Cape Town that would rival the likes of famed Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, and that would showcase South Africa's spectacular marine biodiversity (Tarr, 2021). They secured private funding for their Two Oceans Aquarium (TOA) and officially opened in November 1995 (see Figures 1 and 2). Among aquaria globally, the TOA is an anomaly as it received no government funding for its construction or continued operation (Holmes, 2019). As a privately owned business, the TOA is run for-profit, and is reliant on visitor revenue. At the time of writing, a single ticket to enter the TOA cost R210 for an adult, ten times the minimum hourly wage in South Africa,¹ rendering a visit to the Aquarium a largely middle-class activity. Regardless of this fact, the TOA was a tourism hotspot: in 2019, the TOA attracted 500 000 visitors (Leeuwner, 2020).

The TOA forms part of the Victoria & Alfred (V&A) Waterfront, a mixed-use commercial and residential hub that is situated in the historic Table Bay Harbour, South Africa's oldest working harbour. The V&A was developed as a commercial site in 1990, and over the next few decades, became one of the biggest tourist hotspots in South Africa, attracting more than 24 million visitors in 2019 (Waterfront, n.d.). The V&A is particularly known for its glamorous milieu of luxury shopping, fine dining and several five star hotels.

In 2006, the V&A site was sold by then-owners Transnet Pension Fund to the London-based group, London and Regional Properties, and Emirati investment firm, Dubai World, for R7 billion. A few years later, in 2010, these investors sold their shares of the V&A Waterfront to South Africa's biggest property group, Growthpoint Properties, and the Government Pension Fund for R10 billion (Vollgraaff, 2010). Today, the TOA is owned by the same owners as the V&A Waterfront group, with the Investec Asset Management firm also holding shares in the organisation.

The TOA exhibits an abundance of unique marine animals from the Southern African coastline, many of which are endemic and cannot be found at aquariums elsewhere in the world. Many of these animals are found in the City's famous Table Mountain National Park, which

¹ In 2021, the minimum hourly wage in South Africa was R21.69.

extends to the unique biota of the two oceans surrounding the Cape.² Migratory fish and mammals such as varieties of whales and dolphins, as well as abundant shark species and pelagic and reef fish as well as invertebrates, such as West Coast Rock Lobster, thrive in these waters. The TOA's exhibits showcase several of these species of sharks, turtles, rays, penguins, and endless species of fish, which presents a major drawcard for visiting international tourists. Indeed, in January 2022, the TOA was rated as number 19 out of 188 “things to do in Cape Town” on TripAdvisor. At the time of my research, the TOA had been an iconic feature of the Cape Town landscape for decades. I have many fond childhood memories of going on excursions to see the shark exhibits on rainy weekends with my parents and attending school fieldtrips there. My childhood memories of the TOA are almost certainly shared by countless other middle-class Capetonians who grew up in or near the City.

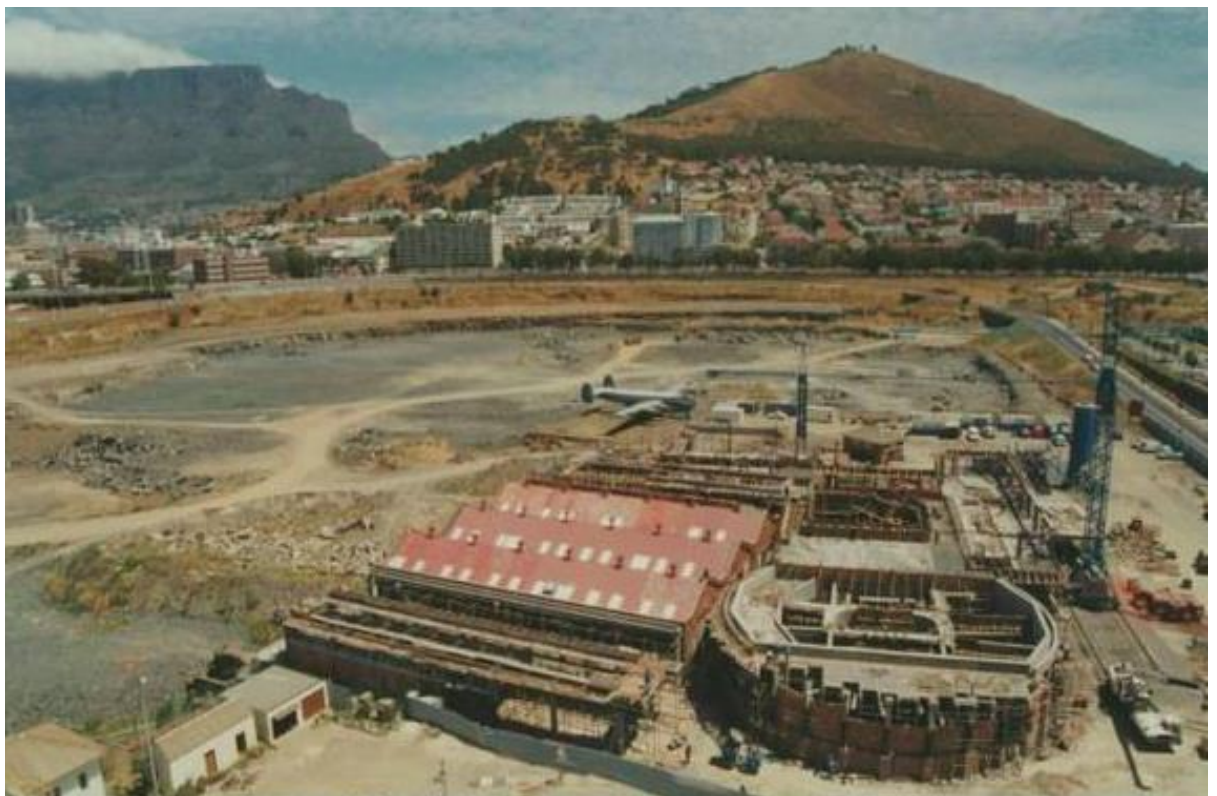


Figure 1: The Two Oceans Aquarium and the V&A Waterfront under construction in 1994. Source: TOA Website (2017).

² The Atlantic ocean, with its cold Benguela current and the Indian ocean, with its warm Agulhas current.



Figure 2: The Two Oceans Aquarium in 2022. Source: TOA Website (2022).

While the TOA was certainly a wildly popular attraction, the organisation heavily marketed its conservation credentials. Since its inception, the TOA had a strong environmental focus and was promoted conservation and sustainability amongst its visitors. Its myriad environmental initiatives included hosting beach-clean up events, running a turtle rescue and rehabilitation programme, a marine wildlife management programme, funding and collaborating on research projects with several universities and implementing several conservation awareness campaigns such as *Rethink the Bag*, *Straws Suck* and *Bin your Butts*. In addition to these initiatives, the TOA had operated an in-house environmental education (EE) centre since 1997, which offered marine science and sustainability lessons to school children. The centre had a team of full-time staff teachers who taught its EE programme (see Chapter 3). The TOA also operated two mobile environmental education outreach programmes, *Oceans in Motion* and *Smart Living*, which taught versions of its on-site environmental lessons to disadvantaged schools in the City (see Chapter 5).

To support these activities, the TOA set up a non-profit (NPO) arm called the Two Oceans Aquarium Education Foundation Trust (see Figure 3) in 2018. The Foundation applied for public benefit status with the South African Department of Social Development, and thus became open to tax-deductible, corporate social investment donations as well as donations from individuals. This, meant that the Aquarium branch concerned with conservation, research and education was no longer singularly reliant on Aquarium profits to function. Thus even though the TOA was primarily a corporate, for-profit establishment, its Education Foundation did philanthropic work typical carried out by charitable organisations.

In this ethnographic thesis, I will focus on the TOA's Education Foundation and the work it did in teaching marine conservation lessons to school children from across the City and its hinterlands.



Figure 3: TOA Education Foundation 2020 report highlighting their NPO activities. Source: Two Oceans Aquarium Foundation website. (2021).

A sea change: the evolution of the modern aquarium³

In 2019, Business Day's Richard Holmes interviewed the TOA's CEO, Michael Farquhar, about the TOA's conservation goals. In the interview, Holmes asked about the ethics of keeping animals in captivity, "Are sharks acceptable in captivity, but dolphins not? What about orcas? Fish are fine, but mammals not? Where is the ethical line drawn in this sand?" Michael responded,

³ As organisations that keep animals captive for public display, I use the terms zoo and aquarium interchangeably in this thesis.

It's about education and conservation. If any of the animals are not serving the purpose of the aquarium, we have to ask why we're keeping them. Our driving goal is to change people's behaviour and to inspire them into action for the future wellbeing of the oceans. But to do that you need to attract people. You need to put on a good show. It's an interesting balance (Holmes 2019).

Michael's answer hinted at *why* the TOA had orientated itself so dedicatedly as a conservation organisation. His response hit at the heart of the conundrum that zoos and aquaria globally have faced in recent years; of how to justify their existence to a public increasingly aware of animal rights issues. Like the TOA, a number of zoos and aquaria have justified their existence in terms of the role they played in global conservation efforts (Ainslie, 2002; Braverman, 2011; Carr & Cohen, 2011; Holtorf, 2007: 8; Maynard, 2018). Thus, modern zoos often identify conservation as an integral component of their work, with research and endangered species breeding, -rescue, -rehabilitation and -release programmes (Puan & Zakaria, 2007 in Carr & Cohen, 2011). Indeed, the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) (2005: 13 in Carr & Cohen, 2011) has stated that "zoos and aquariums, because they are popular visitor attractions, have unique opportunities to introduce their visitors to a wider world and to explain the issues of international conservation".

This justification marked a historical shift in the ways that zoos and aquaria situated themselves vis-à-vis their publics. Historians traced the origins of zoos back over 4,500 years to the ancient Egyptian, Chinese, and Roman menageries, which were created by the rich and powerful as places of entertainment and leisure for their own class (Carr & Cohen, 2011). With the Enlightenment, a number of zoological societies created scientific rationales for zoos and opened the first truly public zoos for mass tourism and leisure. Modern zoos developed out of these organisations but since the 1960s saw a major "structural and ideological transformation" away from them as spaces of entertainment, towards a public emphasis on conservation (Carr & Cohen, 2011; Dibb, 1995; WAZA, 2005). This pivot centred on a recognition of animal rights and an associated growing discomfort with the zoo as a "location for the indulgence of an unashamedly recreational gaze upon its captive inmates" (Beardsworth & Bryman, 2001: 89). As a number of social scientists showed, partly responsible for this shift has been the rise of mass media with morally compelling documentaries and popular science books playing a huge role in shifting public perspectives and expectations (Maynard, 2018).

In addition to their shift to conservation, zoos also increasingly promoted themselves as centres of public education and environmental awareness (Carr & Cohen, 2011). The World

Association of Zoos and Aquariums even mandated that its members have education as a central component of their operations, and issued a statement that zoos must aim to “integrate all aspects of their work with conservation activities” (WAZA, 2005: 11). However, Turley (1998: 341) noted, “zoos cannot perform their more socially acceptable functions without satisfying the needs and requirements of day visitors, who by definition are on a recreational excursion”. This is, as a number of scholars have pointed out, a careful balancing act in which “zoos must balance carefully the demands of the paying visitor with those of maintaining credibility as conservation and education-oriented organisations” (Turley, 1998: 340; see also Dibb, 1995). Due to the rise of the internet and social media, this balance has been rendered all the more challenging due to the ubiquity of a “witnessing public” (Chua, 2018a).

The Aquarium in a divided city

Located adjacent to the opulence of the Atlantic Seaboard, where luxury high-rise apartments, designer stores, and sports cars are familiar sights, it is easy to forget that the TOA and the Waterfront are no more than a 30 minute drive away from some of the poorest areas of the city. In 2020, the City of Cape Town (CoCT) released data that showed that 45.9% of its residents lived in poverty on an income of R1 227 (and less) per person per month (CoCT, 2020). As a number of social scientists have shown, Cape Town is one of the most segregated cities in the world (McDonald, 2008) where neighbourhoods still map onto racial classifications set up by colonial, and later, apartheid, authorities (see Figure 4). Thus neighbourhoods on the lush slopes of the Table Mountain range, in the Southern Suburbs and on the Cape Peninsula are still largely white, while Black and Coloured people⁴ mainly live on the periphery of the City in overcrowded and harsh conditions on the Cape Flats. These areas are densely populated, have high unemployment rates, a lack of services and sanitation, suffer from extreme poverty, have high disease burdens and are plagued by gang violence (Seekings, 2008). In this, the City remains “haunted” (Green, 2020: 15) by a colonial and apartheid past that disenfranchised, dispossessed and disproportionately burdened Black and Coloured people with the environmental ills of living on the harsh plains of the Cape Flats (Seekings, 2008; Ruiters, 2001: 98). In some ways, this ‘haunting’ continues in the ways that people on the Cape Flats

⁴ Throughout this thesis I employ the terms ‘Black’, ‘Coloured’ and ‘white’ understood as categories inherited and produced by the colonial and apartheid systems. Their use in my thesis underscores not their objective significance, but the resilience of these social classifications in shaping the social and material landscape of contemporary South Africa.

are construed as a dangerous, unproductive, and destructive Others (Ruiters, 2001:99). Thus, Zoe Gauld (2015: 16) has argued that “experiences and perceptions of space are not merely physical, but also fortify damaging ideological constructs of race and difference”.

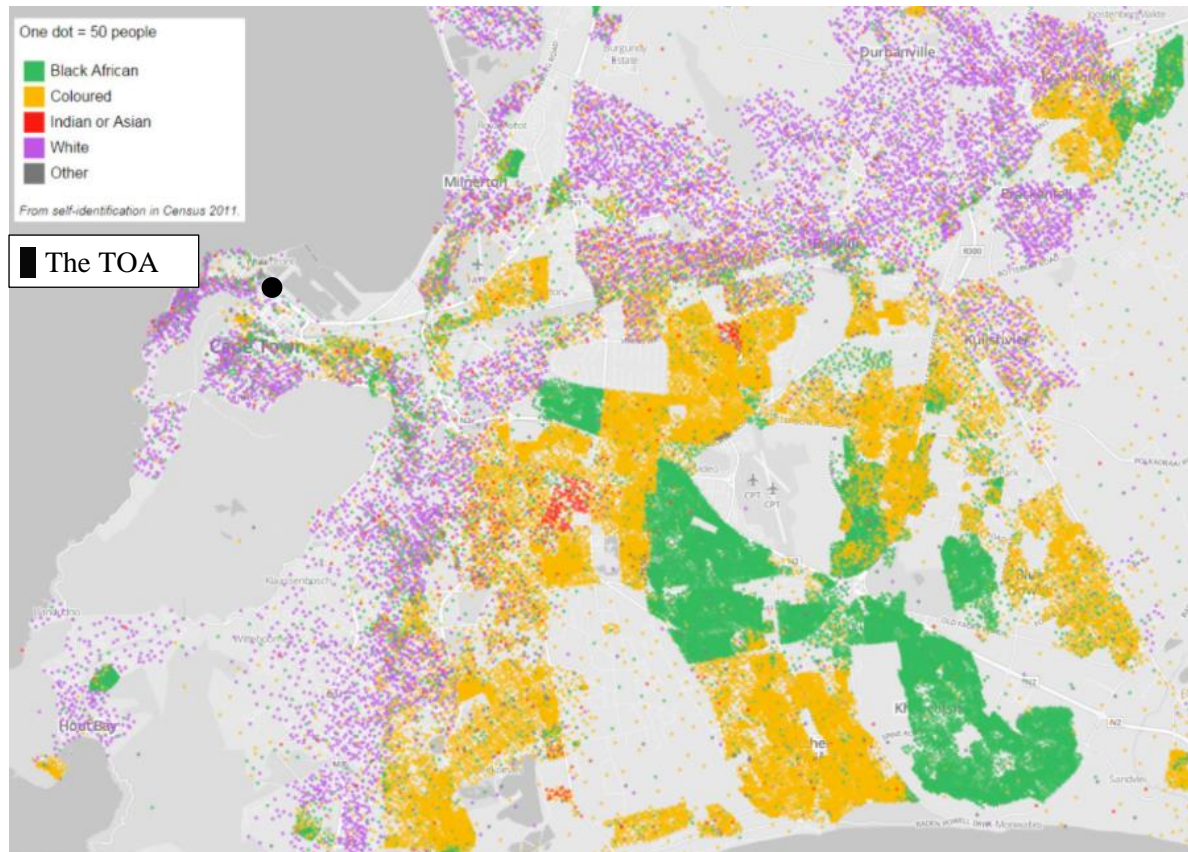


Figure 4: Map of the City of Cape Town showing the racial demographics in different areas of the City. I have marked the TOA's approximate location in black. Source: <https://mapsontheweb.zoom-maps.com/post/96776039959/racial-distribution-in-cape-town-sou>

Such constructions of race and difference are particularly marked in the historical discursive construction of “nature” and nature conservation in the city (Swanepoel, 2013: 5-9). Multiple scholars have shown that “nature”, rather than being “a set of observable, factual and manageable phenomena”, is constituted through “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1991; 2004) which are socially constructed and historically embedded. As many scholars have shown, conservation practices in southern Africa have roots in a long colonial history, and are entangled with a legacy of racial discrimination, violence and dispossession (Beinart & Coats, 1995; Beinart, 2003; Van Sittert, 2003; 2004; Ramutsindela, 2004). In the Cape, colonial conservation did not, as it did elsewhere in southern Africa, “giv[e] way to the Hunt” (van Sittert, 2005: 272 in Swanepoel, 2013: 9), but remained attached to a history of colonial and

imperial “conservationist modes of thought” (Watts 2000:47) that were rooted in elitist and middle-class ideologies (Beinart & Hughes, 2007:14-15; Adams & Mulligan, 2003: 5; Van Sittert, 2002; 2003; Anderson & Grove, 1989; Green, 2020).

According to van Sittert (2003: 163-166), the transfer of control over the Cape Colony to the British at the beginning of the nineteenth century coincided with “tectonic cultural shifts” towards “empiricism and romanticism”. In this, Table Mountain (and its unique flora) “functioned as a site of particular significance for the emerging white middle class ... as a space of natural beauty and botanical and *spiritual* significance, but above all ... a leisure space” (Olwage, 2014: 14) to which Cape Town’s elite could make “romantic pilgrimage[s]” (van Sittert, 2003: 63). During this time, a middle-class discourse on the “immense uniqueness” of the indigenous Cape flora (van Sittert, 2002: 114), gave rise to the notion that it needed protecting from “threats”. This led to the eventual designation of Cape flora as “endangered” and a series of legislations that which “enclosed” this nature by excluding certain people – “both explicitly and implicitly” (Olwage, 2013: 14). Thus, the rise of these conservationist concerns was entangled with a colonial *identity*; and this nature was appropriated as a “mark of class, ethnic and regional identity for the old imperial urban, English-speaking middle class marooned in a new nation state governed by rural, Afrikaans republicanism” (Van Sittert, 2003:114). Further, van Sittert (2003: 114) showed how the “endangered” status of Cape flora allowed for the mobilisation of members of Cape Town’s mostly English-speaking bourgeoisie to convince the state to enforce the enclosure of the commons, to evict people who were seen as undesirable from certain areas of the City, and to convert these spaces into a “preserve for patrician leisure and contemplation”.

With time, the middle-class’ spiritual, ideological, and political attachments to the endemic Cape flora combined with the production of scientific expertise, mobilised for the creation of a series of “protected areas” in and around the City that excluded indigenous people and strictly regulated the use of land (Olwage, 2013). Today, these Cape Town “natures” remain entwined with a particular white, middle-class identity (Swanepoel, 2013; Green, 2020). Although Black and Coloured people are no longer legally barred from the City’s reserves and nature spaces, there are many insidious “invisible” barriers that prohibit Black and Coloured people’s participation in these spaces. One of these barriers is the fact that many reserves in the City require expensive entrance fees or permits to enter.⁵ In spaces where entrance is “free”,

⁵ In 2022, the entry fee to the Cape Point Nature reserve was R90 for a South African resident (with an identity document) while the entry fee for Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden was R80. Both of these reserves are located in historically white areas in Cape Town.

barriers to access can be more subtle and nuanced. As Butler and Richardson (2015: 146) showed, the “lack of paid holidays, leisure immobilities fostered under apartheid, transport issues, time constraints, and lack of understanding and knowledge of what to do in national parks maintain[ed] the perception of parks as unwelcome spaces for many Black South Africans”. In this regard, Green (2014: 5) argued that, [t]he work of decoloniality, in environmental management and conservation science requires the courage to unpick the ways in which the logics of coloniality and race continue to inform the idea of nature in South Africa, and as a consequence, inhibit the formation of an environmental public” (Green, 2014: 5).

Anthropology and the (social) construction of nature

Since the late 19th century, conservationists and conservation practices gave rise to a particular construction of the kind of nature that should be valued; a nature that was epitomised as wild, untouched and pristine. Taken-for-granted concepts such as ‘wilderness’ ‘wildlife’ and ‘nature’ thus have long and complex legacies underpinning them (Swanepoel, 2013: 7; Wolmer, 2007). As scholars such as Beinart (2003) have argued, these conceptions of wilderness resulted in conservation practices rooted in an ideological, spatial and physical separation between particular (valued) natures and society (see also Argyrou, 2005:125). This conceptual division between ‘man’ and ‘nature’ has been the foundation of modern conservation development (Beinart & Coates, 1995; Latour, 2004).

According to Child (2009: 7), the history of conservation in southern Africa is intrinsically *embedded* in this vision of wilderness and pristine nature. It is this version of nature that environmentalism and myriad conservation initiatives and organisations often aim to protect today. As Anderson and Grove (1989: 4, in Swanepoel, 2013: 11) argued, Africa has become the embodiment of ‘Eden’ for the purposes of international and local conservation initiatives, “rather than as a complex and changing environment in which people have actually had to live”. This Edenic imagination of African nature has also inspired an influx of multinational NGOs and conservation groups seeking to aid the continent with this global responsibility of preserving ‘wild’ nature (Anderson & Grove, 1987; Brockington, Duffy & Igoe, 2008; Child, 2009).

Early anthropological engagements with this idea of “nature” centred primarily on the ways that local “cultures” engaged with and imagined their natural settings, and how these engagements contributed to the functioning of their culture as a whole. For example, In *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935), Bronislaw Malinowski famously studied the cultivation and

gardening practices of the Trobriand Islanders. Malinowski argued that the Trobrianders grew food for more than merely *utilitarian* and *practical* reasons; they gardened because these practices were deeply meaningful to the social organisation of the South Sea community, forming the foundation of economic power, political organisation and kinship obligations.

In the 1960s, anthropology's engagement with nature was deeply influenced by the rise of the environmental movement, precipitated by the work of scholars such as Rachel Carson (1962). Three sub-fields of anthropology developed from this interest; environmental anthropology, ethnoecology and political ecology. Amongst the environmental anthropologists, scholars such as Julian Steward, Roy Rappaport and Marvin Harris were particularly famous for using biological systems theories to explain how cultures adapted to and maintained homeostasis with their physical environments. Ethno-ecologists, like Harold Conklin, on the other hand, looked towards traditional ecological knowledge to understand how indigenous groups around the world managed the ecosystems in which they lived (Martin, 2001; see also Haenn & Casagrande, 2007). While a number of these studies were invested in a romantic project of retrieving supposedly authentic, harmonious, and stable relationships between people on the margins of capital and "nature", some employed ethnography to other ends. Colin Turnbull (1972), for instance, explained that his 'apocalyptic' description of the Ik was "a description of a people driven to extreme cruelty under enormous stress... a fate the West would potentially also suffer as religion declined, the state expanded, and nuclear holocaust loomed" (Turnbull 1974:103, in van Wyk, 2013: 70; see also Turnbull, 1972: 293).

By the 1970s, anthropologists increasingly turned their attention to the ways in which governmental and scientific approaches to the environment often masked unequal relationships of power, especially in post-colonial and "Third world" settings (see Ferguson, 1990). Their so-called political ecology challenged the ways in which large state projects used nature conservation to extend state power into rural areas. In this tradition, Arturo Escobar (1995) famously contended that international development projects in the global South had become mechanisms of control, comparable to colonialism or cultural imperialism. Development discourse, Escobar (1995: 9) argued, "has created an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about, and the exercise of power over, the Third World" by framing it as "underdeveloped". He argued that this promulgated a regime of "environmental managerialism" (Escobar, 1995: 194), wherein the poor was framed as lacking in "environmental consciousness", which could only be corrected with the help from the North (Escobar 1995:195). Escobar (1995: 195) reasoned that this discourse served to "shift... visibility and blame away from the large industrial polluters in the North".

By the end of the 1990s, political ecologists started to question the “essentialist” ways in which the movement had conceived of ‘nature’ to embrace the social constructedness of the concept in different places (Escobar, 1998; 1999: 1-30). Using this approach, anthropologists have used an ethnographic lens to situate contemporary conservation and environmental initiatives within the same critique of the “development apparatus” that Escobar wrote about (see Fletcher, 2010; Brockington, Büscher, Igoe, Neves & Sullivan, 2012). In the South African context, the work of environmental anthropologist Lesley Green was inspired by this tradition, but has also been informed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) perspectivism. She explained her approach,

Writers such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro ... are shifting the debate about ... knowing the world away from the framework offered by the concepts associated with “indigenous knowledge” and its concomitant interest in proving particular fragments of knowledges. Viveiros de Castro ... frame[s] an anthropology that moves beyond a colonial heritage of asymmetrical relationships with its research subjects, toward a symmetrical relationship characterized by an accountability to the concepts of its subjects. Thus, the dialogue is deeply invested in understanding the ways in which different conceptualisations of the world are possible, and different “things” emerge (Green & Green, 2013: 20).

Much of Green’s work on South African environmentalism and conservation practices then has been interested in the relationalities through which objects of study such as “nature” emerge as “things” and “facts” (Green & Green, 2013: 20). In this frame, Green has written about contemporary South African environmental/ social issues such as the injustices of South Africa’s marine legislation which criminalised small-scale fishers (Green, 2015a), the Karoo ‘fracking’⁶ debate (Green, 2015b; 2020), the intersection between indigenous knowledge and positivist “science” discourse (Green, 2012) and broadly, how in South Africa, the “right to speak for nature is profoundly raciali[s]ed” (Green, 2014: 2; 2020). I draw on some of Green’s work in my own analysis of the TOA’s education programme, but also draw heavily on postcolonial and post-structuralist approaches.

⁶ Hydraulic Fracturing is a contentious method of extracting oil and natural gas from the earth.

Fieldwork

I started my Master's journey in 2018 with many fractured academic interests and absolutely no idea of what I planned to focus on in my research. When Maryke Musson, a family friend, natural scientist and the then-curator of the TOA, offered that I focus my research on the TOA's environmental education programme, I immediately accepted, excited by the opportunity to be involved with such a reputable organisation. In a meeting to discuss the details of the research, Maryke explained that the Aquarium had the budget to fund a few research projects a year, and that she thought that a qualitative report on their education activities would be useful to glean whether the TOA programmes were "working" or had a lasting "effect". I explained that as a "beginner" anthropologist, this was probably beyond my abilities, but offered to observe some of the TOA lessons and classroom dynamics to determine how the children reacted to these lessons. Maryke thought that this could give the TOA some useful insights, and agreed to my proposal. In exchange, I received a small monthly stipend from the TOA to conduct this research over the next 24 months. However, I soon discovered that simply having a vague idea of a research question before entering the field was not enough to set me up on a path to academic success. I struggled for months deciding which lessons to observe, not knowing who to contact and liaise with in the TOA education department, and once in the classroom; not knowing *what*, exactly, I was even looking for.

When I wanted to attend the TOA holiday courses or outreach classes, I would, on Maryke's recommendation, email TOA teacher Katja beforehand about the upcoming classes that I could attend. Over a six-month period, I attended many different holiday classes on-site at the TOA, and several outreach excursions with Thabo and Anzio. I found it incredibly difficult to conduct research in the classroom setting, particularly the fast-paced TOA lessons where there was little time or space during the day to interact with the children. When I did get the chance, I was often afraid of disrupting the flow of the lessons, or becoming a distraction to the children, and I feared the teachers would find me an unnecessary burden to have in the classroom. I was often relegated to the role of volunteer, spending most of my time during the day marking the children's test papers and helping the teachers, with little time to sit and observe, or make notes of the classroom happenings. In hindsight, I think that I may have missed out on valuable opportunities to observe the classes but as a novice anthropologist, this experience highlighted the (often uncomfortable) world of ethnographic fieldwork, awakening me to the challenges of fieldwork in a large organisation with many gatekeepers and actors involved.

My data collection and analysis took several forms, as my research focused on several different “sites”. When I was based in the TOA classes, I occasionally took down fieldnotes in a journal when my role as volunteer or class helper allowed. I often had to take a mental note of my observations and write them down later, when I had the time. Most of my conversations with interlocutors at the TOA, whether staff or the children, were “unstructured” (Bryman, 2012: 213) and free-form. As I did not have a hard and fast hypothesis that I wished to prove during my fieldwork, the natural ebb and flow of these interactions led me to this project’s eventual core findings and themes, rather than the other way around. This type of inductive data analysis is common in ethnography (Hine, 2000).

In the vein of netnographic research (Kozinets, 2015), I also conducted a thorough multimedia analysis of the TOA’s archival posts across their Facebook and Instagram accounts, as well as their website and blog. I also consulted their TripAdvisor page. Sifting through the immense quantity of posts, public engagements, and online interactions spanning over two decades proved to be an immense challenge but led to invaluable insights.

Finally, I conducted an in-depth critical discourse analysis of the dozens of motivation letters that children wrote who were applying to the TOA’s Smart Living course. I once again took an inductive approach, allowing for unexpected themes to appear and inform the direction of my thesis and my eventual arguments.

Ethical Considerations

To the best of my ability, I have tried to ensure that my research was ethically sound and done in accordance with the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK (ASA, 2021) and Anthropology Southern Africa’s (ASnA, 2004) ethical guidelines. Prior to my fieldwork, I obtained signed institutional permission (gatekeeper permission) from Maryke Musson (the CEO of the Aquarium Foundation) to conduct my research at the TOA. In accordance with ASA’s (2011: 8) suggestion that “researchers should obtain[] informed consent directly from subjects once access has been gained [from gatekeepers]”, I also sought informed consent from staffers at the TOA directly. During my first day at the TOA, at a teachers’ meeting, I explained the nature of my research and then sought verbal consent from all of them to observe lessons and participate in the Foundation’s educational programmes. Initially, I intended to anonymise all my interlocutors by using pseudonyms but it soon became clear that this would not be possible in all cases. While I have used pseudonyms for certain members of staff who would not obviously be identifiable, the TOA, while a sizeable organisation, has very small

complement of teaching staff. Almost every staff member who I made mention of in my thesis were easily identifiable due to their position in the Aquarium. For instance, Thabo and Anzio were the TOA's only outreach teachers, and Russel was the only head of the education department. Their names were also constantly mentioned in TOA posts online with reference to their work. While I have used the real names of certain staff members in this thesis, I do not anticipate that this holds any harm for such teachers either professionally or personally.

My research also involved research with minors, a fact that made this a "medium risk" study for the purposes of Stellenbosch University's research ethics committee (REC) ethical clearance process. However, due to the nature of my research questions, and the fact that I conducted research in a formal classroom setting, under the supervision of the TOA teachers, and using mostly participant observation, rather than formal interviews, this research held little risk of harm to the children involved. I have used pseudonyms for every child I wrote about in this study, and removed any obvious identifiers.

Lastly, I consulted *Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics* (Townsend & Wallace, 2016) to navigate the ethical considerations of the data I collected for my netnographic analysis of the TOA media platforms. Even though social media platforms are considered "public data", and the TOA's Instagram, Facebook, blog and TripAdvisor pages were "open" groups, I hid the identity of commenters by either censoring their names on screenshots or creating pseudonyms. I have also chosen to omit the dates of certain posts on the TOA social media platforms in order to make it more challenging to identify these commenters. Even though these individuals agreed to the terms and conditions of the TOA's social media platforms that allowed the reuse of data by third parties, I protected their identities to uphold the same "duty of care" with which I conducted all my research (Townsend & Wallace, 2016: 7).

Chapter Outline

At its heart, this thesis is an ethnographic analysis of the TOA's non-profit initiatives; focusing particularly on its environmental education (EE) programme and what it communicated about conservation to its various targeted audiences.

The next chapter, Chapter Two, is a "netnographic" (Kozinets, 2015) analysis of the TOA's digital archives; its "social mediascape" and online presence. In this chapter, I explore the TOA's online creation of its content, and the discursive techniques it relied on to get its conservation message across, shape a community around its cause, and to respond to its critics. I argue that in a global context where aquaria and zoos have come under increasing scrutiny, the TOA managed to publicly align itself with animal welfare and conservation groups to

present itself primarily as a conservation and education organisation. I posit that this framing was not accidental and that it was directly attributable to the TOA's online media strategy.

Chapter Three focuses on the TOA's Smart Living holiday EE course, where children from very different backgrounds joined to learn about conservation and sustainability topics. Using the theoretical insights of education and gender scholars, I show that the children had very different experiences of the Smart Living classes. I argue that these differentiated experiences were a function of the "hidden curriculum", a concept that explains how the educational system's unthinking embrace of middle-class expectations, norms and values excludes children from other backgrounds.

Chapter Four looks at the motivation letters that children from across the City submitted with their applications to the TOA to join the Smart Living holiday course. In this chapter, I look at what these letters reveal about the ways in which children across the city both shared and differed regarding their collective imaginations about "nature" and "environmentality" (Agrawal, 2005). I show that while the children were subject to similar influences from a global mediascape, there were also striking differences between the children evident in their letters and that these differences clearly mapped onto race and class inequalities in the City.

Chapter Five looks at the TOA's two outreach programmes; Smart Living and Oceans in Motion. Using my ethnographic findings from my time joining in these classes on the Cape Flats, I explore the content of these lessons, how the children responded to these lessons and the agency of the two teachers involved. In this chapter I expand on the idea of middle-class environmentalism that I developed in Chapters 3 and 4 and explore how this contributed to the framing of the TOA's outreach activities in almost religious terms.

Chapter Six contains a short conclusion of the thesis and pulls out some of its main themes.

Chapter Two: The Two Oceans Aquarium's Mediascape

Building a social networking presence

“The look on your face when you can’t decide what to do on the weekend...” read the caption of a Two Oceans Aquarium (TOA) Facebook post on a Friday morning in September 2020, attracting several laughing face-, likes- and love emoji reactions from TOA followers. The caption accompanied a close-up picture of one of the Aquarium’s resident Black Musselcracker fish with a distinctly grumpy-looking expression on its face (see Figure 5). The post also included a hyperlink that TOA Facebook followers could click on to book tickets to the Aquarium for that weekend. These humorous memes and posts communicating general information to the public about ticket pricing, opening hours and upcoming special attractions or events- like the post on that September morning- were but a fraction of the total media that the TOA produced and posted.

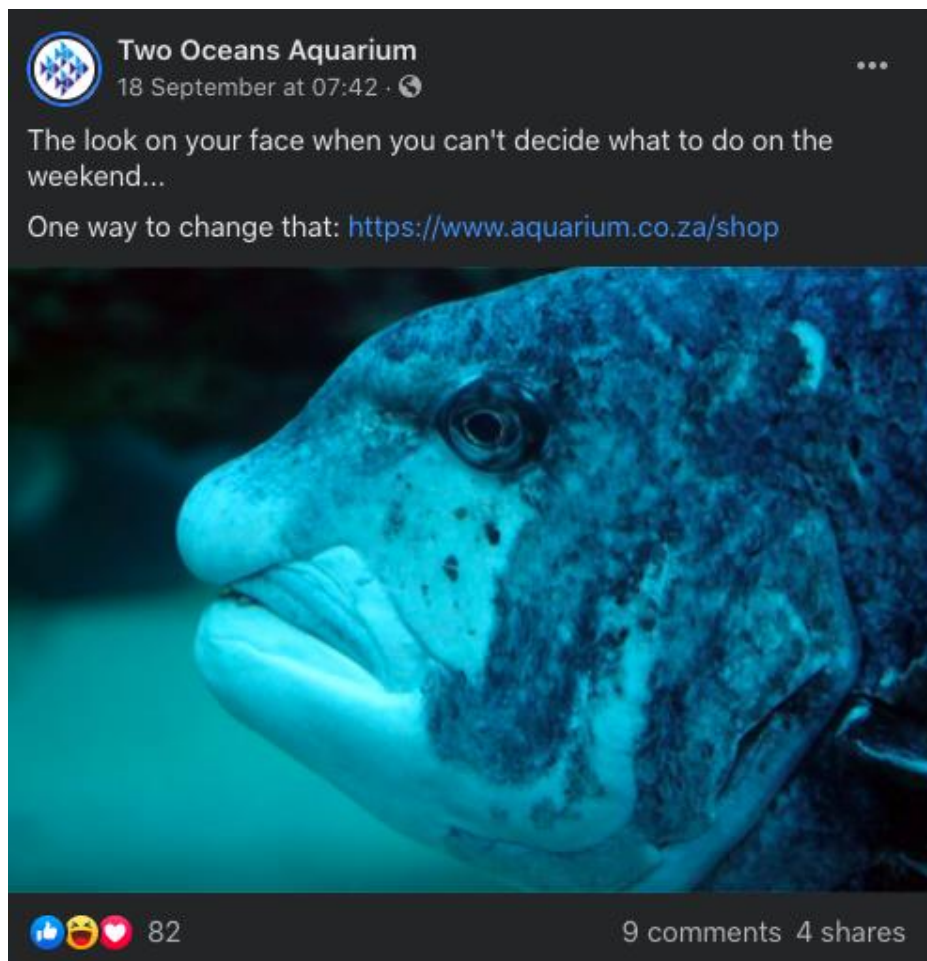


Figure 5: A typical TOA Facebook post. Source: TOA Facebook page (2020)

As I scrolled back through years of posts on the TOA timeline, it was clear that most of the organisation's online content was heavily focused on education and conservation. The TOA regularly posted about their own conservation initiatives, trending global and local environmental issues, and environmental interest stories. These posts drew a great deal of positive engagement from the TOA's wide audience of followers. In the comments sections to these posts, many followers praised the Aquarium for their efforts, leaving positive reactions to posts, and tagging and mentioning their friends, to which the TOA responded in turn. The TOA's online space was a busily interactive one.

Going through the Aquarium's timeline, it was clear that their online presence had grown exponentially over the past decade, going from only a few Facebook posts a week in 2010, to several posts a day in 2021. This is perhaps not surprising; a decade ago, social media was still in its infancy and was not used by businesses as a marketing and public engagement tool to the same extent that it is today. It was obvious, however, that the TOA's online emphasis on conservation had been a sizable part of their online universe since the very beginning. The TOA's very first blog post was published in 2010 when their new website went live. The post emphasised that their new site had a comprehensive section dedicated to their conservation work, "From protecting the V&A Waterfront's seals, to getting behind the microscope, and pioneering research in animal aquatic health; not to mention our ongoing work with sharks" (Sinclair, 2010). The post also added "we are building our social networking presence". Over ten years after this post was published, it was clear that the TOA had attained this goal. the TOA's social networking presence was an incredibly substantial one. In October 2021, the Aquarium had over 82 300 followers on Facebook and 29 000 on Instagram. The Aquarium's dedicated public relations and marketing department constantly shared posts across all their social media platforms, which included Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as their blogs.

In this chapter, I will pay particular attention to the TOA's social media and online presence by exploring the creation of its content, and the discursive techniques it relied on to get its conservation message across, shape a community around its cause, and to respond to its critics. I therefore look at the ways in which the TOA "spur[red] the public into action" (Chua 2018a: 5) regarding conservation by tracing how its media representations of specific environmental issues were made visible to its audiences through social media.

“Higher causes” and conservation in the media

The anthropology of social media has long been interested in using the tools of ‘netnography’ (Kozinets, 2015) to explore the ways that organisations use social networks to engage with the public. What scholars have termed the “mediascape” (Chua, 2018b; Murphy, 2021) has become a fascinating site of anthropological inquiry. As Guo and Saxton (2018: 6) have noted, social media offers organisations “a low-cost, interactive tool to speak out and to educate, engage, mobilise, and build rapport with large audiences of supporters”. Igoe (2010: 384) has also suggested that Benedict Anderson’s (1983) concept of “imagined communities” may provide a useful lens to understand how constituents of these causes are “disseminated, reproduced and intertwined through myriad acts of individual self-expression, imitation, recruitment and linking” on social media. Individuals who interact with these environmental causes online can thus become active producers of these communities. In analysing the TOA’s media platforms, I was particularly inspired by Liana Chua’s (2018a: 3) question on “what anthropologists can gain from an open-ended ethnographic analysis of the tropes and discourses that animate such [online] engagements”. In her ethnography of a chimpanzee rehabilitation non-government organisations’ (NGO) online space, Chua posited that “witnessing publics” were produced through the interactive, morally charged and visceral stories shared on the social mediascape of such environmental organisations. She suggested that the interactive affordances of social media allowed followers to not only abstractly *learn* about environmental threats in these online mediascapes, but also “actively participate to alleviate them” (Chau 2018a: 8). Chau also noted that despite the seemingly impersonal nature of these activities, public participation in this online sphere is often highly “charged- affectively, morally, [and] politically” (Chua, 2018a: 3).

In this regard, a number of scholars have noted that modern zoos and aquariums have had to rehabilitate their historical association with exploitative amusement parks to become sites of conservation, education and research in order to justify keeping animals in captivity, while continuing to turn a revenue by attracting and entertaining guests (Carr & Cohen, 2011; Ainslie, 2002; Braverman, 2011). In this, modern zoos and aquariums have come to frame theirs as a “higher cause” (Ainslie, 2002: 66) to a “witnessing public” (Chua, 2018a).

Becoming an environmental authority

The TOA certainly engaged in a plethora of their own “higher causes”, which included their environmental education activities, animal rescue and rehabilitation programmes, as well as

funding and hosting postgraduate science research. Most of this work, though, was funded and managed through the TOA's non-profit organisation (NPO) arm that they established in 2018 (see Chapter 1). The TOA Education Foundation's charitable activities were all made visible on the TOA's social media pages, where they attracted overwhelmingly positive public engagement.

The Education Foundation's rehabilitative work was especially visible in the ways that people in Cape Town have come to associate the TOA with a conservation organisation. Throughout my fieldwork, a number of TOA employees remarked to me that friends, neighbours, acquaintances and even total strangers often contacted them about injured marine animals to ask for advice or for help in rescuing the animals. One staff member, Adam, remarked that he had once been contacted via a "DM" (direct message) on his personal Instagram account by an acquaintance, who wanted to know what the TOA's "official advice" was about reporting a poaching incident, after witnessing poachers diving out *perlemoen* (abalone)⁷ near their house in Kalk Bay.⁸ Many of the staff I spoke to seemed bemused that Capetonians assumed that this fell within the TOA's remit and that it was the first authority that they thought to contact. Indeed, as Adam remarked, the monitoring, rescue and rehabilitation of marine animals in the coastal waters around Cape Town officially fell to other organisations such as South African National Parks (SANParks), the City of Cape Town (CoCT), or the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB).

For many of the TOA staff that I spoke to, the assumptions about their responsibilities and reach evinced the rapport that the TOA established with the public as an efficient, trustworthy and competent conservation organisation, and how the public had perhaps come to see the TOA as a reliable environmental authority in the City. That many of the public held this view is unsurprising, considering that the Aquarium did indeed often rescue marine animals and posted about it on the Aquarium's website and social media accounts. In 2020, the TOA's Marine Wildlife Programme report poster noted that it had conducted 178 call-outs for wildlife rescues (see Figure 6). Often, the TOA's rescue stories contained explicit descriptions of its education or conservation work, and appeals for the public to become involved, to donate money or to behave in a certain environmentally responsible way. One example of such an effort appeared on a TOA Facebook post in October 2020 and featured the TOA's success in

⁷ It is illegal for the public to harvest *perlemoen*, yet international syndicates often pay poachers large amounts of money for this delicacy, which they export overseas.

⁸ Kalk Bay is a village situated on the False Bay coastline, where poaching incidents are rife.

freeing a seal entangled in plastic in the Cape Town Harbour (see Figure 6). This particular Facebook post included a video of the TOA staff members rescuing the entangled seal, and an appeal to their followers,

For the team, this was the second seal rescue of the day. Entanglements by discarded fishing line, packaging material and random plastic junk are becoming increasingly common for these playful, curious animals. Without hands they cannot free themselves, and without human help they will eventually die due to infection. Always cut up your loops when throwing them out!



Figure 6: Screenshot of the TOA's Facebook post highlighting their "second seal rescue of the day". Source: TOA Facebook page (2020).

As with almost all the TOA posts about their rescue efforts, this post received overwhelmingly positive responses from followers who praised their efforts. Few rescue posts, however, rivalled in popularity the footage the TOA released on their YouTube and social media platforms in 2018 of a veterinarian who removed an entire plastic bag from a rescued

turtle named Alvi's throat (see Figure 7). The video of Alvi's rescue quickly went viral⁹ internationally and was reshared on such media outlets as *Huffington Post*, where it amassed 190 000 views, and *The Independent UK*, where it received 49 000 views. It was also shared by a Facebook news page called Seeker, where it received an incredible 787 000 views. On all these platforms, followers applauded the Aquarium's animal rescue efforts and expressed their disgust at humanity for not discarding litter correctly.

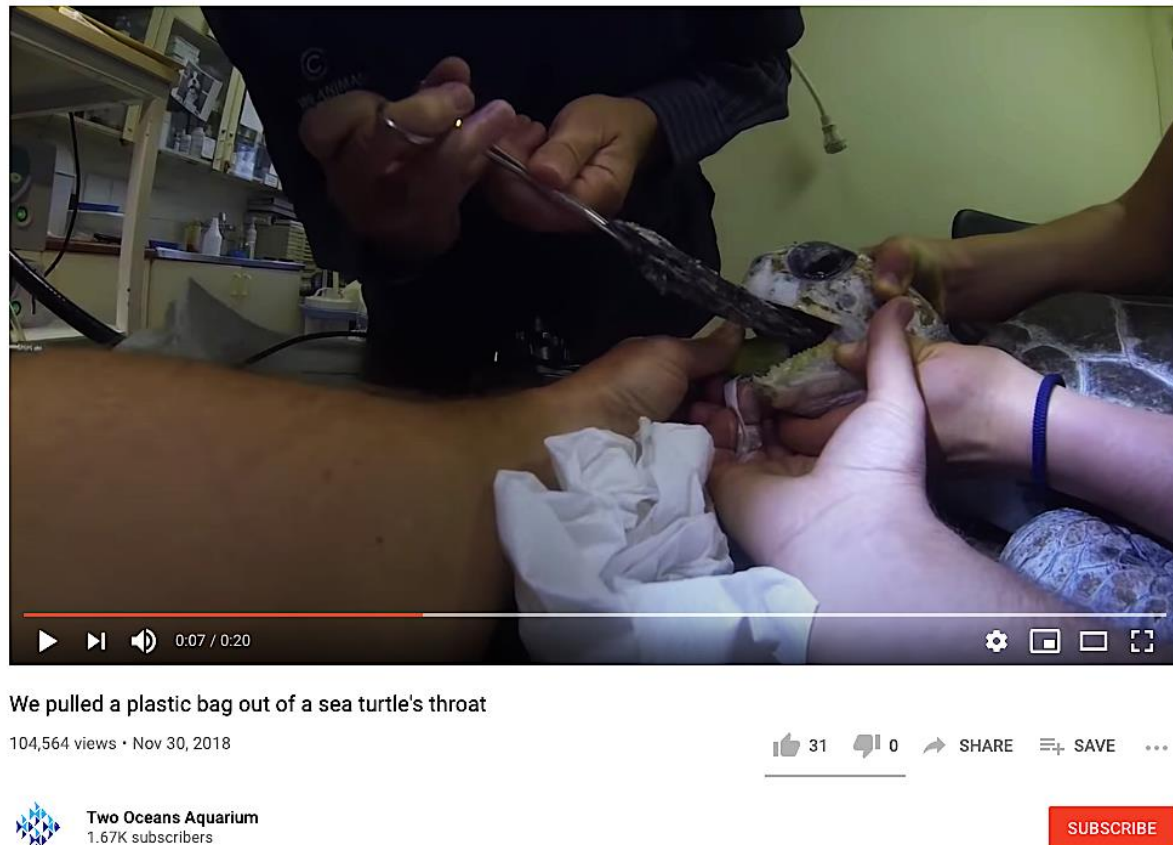


Figure 7: The TOA veterinary team pull a plastic bag out of Alvi the turtle's throat after he was rescued. Source: TOA Youtube Page (2018).

Harrowing environmental stories and cautionary tales such as the TOA's video of Alvi form part of a far broader online mediascape where compelling environmental content has become pervasive (Igoe, 2010; Brockington, 2008; Branston, 2016; Lousley, 2016). For instance, in 2015, an American biologist uploaded a clip onto YouTube of a rescued turtle getting a plastic straw pulled out of its nose, which five years later had amassed over 47 million

⁹ An image, video or link that gets shared many times over social media by individuals to the point where much of the population has seen it.

views (Sea Turtle Biologist, 2015). The TOA hyperlinked this clip within one of their own blog posts advertising an upcoming TOA beach clean-up event. They captioned the post, “Recently, this video of an Olive Ridley sea turtle with a straw stuck up its nose has gone viral – and for good reason. The needless suffering of this wild animal is a direct result of human carelessness” (Sinclair, 2015). This post then went on to mention how the TOA’s *own* local rescue turtles suffered due to plastic pollution, and linked this to another blog entry which contained information about Bob,¹⁰ one of the TOA’s rescue turtles who had been injured by plastic pollution and had a particularly dramatic rescue story. It is significant, then, that apart from sharing their *own* rescue stories, the TOA also engaged with the viral productions of *other* environmental organisations and activists to create content, resharing and building on these popular stories. The TOA also created online content from trending viral environmental documentaries and films. For example, on 26 April 2021, the TOA shared a post on Facebook about online streaming site Netflix’s local Cape Town production, *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), which had recently won an Academy Award, and linked this to a post they had published on their blog about interesting octopus facts,

My Octopus Teacher taught South Africans two things: Firstly, that we have amazing, Oscar-worthy talent in our country! Secondly, that octopuses are one of the most remarkable, intelligent animals that we share our world with! Visitors to the Two Oceans Aquarium will no doubt be on the lookout for our own octopus ... and may be curious to learn about the intelligence and quirks that make this animal something truly special!

Apart from resharing viral content, the TOA also frequently mentioned and linked their posts to the work of prominent environmental activists, government agencies, scientists and NPOs who worked in the field of marine conservation. Locally, the TOA often collaborated with these other establishments to create new exhibits, events, and educational online content. For example, in 2018, TOA shared a blog post (see Bowen, Musson & Sinclair, 2018) which drew attention to the new website of the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) and the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA). The post contained information about Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), responsible fishing practices and the TOA’s new educational exhibit called “MzanSea”. In its clever play on Mzansi, a colloquial term for South Africa, the TOA’s MzanSea thus not only connected the organisation’s work with “official” governmental

¹⁰ Bob the turtle was rescued by the TOA with a huge amount of plastic in his stomach, including balloons, which left him with permanent brain damage.

conservation organisations, SANBI and the DEA, but also mapped its influence onto existing and proposed South African MPAs. Another example was of the TOA blog post about the work of Dr Tess Gridley, founder of Sea Search, a Cape Town-based organisation that studied whales and dolphins. The TOA explained its connection to the NPO by saying that it was “always eager to collaborate with organisations that conserve our precious ocean and provide thrilling insights into the possibilities of marine careers for young people”. The blog post included a short blurb written by Dr Gridley in which she detailed her work and highlighted the importance of protecting the marine environment, and called for public donations to the SeaSearch NPO (Gridley, 2018).

Through links with the stories of scientists, conservationists and authorities who worked in this field, the TOA carefully positioned itself as a “serious” environmental organisation rather than as a place of entertainment. Through this discursive work online, it seemed that the TOA managed to resist the public critique from animal welfare societies and conservation organisations that many other zoos and aquariums have been subject to in recent years. Indeed, animal welfare organisations such as the SPCA and SANCCOB had even collaborated with the TOA on multiple occasions to undertake animal rescue and research initiatives¹¹ (SANCCOB, 2017). Online, it was fascinating that I could find no obvious critiques of the TOA from any local or international animal welfare organisations. This was in contrast to many other zoos and aquariums around the world that have come under fire in recent years from animal rights groups such as Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS, 2016), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), who were known for using media and public protests at zoos, or grassroots movement “Empty the Tanks” (Maynard, 2018: 178). Empirically, such opposition to zoos and aquariums have had an impact on public perception of these organisations, to the point of affecting revenue. One example of this, which Lily Maynard (2018) highlighted, was the production of the documentary *Blackfish* which greatly affected well known international aquarium group, SeaWorld. Given this wider global context, it was striking that the TOA managed to resist the same critique and opposition from conservation groups, and that these organisations seemed to have embraced the TOA as peers in their own field.

Some explanation of this can be traced to the TOA’s constantly expanding social mediascape in which it created viral conservation content and linked their followers to such

¹¹ The TOA has repeatedly donated money for research. In 2017 the TOA donated 15 000 to SANCOBB (see Anon, 2017b).

content from other authoritative environmental sources. In this role, the TOA situated itself as an important node in the “spectacular productions of biodiversity conservation” in which “[c]onservation NGOs, as well as the foundations, government agencies and for-profit companies that support them, consistently use image and dramatic performance” to create a “fictional universe in which many stories are possible and each feels like it fits with the others” (Igoe, 2010: 377). As Igoe (2010: 377) noted, the fictional, interconnected and dramatic universe of conservation organisations online was often “conjure[d] for effective conservation interventions”. On this point, Chua (2018a: 3) noted that the collaborative practices of conservation organisations “are mirrored and often extended in the social mediascape ... a loose and fast-evolving cluster of images, videos, appeals, petitions, news-pieces, scientific publications, and other digital artifacts that now forms a significant part of many organisations' outreach and publicity efforts”. “Cumulatively”, Chua said, “these constitute a discernible field of activity that encompasses a regular cast of players—[conservation] bodies and their supporters- and a recurrent set of tropes, narratives, and affective and praxiological conventions”. This field “is further strung together by the connections - and ethos of connectedness - between different organisations, many of which ‘follow’ each other on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and occasionally circulate the same material” (Chua, 2018a: 3).

Making activists out of followers with turtles

Chua (2018a: 2) argued that the social mediascape of conservation organisations were framed by “distinctive affects, sensibilities, and praxiological conventions through which diverse internet users ... can not only learn about but also participate in what is widely construed as an urgent, morally compelling project”. It was clear that online, the TOA conformed to this typification by encouraging their followers to actively participate in their environmental causes with a mixture of practical action and emotional appeal. For instance, in November 2020, the TOA ran a 28-day online campaign with another local environmental NPO, Ocean Pledge, posting a different conservation “pledge” on their social media feeds each day, and encouraged their followers to commit to adopting a different sustainable action each day. Some of these pledges included to “compost”, to “bring my own cup” and to be “energy conscious”. On day 14, followers pledged “to say no to balloons and plastic party décor” - but only after they were reminded of the impact that these types of plastic had on turtles like Bob who needed “years of care to recover from eating party balloons (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: One of the TOA's "Ocean Pledge Challenge" posts on Facebook. Source: TOA Facebook page (2020).

The participatory, morally compelling nature of these online anti-plastic and conservation campaigns helped the TOA to rally support and to produce a community around its causes (cf. Chua, 2018b). Some of these posts gained more online support than others, but for the most part, TOA followers expressed their admiration for its conservation work. For example, in response to its planned Trash Bash beach clean-up event in 2020, followers variously commented on Facebook, “You are all doing fine work by still spreading such important messages xx”, and “Wonderful how these clean-ups are spreading in SA!! Keep up the good work”, and “Wonderful that people are actually taking notice of their environments”. In their comments, followers thus often echoed the “recurrent set of tropes, narratives, and affective conventions” (Chua, 2018a: 3) that the TOA constantly posted and those of an

existing field of activity made up of scientists and environmentalists to which it was linked online.

Central to the creation of its “affective conventions” was the TOA’s sea turtle rescue and rehabilitation programme. The programme featured prominently on the TOA’s website, in its various campaigns and on its social media pages, almost always accompanied by or linked to dramatic images of animals in distress or scarred by the damage of pollution or thriving after TOA care.¹² Out of all their published content, the TOA’s turtle stories elicited the empirically the most engagement from their followers. This was perhaps not surprising. The use of dramatic images of animals to communicate the urgency of environmental issues is a well-known conservation trope (see Arponen, Lundberg, MacMillan, Vainio, Verissimo, 2019). As Igoe (2010: 378) has argued, “conservation NGOs engage in spectacular accumulation, through which images of ... animals are used to communicate urgent problems in desperate need of the timely solutions”. In a video interview, Maryke Musson,¹³ the Education Foundation’s CEO, affirmed this point by saying that “the best way of inspiring care for the oceans is through storytelling” and that the TOA rehabilitation turtles were both “storytellers” for the organisation’s conservation goals and “ambassadors” for the problem of plastic pollution (Heavy Chef, 2020). The TOA’s conservation co-ordinator, head of the TOA turtle rehab programme and “turtle hero”, Talitha, in a presentation to high school students that was later published on the TOA blog, spoke in remarkably similar ways about the “incredibly inspiring...turtle stories” and of these “ocean ambassadors” who “speak not only to the threats our oceans face, but also the resilience of our marine environment” (Nobel, 2019).

The use of “storytelling” to engage public empathy around conservation matters is a well-documented pillar of the conservation world (Chua, 2018a, 2018b; Brockington, 2008; Igoe, 2010, Lundberg, et al., 2019). On this, Chua (2018a: 3) noted that animals “quickly acquire names, biographies, and hopeful trajectories [to] make ideal poster children for ... causes, often becoming linchpins of virtual adoption programs through which various organizations raise funds to cover the cost of these animals' care”. As Irus Braverman (2011: 829) wrote, “The modern zoo visitor is asked not only to imaginatively recontextualize the animal within that environment from which it was separated, but also to feel responsible for

¹² Fully grown turtles as well as juvenile hatchlings were frequently brought to the Aquarium by members of the public, or their own rescue team after being found injured or in distress on beaches around South Africa. TOA’s staff veterinarians then treated their injuries and rehabilitated the animals over long periods.

¹³ Maryke was the TOA’s curator for many years and went on to take the role as CEO of the TOA Education Foundation in 2018, where she was instrumental in establishing the TOA’s NPO section. She has since left the Aquarium.

the disappearance of that environment and to react accordingly by donating money or by performing other everyday actions, such as recycling and building bird nests”. As such, animal stories are “pivotal in shaping the affective and ethical contours of the social mediascape as they circulate” since “their embeddedness in a larger narrative about environmental destruction ... make cute images and sad stories legible on social media as conservation issues” (Chua, 2018a: 3-4). Chua (2018b: 8) further wrote that such named animals “perform the affective work of bridging large-scale problems with small-scale specificities, becoming the almost human faces of an unfolding ecological crisis”. More than highlighting the threat to specific species, these animal stories form “the affective ... backdrop against which specific ... appeals, campaigns, and news pieces are charged with meaning and urgency” to “render such threats immediate, personal and, crucially, addressable by individual users” (Chua 2018b: 6-77).

As both stories and “storytellers”, the TOA’s rescue turtles were often given names while anecdotes about their quirky behaviours and unique personalities were posted on social media. Here, their stories were told, retold and adapted through rehabilitation “journeys” that were as unique as the turtles involved. Online, the public could follow individual turtles and adopt a specific turtle by donating money to fund its treatment. The public could also visit many of these turtles as they recovered in the exhibit at the Aquarium. In the TOA’s parlance, a turtle called Yoshi was particularly adept at “storytelling”. Yoshi was the first turtle to be exhibited at the Aquarium shortly after it opened to the public, arriving at the Aquarium in July 1997. There are many posts on the TOA media pages describing the circumstances surrounding the loggerhead turtle’s arrival, with the specifics differing slightly between posts published over the years. Some posts attributed Yoshi’s arrival to harbour authorities who had confiscated her from a Japanese fishing trawler which had caught her in their nets, while another post read that the trawler captain named Yoshi after Yoshitaro, the cook aboard the boat, and had gone to great lengths to get Yoshi to safety (Musson, 2018). On the Education Foundation’s dedicated Yoshi page, the story was that Yoshi was picked up by a fisherman, who “looked after [her] like a much-loved pet” (Musson, n.d.).

Over the years, Yoshi was not only a firm favourite of Aquarium visitors, but became the “Queen” of its exhibit, and was referred to as such on multiple TOA posts. As such, the TOA often scripted events and campaigns around her as a central character, publishing these stories on their blog. For instance, during the 2010 Soccer World Cup in South Africa,

Aquarium divers wore *Bafana Bafana*¹⁴ t-shirts and played soccer with the special ball they brought into the tank with them with Yoshi in honour of one of the upcoming matches in Cape Town (Anon, 2010). During Christmas 2013, the TOA encouraged followers to come watch Yoshi being fed by “Santa Claus” (see Figure 9) while in 2014, a post encouraged families to sign up to attend one of the TOA’s “educational sleepovers” in front of the “watchful eye of Yoshi the turtle” (Rockstroh, 2014a). In 2015, a Facebook post encouraged visitors to book a dive with Yoshi “our famous quirky turtle” (Anon, 2012) and on world turtle day in 2017, the Aquarium designed a turtle-friendly cake for her and some of the other Aquarium turtles to “shellebrate” (Bowen, 2017; see Figure 10). There were numerous other such events.



Figure 9: “Yoshi” being fed by “Santa Claus” in a post on Facebook highlighting that the Aquarium would be open on Christmas day. Source: TOA Facebook post (2012).

¹⁴ The South African national soccer team.



Figure 10 :Yoshi is served her bespoke ‘turtle cake’ made out of vegetables and fish by TOA aquarists. Source: Bowen (2017).

Near the end of 2017, the Aquarium announced on their blog and Facebook pages that they would be releasing Yoshi in December to allow her to get back to the beach that she had hatched at and to reproduce as she had reached sexual maturity. Although the TOA and its public had “grown extremely attached to her”, it announced, “all signs [were] there that it [was] time to return her to the wild”. The post also explained that the decision followed much initial concern about Yoshi’s ability to survive in the wild after being in captivity for so long, but that the Aquarium was confident that its long experience with turtle rehabilitation and recent academic research on the successful release of other loggerheads, made them confident that it “would be in her best interest to be released”. As Maryke explained, the TOA

gained confidence in handling sea turtles and general turtle husbandry [...] By 2009 we started to formalise our turtle rescue, rehabilitation and release efforts and have since successfully released more than 450 rehabilitated turtles. At approximately 25 years of age, we knew [Yoshi] was maturing and her breeding instincts started kicking in. We also know that turtles have lifespans of 80 years or more, which meant that Yoshi was going to outlive many of us.

The Facebook post about Yoshi’s release immediately received 230 likes, 80 comments and 76 reshares, far exceeding the engagement of any previous TOA post about Yoshi. Many followers commented that the news of Yoshi’s release was bittersweet; they were happy to see her set free but would miss her. A large number of followers tagged their friends and reshared

the post, commenting that they would visit the turtle one last time before she was released. People also posted their own personal pictures and memories of visits to Yoshi in the comment sections and asked the Aquarium scientific questions about Yoshi's upcoming "journey" (see Figure 11).

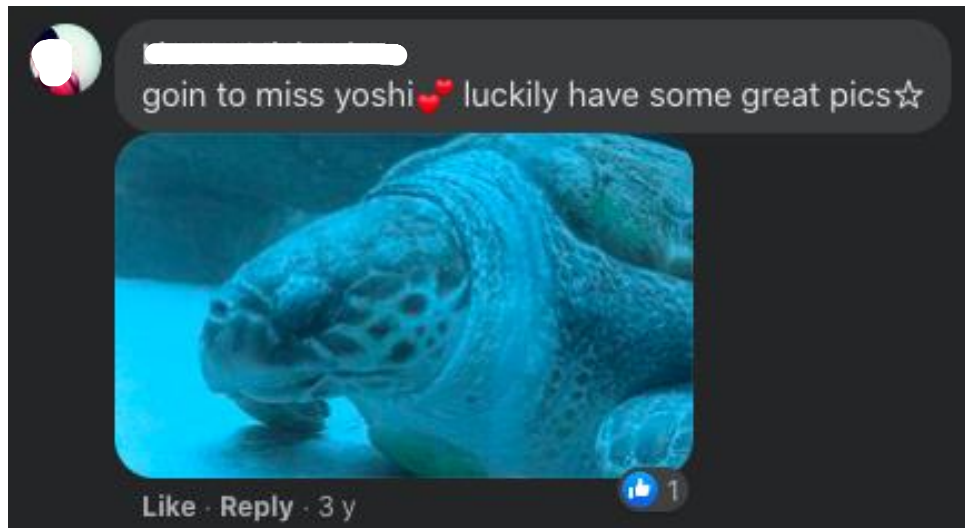


Figure 11: A follower reacts to the TOA's post about Yoshi being released (2017).

Many followers wrote about the impact that Yoshi had on their lives- and on multiple generations in their families. One follower for instance commented,

My two toddlers have grown up visiting Yoshi almost every week. She is the highlight of our visit and though we'll be heartbroken to see her go, we know that she was never meant to live in captivity (as loved and cared for as she has been with you). May she live a long (long!) and happy life in the world outside xxx

Another woman noted the inspirational role that Yoshi had on her family's turn toward conservation, writing that her daughter had been inspired to start an anti-plastic blog after meeting Yoshi, "My daughter is both happy and sad. She's trying to help the penguins and turtles by teaching her friends to not litter or use straws or balloons. [...] She says she's happy Yoshi gets to go home but is sad she won't get to see her". Other comments revealed how visitors had formed deep attachments with Yoshi, crediting her with helping them through difficult times in their lives. Another woman for instance recalled, "I volunteered at TOA for about 5 or 6 years back in my student days. Many, many tea breaks were spent watching and

admiring this beautiful animal. She saw me through some tough times back then”. Below this, a woman added her own moving story,

Yoshi played a huge role in our lives while my daughter was treated for childhood cancer at Red Cross Children's hospital. We visited Yoshi almost every week for a year. My daughter is really happy there will be lots of little Yoshis all over the place. Safe journey to our dear friend, you helped us through a really rough time and we will be grateful forever” (2017).

The TOA’s Yoshi page also hosted numerous stories about the close bonds that existed between Yoshi and her handlers at the TOA. In one of these posts, Simon, a young aquarist who dove with Yoshi every day, wrote about his experience after he was interviewed by the television talk show *The Expresso Show*,

One day I was giving Yoshi a little tickle on the left side of her neck [...] On this day she was OK with me doing that, and she even opened up a bit and pushed harder into my hand. [...] it’s that form of communication when you’re working with an animal that is so special that, although you don’t have that verbal communication, you are still able to understand each other enough to have this absolutely great energy (Leigh, 2016; cf. Figure 12).

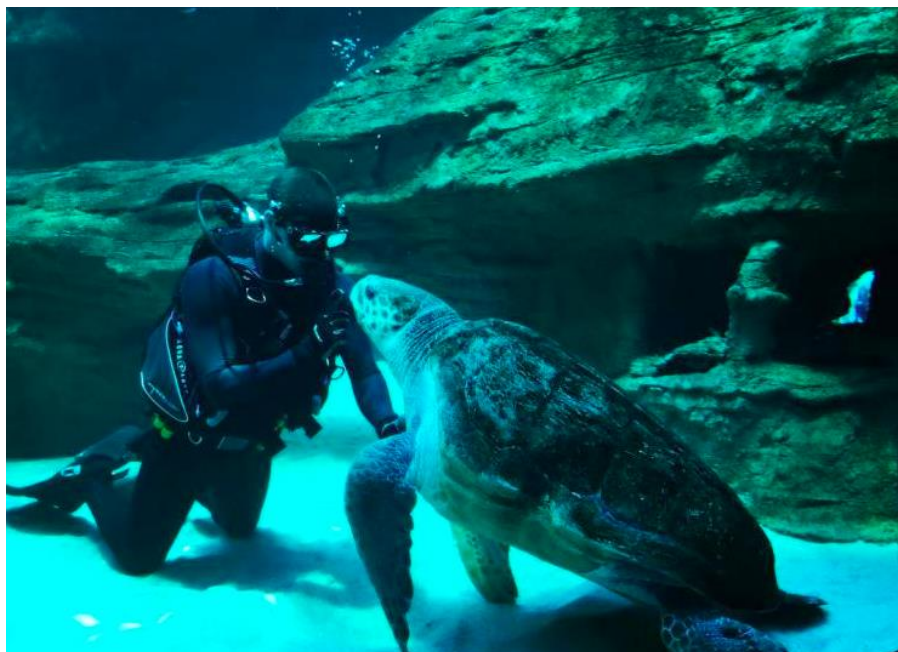


Figure 12: Simon tickles Yoshi’s neck. Source: eNCA (2016).

Over the next three months, the anticipation about Yoshi's release continued to build up as the Aquarium released more posts about Yoshi. More and more followers started to respond to these posts as the release date got closer. On her release date, the TOA's Facebook post announced, "The day has arrived! Yoshi, the mighty loggerhead sea turtle of the Two Oceans Aquarium, is ready to be released". Within a day, the post received 701 likes, 102 comments and 173 reshares.

The Aquarium did not stop posting about Yoshi once she was released. In fact, the turtle's fame and the work she did for the Aquarium's marketing and conservation campaigns increased exponentially in the years following her release. Yoshi was tagged with a satellite tracker mounted on her shell, which updated the Aquarium on her location every time she surfaced on her travels. Between 2018 and 2020, the Aquarium published multiple monthly updates about her global position and anecdotes about her time at the TOA, as well as sharing educational posts about turtles and their conservation value, linking these to Yoshi's story. These post were extremely popular and circulated on social media well beyond the TOA website and social blogs to local and international news reports.

In February 2020, a TOA post claimed that Yoshi's journey to Australia was the longest of any marine animal ever tracked, and that she would add to the world's loggerhead population by breeding on the Australian coast. The post went viral, receiving an unprecedented 1700 likes, 198 comments and 15 000 shares on Facebook. As with previous posts about the turtle, commenters shared their memories about Yoshi in the comment sections. Amongst the comments, a woman posted a picture of the turtle tattoo on her foot that she got in honour of Yoshi. Another woman posted a picture of Yoshi and said, "Part of everybody's story. She made such a difference everywhere. So much love for her". Most of the commenters thanked and congratulated the Aquarium for their conservation contribution and work in rehabbing and releasing turtles. Before long, other South African, Australian and North American news channels picked up on Yoshi's story in which she became an international *cause célèbre* (Figure 13).



Figure 13: Yoshi's story was shared on news channel eNCA in an interview with Maryke, CEO of the Aquarium Education Foundation, when the turtle reached Australia (eNCA, 2020)

In October 2020, the Aquarium announced in a blog that Yoshi's satellite tag had stopped transmitting, which meant that they could no longer update followers about her location. The post highlighted that scientists were confident that Yoshi was close to finding her natal beach where she would go on to lay her eggs. "This is not the end of her journey by any means! With 60 years of life ahead of her, and the possibility of breeding on the fertile and protected coast of Western Australia, we're expecting plenty of baby Yoshi's in the future!". The post then added that Yoshi's future babies would "face the same man-made ocean dangers their mom did". The post ended with an appeal to followers to "help the survival odds of all sea turtles" by donating to the TOA's Education Foundation to support their rehabilitation program.

While Yoshi was one of the original and most well-known TOA "ambassadors", she was among many other Aquarium turtles whose ongoing rehabilitation struggles and "journeys" to release were documented on the Aquarium blog. The TOA created an entire page on the Aquarium Foundation website dedicated to turtle "release stories", documenting the histories of the individual rehabilitated turtles who had been or were going through the TOA rehabilitation programme. These turtle stories spoke of turtle rescue operations, costly surgeries, and harrowing journeys to recovery. Where rehabilitations were successful, there was much fanfare about the turtles' release back into the wild while turtle deaths were used in

conservation lessons, particularly about plastic pollution, which was often cited as the cause. For example, in 2020, the TOA released a Facebook post linking to a blog entry which storied the death of Marcel the green turtle, who had been found injured and tangled in a ghost-fishing line¹⁵ by a woman in Grotto Bay. Marcel was brought to the TOA, but unfortunately did not survive his surgery. The TOA explained that Marcel's autopsy revealed a large amount of plastic -and a piece of cloth- in his stomach (see Figure 14).



Figure 14: The plastic pollution found in Marcel the turtle's stomach (2020).

This post continued, “It is our hope that the story of Marcel, the green turtle, will remind and encourage people to be more responsible when it comes to their use of single-use plastic items ... We also rely on people to be inspired by these amazing animals and to re-think problem plastics and contribute to keeping the ocean plastic-free”. The post also shared a quote by Talitha,

¹⁵ Cast-off debris from commercial fishing vessels such as nylon nets and gut which marine animals cannot see in the water until they get tangled and caught in it.

Marcel's story makes me super sad, because despite him being an incredibly strong turtle and despite us doing our best to try and help him, we as humans gave him too many battles to face. Turtles just can't do it, they are strong but they can't win against the burdens we put on them by polluting the ocean.

Followers who commented on this Facebook post thanked the TOA for documenting Marcel's "journey", for "sharing his life with us" and urged other followers to recycle as a matter of great urgency. As one commenter wrote, "Poor chap - and we go on discarding plastic in an irresponsible manner. Please recycle and save the oceans!". In the process, the TOA social media followers were turned into what Chua (2018a) called "witnessing publics" who were morally, even viscerally, compelled to participate in the TOA project to save animals victims.

Engaging with a "witnessing public"

While the TOA's online conservation world seemed to conjure a community of followers that shared its earnest conservation activism, heart-rending stories, and charitable deeds, its online "witnessing public" occasionally ruptured this image of seamless fit. A small number of individuals who did not claim affiliation to any animal rights organisations questioned the aquarium's conservation credentials on its pages and frequently called upon the TOA to justify making money out of captive marine animals. Due to the inherent visibility of social media where audiences and publics see and hear everything, these questions were witnessed by the same public that praised the TOA for its work and thus required careful responses. In this sense, social media became an "additional reality" (Boellstorff, 2016: 9); a space beyond the material real-life organisation which had to quickly satisfy their followers, donors and visitors by swiftly responding to queries, critiques and suggestions which came through in real-time, online.

The TOA's critical public was perhaps most visible at the time of Yoshi's release. Under the viral post of Yoshi's arrival in Australia in 2020 one woman, Kate, asked, "I still don't understand why it took you 20 years to free Yoshi?" On the same post, another follower, Luke, remarked, "If it is [Yoshi's] nesting spot, does that mean that she probably spent 20 years in captivity pining to get back there to nest? Seems really tragic". While the Aquarium seldom responded directly to positive posts, it immediately replied to both of these comments with a long and detailed response,

Basically, Yoshi arrived at the Aquarium at a time before we had experience of releasing or caring for them in ways that prevented alteration of their natural behaviour. By the time we

began regularly rehabilitating and releasing turtles, we were concerned that Yoshi may have lost her natural instincts and would not be able to survive in the wild. It wasn't until after a series of successful long-term turtle releases in the US that we realised Yoshi's release was a possibility. TL;DR: Initially we were too inexperienced, then we were worried she'd lost her instincts, then it took time to get her fit to release.

Both commenters seemed to have been satisfied by this response; Kate thanked the TOA, saying “I understand now” while Luke “liked” the TOA’s reply. This interaction was just one example of the swift and well-considered responses that the TOA made to followers who left negative feedback online. There were several other examples of the public criticising the TOA for its educational programmes or its animal conservation claims. When it came to comments questioning animal welfare in the aquarium, the TOA was particularly assertive in responses that emphasised the organisation’s educational and wider environmental value. In these instances, the TOA’s social media pages became a space of public “moral intervention” (Chua, 2018a: 1).

An example of this can be seen through several Facebook posts about a sunfish that the TOA had brought into the aquarium Ocean Exhibit in 2017 for “rehabilitation” after rescuing it from the harbour’s dry-dock. While the TOA blog and its social media handles shared many rescue and release stories over the years, in this particular rescue, the TOA decided to keep the sunfish in their main exhibit for several months over the festive season. In their posts, the TOA explained that the sunfish was placed in the exhibit to monitor its health, and to educate visitors about the rare fish. While most followers were enthusiastic about the new addition, others pointed out the irony of capturing the animal from the wild in order to teach visitors to conserve the species.

One woman, Maya, commented that she hoped this was a temporary arrangement. The Aquarium replied that it was, and “like our sharks, turtles and most of our fish, it will only be with us temporarily”. In her reply, Maya pointed out that “I hope so- Yoshi was in your care for 20 years!”. A week later, Sandy commented in the same thread, “Please release the sunfish back into the ocean where it belongs!!!!!! It does not belong in captivity!!! Disgusting that you have not released it back yet!”. In their reply, the TOA agreed that the sunfish belonged in the ocean and promised to return the fish once they were sure it was healthy enough. A few days later, a man called Rowan asked on the same post how the TOA could justify keeping the sunfish to monitor its health when he and his children just witnessed Yoshi take a bite out of the sunfish. Rowan complained, “We watched it terrorise the sun fish for about a half hour,

then got a good bite on the tail and took out quite a big chunk, with bits of sun fish tail left floating up. The experience upset a few people who saw it”. He posted a picture of the damaged sunfish in the comments section. The Aquarium quickly replied that they were removing the sunfish from the tank and placing it elsewhere, and emphasised that the sunfish was fine after the attack.

Two weeks later, and just a few days after Yoshi’s much-publicised release, the TOA posted on Facebook that the sunfish was being moved back to the main exhibit where it could swim in safety without the threat of a turtle attack. Sammy, another commenter, pointed out that the timing of the fish “replacing” Yoshi in the main exhibit as a visitor drawcard seemed suspicious, especially since the TOA had zealously advertised its “rescue” of the sunfish and drummed up a great deal of attention from the public who wanted to visit it. Sammy, whose Facebook profile indicated that she was a student veterinarian, further asked, “I don’t understand why you have removed a pelagic fish from the wild and placed it in captivity with no plans to release it. What has happened to the Two Oceans Aquarium?”

In response, the TOA was much more assertive about the educational importance of exhibiting the sunfish, “Most of our visitors will have never seen a sunfish, never mind actually knowing what it is! This affords us an opportunity to foster love for the oceans through nurturing curiosity and awe”. Sammy replied that she understood the value of education, but argued, “we are way past the days of putting wild animals in captivity for the entertainment of the masses”. The Aquarium replied, “Like with our sharks, turtles and most of our fish, the Aquarium is a temporary home where these animals do invaluable education work - and that is what the Two Oceans Aquarium is all about”. Sammy was clearly not swayed by this response; she insisted that the TOA had captured the sunfish to “latch on” to the fish’s popularity in the media and to replace Yoshi as the central exhibit attraction. She admonished the TOA by saying,

It’s sounds like you have lost sight of what is right and what is wrong. You release an animal to freedom, gain massive press, praise and favour, and then 2 weeks later catch another wild animal to replace it?...Sounds like it’s one marketing ploy after another. And how convenient is the timing!

The TOA swiftly replied to Sammy,

It might be useful to bear in mind that we are always under scrutiny, from the public, our peers, the government (law) and from each other- and we hold ourselves accountable for every decision we make. As a public facility that reaches nearly 500 000 people a year, we see it as our duty to educate the public - those people not lucky enough to be able to spend time in or near animals or the ocean, who have never ever seen these creatures in real life. It is hard to put into words here the difference it make to a child or an adult's life to come close to the wonders of the world in this way. We understand and respect that not everyone shares our feelings about the work that we do, but we witness first-hand - regularly - the changes that occur because of the work we do.

In its assertions about its educational and conservation role, the TOA followed the example of many zoos and aquariums around the world that have consciously attempted to shift public perception of them as cruel amusement parks where animals were forced into cages - to emphasise their *educational* and *conservation* importance (Ainslie, 2002: 59; Carr & Cohen, 2011). According to Ainslie (2002: 66), this transformation was a knowing institutional mechanism to morally justify the existence of zoos and aquariums as places where animal lives were compromised “for a higher cause: the future of the planet”. The TOA’s reliance on this rhetoric was clearly visible in its defence of the sunfish exhibit, namely that the educational ends of the exhibit justified the fish’s removal from the wild, its molestation by Yoshi and its continued captivity.

As Braverman (2011: 822) showed for zoo directors, striking a balance “between the display of animals for public pleasure, for public education and for animal conservation, while also providing the animal with optimal individual care” was hard. It was certainly a balance that the TOA struggled to always get right. For some followers, none of the organisation’s animal rescues, educational programmes, or beach clean-up were enough to gloss over the fact that the TOA continued to function as a for-profit Aquarium, and as such kept animals in captivity for the purpose of what Sammy called “entertaining the masses”. Although the TOA had clearly established itself as part of a broader environmental field of conservation organisations and activists, it was significant that as an *aquarium* the TOA had to constantly work at maintaining their conservation image and rapport amongst their followers. Online, the TOA constantly distanced themselves from any connotations with institutions that exhibited animals for entertainment. A clear example of this was in an interaction between a reviewer and the TOA on the TOA’s TripAdvisor page. Interestingly, some commenters on this page criticised the TOA for its disappointing lack of “entertainment”, remarking that the

organisation's emphasis on education was *too* strong. A pattern emerged across comments of this nature, in that many reviewers remarked that they were disappointed that the Aquarium did not have dolphins on display. Many of these reviewers compared the TOA with uShaka Marine World in Durban,¹⁶ which offered both dolphin shows and theme park rides. In a keyword search, I found that uShaka was mentioned 65 times on the TOA TripAdvisor page, as reviewers contrasted the two organisations' entertainment offerings and quality.

One TripAdvisor reviewer wrote in 2018 that although they thought the TOA was well managed and they had heard many great things about it, they much preferred uShaka Marine World because the TOA did not “offer as much as Ushaka, no shows to watch, not much to do inside either apart from just walking, reading and looking”. The TOA responded to this, and asked if the reviewer had perhaps missed “the feeding times and interactive displays”, which provided entertainment and fun. Another reviewer similarly wrote in 2018 that while the TOA was very “Educative”[sic] the uShaka Marine World had more activities. The TOA responded that the reviewer should keep in mind that there was a difference between the two organisations, writing that unlike the TOA, “uShaka is not just an aquarium, but also a dolphinarium and a water park”; the TOA was an educational facility with other fun activities such as “diving in our Ocean Exhibit, penguin encounters, oceans exhibit encounters, etc”. The TOA also added, in a comment, that as a “conservation” organisation, they would “never house mammals”. In these responses, the TOA consistently positioning itself as a moral, conservation institution to their “witnessing public” online. They emphasised that that their organisation was *different* to more traditional zoos and aquariums such as uShaka because of their moral stance around keeping animals in captivity for entertainment. Publicly distancing themselves from projects of this kind, the TOA highlighted that while they did have “fun” activities on offer for visitors, their purpose, as an institution, was first and foremost educational.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the TOA's online presence, looking at the ways in which the organisation created content, linked and interacted with a wide range of “publics” online. In a global context where aquaria and zoos have come under increasing scrutiny from animal rights groups and a critical public, the TOA managed to publicly align itself with animal welfare and conservation groups and to present itself as a conservation and education organisation. This alignment has

¹⁶ uShaka Marine World is the largest Aquarium or “marine theme park” (Mann, 2016: 28) in Africa, and offered waterslides, rides, and dolphin shows (where dolphins perform tricks to the cue of a trainer) as part of their entertainment offerings.

been so successful that locals often approached the TOA to help rescue distressed marine animals in and around Cape Town- even though such operations normally fall under the remit of various non-governmental as well as local, provincial and governmental agencies. In this chapter, I argue that this blurring of boundaries between the TOA and other conservation organisations was not accidental and that it was directly attributable to the TOA's online media strategy and to the ways in which it related (and linked) to a wider online universe of conservation content; content that was heavily dependent on morally compelling and spectacular animal stories. I paid particular attention to the role that stories about the TOA's "rescue turtles" played in framing the TOA as a legitimate protector and champion of "deserving victims" (Chua, 2018a: 4) online. At the same time, these turtle stories engendered within their audience a deeply affective connection to individual animals, to a wider conservation message and by extension, to the TOA. Through these stories the TOA turtles became more than just a powerful Aquarium attraction, but also icons and "ambassadors" for the TOA's conservation causes.

In analysing the TOA's media platforms, I was particularly inspired by Liana Chua's (2018a) and Ainslie's (2002) constructivist work on the topic. As such, I showed that the TOA not only shaped its own public image, but also its "witnessing public" (Chua, 2018a), spurring them into conservation action through the use of highly emotive animal stories and digital links to a wider conservation world. At times, this was a double-edged sword for the organisation. I showed that although the TOA was largely able to create a community around its cause, the online medium also pulled other "publics" into its orbit. One such a public had little interest in conservation or education and demanded more "entertainment" from the facility. Another public criticised the TOA for profiting from the animals they kept in captivity and questioned their educational and conservation credentials. Due to the inherent visibility of social media where audiences and publics see and hear everything, these questions were witnessed by the same public that praised the TOA for its work and thus required careful responses. In this sense, social media became an "additional reality" (Boellstorff, 2016: 9); a space beyond the material organisation and reality where the TOA was constantly held accountable, and had to live up to the moral standards which they had set for themselves.

In the next chapter, I will explore one of the TOA's many 'material' conservation initiatives; their Smart Living school programme, looking at the content of the lessons, as well as the dynamics which unfolded in the classroom.

Chapter Three: Smart Living

The anatomy of a science class

The sun had not yet risen over the Waterfront when I arrived at the teachers' meeting on the morning of my first day on the Two Oceans Aquarium Foundation's (TOA) Smart Living course. When I arrived at the upper floor classroom, the TOA teaching staff were all preoccupied with making coffee, shuffling worksheets, and catching up after the weekend. Katja, a white woman in her mid-30s and a graduate of Stellenbosch University's Sustainability Institute, with whom I had been liaising over email in order to arrange my visit to the class, introduced me to the teachers. "Everyone, this is Dayni, the girl I told you all about. She's going to be observing this week's lessons for her university research to see... what was it you were doing your research on again?" She trailed off, frowning at me. I replied with a mumble. I had not expected to be put on the spot in front of a room of strangers. With all the teachers now watching me expectantly, I clumsily gave them a brief summary of my research questions (not fully knowing what these were myself at this stage). "So, are you studying to be a teacher then?", Lisa asked. I explained that my field was not education, but anthropology, and vaguely described what that meant. "Well," Bianca replied primly, "it could be useful to get some outside feedback on how our lessons are going and what we could do differently". I cringed at this because I did not want the educators to see me as some sort of efficacy auditor. Although the teachers generously included me in their conversations and treated me as a volunteer in their classes that week, I do not think that I completely managed to fully dispel their suspicion that I was there to judge and report on them.

Among the teachers in the class that morning was Anzio, the Smart Living course coordinator. During term time, Anzio's job was to visit schools to teach the mobile Smart Living lessons, but during school holidays, he became the Smart Living holiday course coordinator and facilitated many of the on-site lessons at the TOA. Another teacher, Wandi was one of the only Black female Aquarium teachers on staff. She was in her 30s, and had moved to Cape Town from the Eastern Cape. In non-profit organisation (NPO) parlance, Wandi seemed to 'wear many hats', as she was often on the road helping the outreach teams, coordinating her own outreach projects, and also teaching classes of visiting school groups during term time at the Aquarium. Bianca, one of the senior teachers on-site, was a middle-aged Coloured woman who used to be a teacher at a high school in Cape Town before she came to work at the Aquarium. She still exuded the air of authority that all seasoned teachers have,

and which all the other younger teachers respected. The last teacher at the table, Lisa, was a young Coloured woman, who would be facilitating some of the course's lessons.

Katja invited me to take a seat at the table as the teachers began their morning meeting. Soon after I sat down, three young volunteers and class helpers arrived, all white and a few years younger than me. Samantha and Caitlin were both 17 years old and attended a private international school in the southern suburbs. They were volunteering during their vacation as part of a job-shadowing project at school. Taylor was in her second year of her BSc Oceanography degree at the University of Cape Town, and as I got to know her over the coming week, I found out that she enjoyed volunteering with environmental organisations in her spare time, and regularly took part in beach clean-ups and tree planting days. Taylor was also an eco-influencer¹⁷ who promoted a waste-free¹⁸ lifestyle on her Instagram account. She had several thousand followers. Taylor later told me that she often did talks at schools in the city and was sponsored by several sustainability-focused brands, whose products she posted about on her social media accounts.

Each of the tables in the classroom were large and could seat six students. Pictures of various marine animals were stuck on the walls while aquarium tanks filled with small live pajama sharks, anemone and starfish lined the walls. Shelves were laden with an array of desiccated marine life; empty crab shells, shark jaw bones and dried seaweed (see Figure 15). Hanging from the ceiling was a surfboard with a distressingly large set of tooth marks embedded into the foam, which the surviving surfer had signed and donated to the classroom. Large windows looked out on an incredible view of the Waterfront, with its trendy artisanal food and crafts market, touristy Ferris wheel, and Table Mountain looming in the background.

¹⁷ A person who has a large social media following and who posts about environmental issues on social media.

¹⁸ A lifestyle that rejects plastic of all kinds, but particularly single-use plastic packaging, and which encourages reusing items. It is such a popular lifestyle choice that some stores in Cape Town now offer biodegradable or reusable alternatives to plastic and offer 'waste free' shopping services, for example, where customers can bring and fill their own containers rather than purchase items contained in single-use packaging.



Figure 15: Examples of marine biodiversity decorated the Aquarium classroom's shelves, walls and ceiling Source: Photograph by the author. (2018).

As the meeting got underway, Bianca gave instructions to the teachers and volunteers, (myself included), and handed out a printed itinerary which outlined the week's schedule to each of us. At this point, a middle-aged grey-haired man wearing a smart collared shirt stealthily entered the classroom and stood next to the table without saying a word. The staff all went quiet. "Morning Russel", Wandi said, and everyone else also murmured their greetings. "Don't mind me, I'm just checking in...big week this week, big group of kids coming", he said pensively, casting his eyes around the room. "I think it's one of the biggest group of kids that we've had", replied Bianca. Russel, who I later learnt was the head of the TOA education department, congratulated Anzio on getting through all the children's applications (see Chapter 4), remarking wryly, "That must have been loads of fun". "Yes, let's just say lots of interesting ones...", replied Anzio, grinning.

In this chapter, I focus on the TOA's on-site Marine Science courses that teachers like Katja, Lisa, Bianca, Wandi and Anzio taught to school children during school holidays for free. My research took place in the TOA's Smart Living Class, where approximately 50 grade seven children from very different backgrounds joined to learn about conservation and sustainability topics. In this chapter, I pay particular attention to their differentiated experiences of the Smart

Living Class using the theoretical insights of education and gender scholars who have worked on the “hidden curriculum” in schools.

The TOA Marine Sciences Academy

The TOA Education Foundation offered a number of educational opportunities for school children in the City. Apart from offering science classes for the children who were visiting the Aquarium on fieldtrips with their schools, and mobile outreach lessons to schools in disadvantaged areas of the City (see Chapter 5), it also ran week-long courses during school holidays at the TOA as part of its Marine Science Academy. These courses were for school children who were between grades six and twelve (approximately ages eleven to eighteen) and were held between two and three times a year. The TOA’s marketing material for these courses made it clear that these were not simply holiday courses, but prestigious academic ones. Many of the TOA’s online posts about recently completed or upcoming marine science holiday courses suggested that attending them could potentially unlock academic and career opportunities for participants in the sciences.

In keeping with the idea of an academy, the Aquarium’s holiday courses were comprised of different levels, which were designed to complement the national school curriculum and what the children were learning in their respective grades at school. Each course was designed to build on those that preceded them and the children were encouraged to reapply and return each year. The first course, called the Junior Biologist course, was aimed at grade sixes. The Smart Living¹⁹ course, which was the one that I attended for my research period, was focused on teaching grade seven students about conservation and sustainability topics. The grade eight course was called the Marine Science Discoverer course. The TOA described this course as “ideally suited to Grade 8 learners who have an interest in marine life and science and who are considering this as a future career path” (Anon, 2018: 13). The grade nine course was called the Marine Science Explorer course, and information about it was described with very similar wording as the grade eight one.

In the TOA online marketing, the grade ten Young Biologist course was described as a course that allowed students who were “committed to the marine environment and positive action” to volunteer at the Aquarium on weekends after they completed the course (Anon, 2019b). Another post on the TOA website described it as a “jumpstart [to the students’] marine

¹⁹ The TOA’s Smart Living courses were financially supported by the City of Cape Town during my fieldwork period.

careers” (Koumbatis, 2019). The blog post also heralded the value that this volunteer work experience could add to the students’ resumes, and mentioned that many past students of this course had gone on to study oceanography or marine biology at university. Finally, the prestigious grade 11 and 12 Oceanography and Zoology FET (Further Education and Training) courses were offered to 50 students in total. It comprised “two five-day academic courses offered to Grade 11s and 12s who are considering studying marine sciences at a tertiary level” (Koumbatis, 2019). The blog post about this final course also noted that the TOA had to sift through a high volume of applications and “turn down those applicants whose school exam results indicated that they would simply not be able to keep up with the fast academic pace” of the course. The message was clear; the TOA courses were academically rigorous and competition to secure a place was stiff.

The TOA’s aspirational marketing of their courses as stepping stones to prestigious careers in the natural sciences was clearly very effective. Over the course of my research in the Smart Living classroom, I was struck by the frequency with which students from all backgrounds who had joined the course described it in remarkably similar terms that the TOA marketed it. In a conversation with two Coloured girls from a school in Mitchells Plain on the Cape Flats, for instance, the twelve-year-old children told me that they had high hopes that the course would open up career opportunities for them. Aqhama told me that she “really want[ed] to be a conservationist or an environmentalist” when she grew up, and thus had joined in the Junior Biologist course the previous year after her class teacher had told her about it. Zeenith, her friend, added that she too had been motivated to join the course because she wanted to become a marine biologist. She told me that she would love to work with the sea animals every day like the Aquarium staff. Kayla and Lucy, two white students who attended private schools in Constantia and Paarl, respectively, echoed similar sentiments about the course. Lucy said she joined because she wanted to decide whether she wanted to pursue a career as a marine biologist or scientist after school. Kayla told me that she applied to the course because she wanted to learn *more* than the “basics” that were taught in her school science lessons. She said, “I find that a lot in class, that we get bored because they don’t do in-depth about climate change and environmental stuff ... So those of us who do care [about the environment] need to find programmes like this to learn more”. Kayla noted that she did not even mind missing out on her vacation because she saw the opportunity as one she could not afford to miss, “there will always be more holidays, but this was a really good opportunity for me”.

Other children on the course shared the sentiment that education and future opportunities were intertwined and that their education at the TOA would lead to fulfilling

careers in marine biology or adjacent fields, adventurous lifestyles and, in the case of the Kayla, the power to save the environment.

The hidden curriculum

In this, the children who attended the course shared in the mainstream social perception of the education system in which a “good education = good job, good money, good things” (Gatto, 1992: 66; cf. Fenning & May, 2013). However, social scientists have long shown that schooling in a capitalist system did not always equate to equal economic success – or social mobility – for everyone (Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Gatto 1992).

Influenced by Bourdieu’s (1974) work on class and education, scholars working on education first used the term “the hidden curriculum” to highlight the ways in which social inequalities persisted and were reinforced in schools despite common beliefs that education could promote social mobility. Giroux (1983: 47) described the hidden curriculum as the “unstated norms, values, and beliefs embedded in and transmitted ... through the underlying rules that structure the routines and social relationships in school and classroom life”. Jane Martin (1976: 136) distinguished the hidden curriculum from what she called the “curriculum proper” as the “contrast ... between what it is openly intended that students learn and what, although not openly intended, [students] do, in fact, learn”. Thus Paul Willis (1977) first showed how English schools socialised working-class “lads” into working-class jobs, reproducing the working class rather than effecting social mobility. From a critical theory perspective, David Gillborn (1992: 58), showed how American students were taught “powerful lessons about the second-class citizenship of [B]lack people”. Gillborn (1992: 58) also noted that while the “educational system[] continue[s] to operate in racially structured ways such that [B]lack people tend to experience them in more negative ... ways than their white peers”.

While Martin (1976); Willis (1977); Giroux (1983) and Gilborn (1992)’s hidden curriculum referred to the working of the social setting of a school and the distribution of cultural capital, later critical race theorists asserted that the hidden curriculum was not just structural, but cultural and interpersonal and as such, was invisible and often worked “unknowingly” to “maintain the marginal position and subordination” of students of colour (Jay, 2003: 4). In this tradition, a number of critical scholars have laid bare how the hidden curriculum marginalised LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex) students (Carpenter & Lee, 2010) and students who were not neurotypical (Sulaimani & Gut, 2019) despite stated goals that embrace diversity. Since the education system *unthinkingly* and

unknowingly subscribes to certain expectations, norms and values, some learners either fit in, “like a fish in water” or feel alienated by the school environment (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Since the academic content of school curricula often reflect middle-class values and expectations, children from privileged backgrounds generally perform better academically than those from disadvantaged ones (Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012). Many authors have suggested that in this regard, middle-class and affluent students are typically better equipped with the right social tools to thrive in class (due to better being able to conform to these “invisible” expectations), while working-class children often fall behind.

As Bowles and Gintis (1977) have posited, educational systems often reward the “right” type of personality, and to this end, family wealth and race are important determinants of school success. In the South African context, where the legacy of apartheid means that class still largely maps onto race, many Black and Coloured disadvantaged children experience “alienation and indifference” (Shaw, 2020: 22) in the classroom. I did not expect to find this pattern in the TOA classrooms because although the programme was loosely based on the official school curriculum, it was *not* school. The programme was offered with the intention of encouraging an interest in the ocean and conservation that the children already seemed to profess, and there seemed little reason to rank the children academically. As scholars have commented, the potential of learning experiences in zoos is related to the fact they are offered in an *informal* and *unstructured* manner, rather than a structured traditional schoolroom setting (Carr & Cohen, 2011). Therefore, I was both surprised, and interested to find that the TOA had elected to mimic the rigours of the formal school environment in their own classes.

A class dichotomy

The process of applying and getting accepted into the TOA holiday course was no easy feat for the many ambitious children who were interested in “unlocking” the opportunities which the course promised in its marketing. Anzio explained that prior to the start of all the TOA’s Marine Science courses, the TOA would contact several schools on their database to inform them about the course, asking teachers to nominate two suitable candidates from each appropriate grade. Upcoming courses were also advertised on the TOA’s social media accounts and website. The requirements differed between the various courses, but in general, the children had to meet the requirements of both “showing leadership skills and an interest in natural sciences” (as stated on the Smart Living course’s application form) and having a grade average of over 50%. Class teachers had to sign off on the submitted application form to confirm that applicants met these

requirements. For the Smart Living course, the children were also asked to write a motivational letter to the TOA in which they explained why they were interested in joining the course and saving the environment and what “environmental actions” they would undertake after the course was completed (see Chapter 4). The children were asked to return to the TOA classroom a month after the course was over to do a presentation with their peers and parents as audience on these activities. It was only after the presentations that they would receive their completion certificates. The applications *also* had to include a recommendation letter written by the children’s teacher or principle. Once accepted to the course, children were expected to keep up with daily homework assignments, and to study and revise the content of the work in preparation for tests which the children had to write each morning and each afternoon of the course.

When I asked Anzio about the selection process, he told me, with a wry grin, that it was often an immense task to work through the children’s applications and motivational letters prior to a course. He explained that there were always a few schools that would give their students the wrong information about what to write. Some teachers, he told me, even “misread” the TOA’s instructions and simply did not include motivational letters with the applications at all. For instance, he said, some schools had in the past invited their entire grade or class to write letters and apply, instead of only one or two nominated students. He said that the consequent avalanche of applications made his job very difficult. Anzio did not name the errant schools, but it was clear that they were all in less privileged areas of the City, where schools are known to be under-staffed, underfunded and under-resourced (Shaw, 2020).

Anzio inferred that there were also great disparities in the quality of applications from students that had applied to attend the course. Children from less privileged schools were less likely to be given the same help with writing “good” letters as children from more affluent schools, while teachers in semi-private or private schools had the time to write detailed letters of support, and parents of these privileged students often got involved in the application process. Since many of the privileged children’s parents were highly motivated to get their children into the TOA course, the resultant letters were compelling, contained very few grammar and spelling mistakes, and were written with an impressive vocabulary. Anzio told me that these motivated parents also often went out of their way to send irate emails to the TOA, inquiring why their children had not been selected to join the course, and pleading for their child to be chosen.

In contrast, parents of children from disadvantaged backgrounds hardly ever contacted him in the same manner, and evidently did not help their children much with their applications

(see Chapter 4). Anzio also mentioned that because many Black and Coloured children in Cape Town only spoke English as a second or third language, he surmised that writing lengthy motivation letters also presented a challenge for these students. Aware of the disparities in the applicant pool, Anzio maintained that the quality and content of the application letters did not really sway him, and that he always just tried to select an equal number of students from different areas and schools across the City.

Despite Anzio's conscious attempts to even out the playing field in the application process, I noticed that on the Smart Living course where I often helped the teachers to take attendance, considerably less than half of the 50 children on the list were from disadvantaged schools in the City. Of these children, most were Coloured, and there were very few Black children enrolled. Further, on the first day of classes, I noticed that there were already two names crossed off the list, and that both children who had dropped-out were from disadvantaged schools. When I asked Bianca why she thought they had not showed up, she replied that this was a common occurrence before all their courses. As she explained, underprivileged parents often realised "at the last minute" that they were not going to be able to commit to drive their children to and from the Aquarium every day. Bianca then lamented,

It's really unfortunate that we can't prevent that from happening. We try our best to make the courses free and available to all kids from all backgrounds but then the ones from the poorer areas do sometimes pull out or are absent ... and their parents haven't contacted us that they aren't coming. It's frustrating because we only have a few spots available on the course and then some kids don't show up and those spots are wasted.

A stipulation of the courses was that the children had to be able to get to and from the Aquarium every day of the course, as the TOA offered no transport to the enrolled students. The children's parents also had to agree to bring them back to the Aquarium one month after the course so that the children could do a presentation about the environmental activities that they had completed after the course, as well as to attend the prizegiving ceremony which happened afterwards, where the children would receive their certificates. Due to the spatial legacy of apartheid segregation, many students from disadvantaged areas of Cape Town, particularly the Cape Flats, lived more than an hour's drive away from the Waterfront. Few people in these areas owned private cars, while public transport was often unreliable, slow, and expensive in relation to a typical family earnings in the area. Cars, for families that could afford them, were used to get adults to work rather than to ferry children to extra-curricular activities. For these

students, transport to and from the TOA would have been a major hurdle in their attendance of the course.

In addition to the lack of transport, the TOA did not provide any lunch for attending children. While the Aquarium provided an urn of water and juice, and a bowl of biscuits as a snack during break times, the children were expected to bring packed lunches from home each day. Further, the TOA staff did not allow students to leave the classroom area during their lunch period to walk around the Aquarium or buy food from the Waterfront food stores, which I presumed was due to safety concerns.²⁰ In any case, sandwiches at these stores and the upmarket *Bootlegger* restaurant located inside the Aquarium typically cost close to R100, something that few disadvantaged students could afford. This may have provided an additional financial stress for the most disadvantaged children (and their parents) who attended the course.

The disadvantaged children who made it into the Smart Living classroom despite these “invisible” challenges were powerfully confronted, perhaps for the first time, with their marginal socio-economic positions during their interactions with their peers who were from evidently more privileged backgrounds. I overheard one conversation between two students on the course that powerfully illustrated this. Aimee, a Coloured girl from a school next to Elsie’s River on the Cape Flats, was getting to know her desk-mate Jessica, a blonde, white girl from Langebaan.²¹ Aimee asked Jessica, rather incredulously, how her parents could drive all the way from Langebaan every day to drop her off for the course. Jessica replied in a nonchalant tone that her parents had rented a hotel room at the Radisson Blu²² for the whole family for the week, so that they could be close to the Aquarium for her to complete the course. When Jessica in return asked Aimee how she got to the Aquarium every day, Aimee replied that she and her dad got up early and drove over an hour to get to the TOA in the mornings. He then dropped her at the Aquarium at 7.30am and drove back to Kuils River so that he could be at his job by 9am. Her mother then had to fetch her after the course each day, completing a similar three hour round-trip.

Even at home, it was clear that the experiences of children from privileged families were very different to those of disadvantaged children when it came to the kinds of support they received from their families regarding the course, and on a broader level,

²⁰ South Africa has extremely high crime rates; a fact which has created a culture of hyper-awareness around enforcing safety and security measures, particularly around children and in schools, stemming from concerns for children being kidnapped, sexually abused or murdered- all of which are common occurrences in South Africa.

²¹ Langebaan is a seaside community on the West Coast of South Africa, an approximately two-hour drive from the Cape Town CBD.

²² A four-star hotel near the Waterfront with rooms costing upwards of R2000 per night for a two-bedroom suite.

environmentalism as a concept. For instance, when I spoke to Aqhama and Zeenith, I learned that they had attended the previous year's TOA course after "convincing" their parents to let them enroll. However, when I asked how their parents felt about implementing the sustainable practices they were learning on the course, the girls told me that their parents were "not interested" in what their daughters had to say. Aqhama laughed and said, "my parents send me to bed early just to get me to stop talking about it, they just don't want to know". Zeenith added, "and my mom is just like ja, ja, ja, OK just go away now". Aqhama continued, "It doesn't matter how much we talk or how much we are interested in it and try share with them, they are always just like ja OK, but they don't really listen. They think it's just something for children to be interested in". Aqhama complained that she struggled to get her parents to listen to her about her interest in the environment, "When you talk to them and tell them things, and then ask what you just said then they say they don't know. I'm the only one that likes nature in my family".

In contrast to Aqhama and Zeenith's parents, several girls from more privileged backgrounds described their positive experiences of sharing with their families what they had learned on the course. When I first asked Anke, from a private school in Paarl, why she had wanted to join the course, she said that it was actually her mother who had "pushed" her to apply for the course when she was at first unsure about it. Jessica, from the affluent neighbourhood of Kommetjie, told me that she knew she had to join the course after her sister had done it the year before her and enjoyed it, and then her mother had helped her with the application because "she wanted me to apply early to make sure I got in". When I asked the girls whether they felt their parents had been supportive of their environmentalism, and what they had learned on the course, the girls both told me that their parents were enthusiastic about it. Lucy, from Tygerberg said, "It was easy for me because my mom is an environmental auditor, so she loves this stuff. We want to start making our home more eco-friendly too, because I have twin brothers, so we want them to learn from a young age ... and not teach them the bad stuff [environmental habits]". Jessica said that ever since her older sister had completed the course, she had shared what she learned with the family, and since then they had all tried to make positive environmentally friendly changes at home.

The distinct differences between how the privileged and disadvantaged children's parents engaged with their children regarding the course, and their children's interest in environmentalism reflects what Lareau (2003: 747) called the "invisible inequality" in the classroom. According to Lareau (2011: 3), social class inequalities influenced parental engagement in education. She argued that middle-class families actively fostered the

development of their children's skills, interests, and behaviours, adopting “strategies of concerted cultivation”, actively facilitating their children’s learning experiences, disadvantaged children were left with a sense of distance [and] constraint in their institutional experiences”. Lareau’s analysis takes its cue from Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1974) and his theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu held that middle-class parents instilled in their children behaviours, styles, and knowledge that were rewarded by educational institutions while students from lower social classes who did not have this capital were less successful, and often adjusted their aspirations as they ran up against unfamiliar cultural norms. In the process, educational institutions reproduced social inequality (Lareau & Lamont, 1988; cf. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Just as middle-class students benefitted from the French educational system, so did middle-class students in the South African education system (Gillies, 2005) – and in the TOA classroom²³.

Teaching ‘class’

The TOA staff were acutely aware that students who applied for their holiday courses came from very different socio-economic backgrounds but believed that not charging a fee for the course was *enough* to make it accessible to disadvantaged students. When students from disadvantaged backgrounds often dropped out of the course or were absent, the teachers expressed their frustration that a spot on the course had been “wasted”, and that it could have gone to another student who would have perhaps showed up for the lessons. None of the teachers mentioned transport or financial issues as perhaps hindering participation in the course and framed dropouts in terms of disadvantaged parents’ inconsiderateness, a failure to communicate and a carelessness that was hard to fathom precisely because it impacted on the opportunities of other imagined students who would have made better use of the opportunity. The TOA teachers thus not only made assumptions about the *economic* abilities of parents to meet the transport, food and time demands of the course, but also inferred that these children did not have the appropriate “feel for the game” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 128). The expectation that parents had to inform the TOA whether their child would attend the course mapped onto norms that were not universal. Indeed, anthropologists have long pointed out that RSVPing to events in southern Africa was an elite norm (see Pauli, 2011: 153-167; Pauli & Dawids, 2017; Solway, 2016).

The supposed “waste” of a spot on the course not taken up by a disadvantaged student was heightened by the teachers’ shared belief that the holiday courses offered disadvantaged students, unlike their more privileged peers, *more* than just an educational opportunity. As teacher Lisa said, the course offered children from disadvantaged areas opportunities to “access nature”, a developmental opportunity ordinarily unavailable to such students due to financial constraints. As she explained,

I wish that more kids from marginalised areas could at least do aquarium tours with their schools, or families, but living in a segregated city means that many kids can’t visit because of financial constraints ... Many kids don’t have opportunities to access nature in their everyday lives. Some students who come here on these courses can’t even afford to pay school fees, and those schools in particular do not have the funding to send kids on outings or camps. For some kids, the outings that they go on in this course are the first time that they’ve been to those environments.

Lisa’s views were widely shared among the other teachers who hoped that the TOA could expand its capacity to offer its holiday courses more often, and to *more* disadvantaged students.

A middle- class environmentalism

The Smart Living course was heavily focused on encouraging “action” amongst their students. Every one of the lessons that I observed was focused on encouraging the students to implement sustainable changes in their everyday lives. The teachers constantly told students that they should practice what they learnt on the course, and that they hoped the children would take the lessons home to share with friends and family. However, many of these lessons required very specific infrastructures to be in place in the children’s homes for these environmental practices to be implemented. On a fieldtrip to the Greenpoint Biodiversity Garden, for example, students learnt about the ways in which wildlife could be “invited” into home gardens through the introduction of a “wildlife pond”, “quiet” areas created through dense planting, and by building a stone wall in which insects could nest. This lesson, of course, assumed that each learner had a garden at home, that they could invest in plants, ponds and walls and that they had piped water to care for these improvements. Another lesson involved teaching the students how they could save electricity or water at home, by using energy-saving lightbulbs, purchasing solar panels, taking shorter showers and reusing shower water to flush their toilets and water their gardens. The children also filled out a worksheet where they had to “tick off” which off these

activities they did at home in order to calculate their “carbon footprint”; their score then revealed how “carbon friendly”²⁴ they were. These lessons assumed that all the learners had access to the city’s electricity and water grids- and could afford expensive gadgets and appliances at home, such as washing machines, family vehicles, and special lightbulbs and faucets- as was evident too, in the children’s Smart Living class workbook (see Figure 16 and Figure 17).



Figure 16: Picture in the TOA Smart Living Course class workbook highlighting ways to save water at home (2018)

²⁴ Being carbon friendly means relying less on fossil fuels, and emitting less greenhouse gasses i.e., by using solar electricity at home, using public transport or purchasing an electric car.

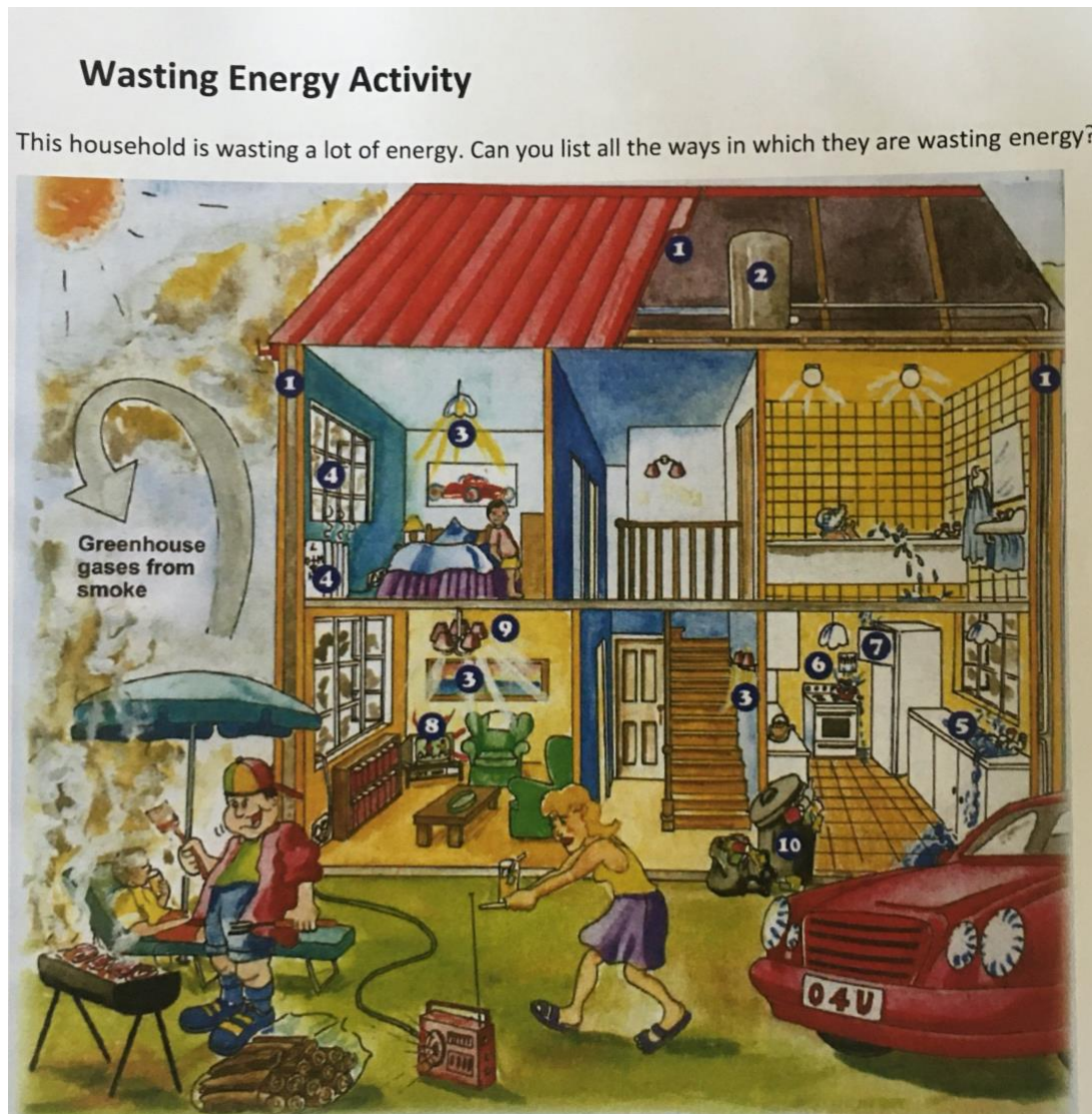


Figure 17: Picture in the TOA Smart Living class workbook highlighting ways people waste energy at home (2018).

The TOA's environmental lessons deployed heavily emotive language to underscore the importance of students and their families making these environmental changes to their lifestyles. For instance, to emphasise the importance of eliminating single-use plastics in order to prevent ocean pollution, the teachers showed various images of the Aquarium's rescue turtles which were harmed by straws and plastic bags (see Chapter 2). I noticed that many of the learners became visibly distressed at seeing these images. These lessons were followed by a short presentation by Taylor, a class volunteer and eco-influencer, who spoke to the class about her journey to embrace a "waste-free lifestyle". Beyond recycling and disposing waste "responsibly", Taylor described shopping at particular "zero waste" shops where she decanted ingredients into the glass jars and cloth bags she brought along, and purchasing bamboo toothbrushes, reusable water bottles and stainless steel straws. These lessons echoed the

Aquarium’s own various environmental campaigns regarding plastic, including ‘*Straws Suck*’, ‘*Rethink the Bag*’, and ‘*Balloon Busters*’ (see Figure 18). Posters for these environmental campaigns covered many of the walls around the Aquarium. Chao (2020: 41-43) called the TOA’s version of environmentalism “mainstream” or “first world” environmentalism, a form of environmentalism that centered on shifting consumption patterns to more sustainable choices.



Figure 18: Collage of several TOA environmental campaigns. Source: TOA (2017).

While very impactful and galvanising of students’ commitment to eliminate plastic, none of the lessons or campaigns contained discussions about waste disposal for those who were not serviced by the city’s refuse collection. The assumption seemed to be that everyone in the class (and those reading the campaign posters) had access to municipal waste collection services. The course workbook, given out to all the children in the class, supported this by stating that “Waste collection is performed by the municipality within a given area”. On another fieldtrip, this time to the Kraaifontein Integrated Waste Management Facility (KIWMF), a staff member told the students that if they did not have recycling collection services at home, the children should separate their recyclables at home and drop it off at the site with their families, which again, assumed the children all had access to a family car, or the time to make a weekly trip to a local recycling facility.

In 2014, Karl Buckton did a short survey of the City of Cape Town’s Smart Living Campaign and conducted an analysis of several businesses in the City who had asked their employees to implement Smart Living “sustainability” practices at home. These practices were

similar to those that the children were encouraged to implement during the Smart Living course at the TOA; employees were encouraged to recycle, to switch to energy-saving lightbulbs, and to save water. Buckton (2014) found that many of the economically disadvantaged employees complained that their “environmental behaviour” was constrained both by economic limitations and by the fact that in the areas where they resided, there was a lack of available facilities and support. They were unable to recycle because facilities were far away and they did not have private transport, nor could they afford the energy-saving lightbulbs that the city recommended. Some did not have access to the electricity grid at all (Buckton 2014: 48). In a very similar manner, the TOA assumed that all the enrolled students and their families had the ability to make the practical changes that were taught in class and overlooked how some of these practices required middle-class privileges and incurred costs that were beyond many disadvantaged children’s household budgets.

Buckton’s (2014) finding, that the City’s Smart Living environmental activities demanded certain middle-class infrastructures (which not every employee had access to), became visible in my own findings when the children returned to the TOA classroom one month after the course to do their presentations on the two “environmental activities” they had completed. It was clear that some of the class had faced challenges in implementing the environmental lessons they had learned on the course at home, and that these were predominantly children from disadvantaged backgrounds. For instance, Uzair, from a neighbourhood on the Cape Flats, said that he had decided to donate bins, with the help of his parents, to a few of his neighbours so that they could begin recycling. Uzair complained that while he had spoken to three separate households on his street about the importance of recycling, they had all given excuses as to why they were not interested; the special recycling bags were too expensive, they did not have the time to drop off their recycling at the depot, and the drop-off site was too far away. Uzair told the class that in the end, after struggling to get his neighbours on board with his recycling initiative, he decided to rather donate the bins to his local mosque.

In contrast, many of the more privileged, white children had few problems with implementing their activities, which ranged from organising recycling drives at school, to organising litter clean-up events on beaches at their holiday homes (some of which were located across the country). One girl called Jessica organised a bike-to-school-day for her entire grade in Kommetjie. It was clear that while the privileged children had received overwhelming support from peers, family and their schools, some of the disadvantaged children had struggled to garner support for their projects. As Amaarah, from Mitchells Plain, illustrated in her

presentation, “I spoke to our school principle about starting an eco-club and recycling collection at school, but he just said he would ‘think about it’”. Without her principle’s and school’s support, Amaarah and her sister decided to pick up litter on a field near her home for her environmental activity.

The meritocracy myth

The invisible expectations that structured the Smart Living course was also at work in the way that the course was planned. One striking illustration of this was the course’s heavily reliance on assessments and academic competition to gauge the success of their program. While most of the teachers suggested that they thought testing was perhaps not the best way to, as Lisa said, “see what was in [the students] heads and hearts [regarding conservation]”, they nevertheless insisted that this was the only way to assess the children’s progress. Russel, who had designed all the course curriculums, told me that he felt that the biggest difficulty facing the field of environmental education was the challenge of “empirically measuring” the long-term efficacy of environmental education programmes, which included both their outreach classes and on-site holiday programmes. Ideally, he said, it would be great to monitor the children for years after the lessons, to gauge how they had been influenced by them, but that the large numbers of learners who attended the course made this impractical. Lisa overheard Russel’s comments on this and agreed that the TOA needed to measure the “effectiveness” of the course, but lamented that testing was often inaccurate. She said that “testing only tells us so much”, but that,

I just wish that there was a way to measure whether what we are teaching is actually affecting the kids on a deeper level. We get them to complete tests and surveys, but this does not reveal what is on their heads and hearts with regards to conservation ... kids may get full marks on their tests at the end of the week, but still [do unsustainable] things ... On the other hand, a child who does poorly on the tests may have taken everything to heart ... and even try teaching their family when they go home.

The Smart Living course was indeed heavy on testing. From the moment the learners first arrived in the classroom, they were told to pack away all their bags as they were being tested on their general knowledge before the course started. Lisa handed out the assessment papers and asked the class if anyone needed help with reading and writing. Only one girl, Hannah, put up her hand, and she went with Caitlin to an office in the back. The other

volunteers and I were put in charge of collecting and marking the tests according to a rubric and writing the scores next to the learners' names on the register. The first test did not count towards the students' final mark but was graded to gauge how much the children knew of the content before the course. On the final day, the learners were given the same test again so that the teachers could measure their improvement. Each morning of the course, the learners would be tested on the content of the lessons they had had the previous day, and learners' total scores from these tests would be tallied to determine what certificate they would receive at the end of the course's prizegiving in front of their family and peers. The certificates were graded from just a completion (under 50%), to bronze (50%-60%), silver (60-70%), gold (70%- 80%), platinum (80%-90%) or diamond (90%-100%).

Every morning the class helpers, myself and Taylor, Caitlin and Samantha, would sit in the corner of the class, marking piles of tests while the teachers continued with their lessons. Marking was time-consuming and repetitive work. Every now and again, one of the other volunteers would pass around a test paper in which a learner had written an amusing answer. This frustrated me because the kids knew we were marking their tests and were self-conscious about their performances. I noticed them watching us while the other volunteers giggled. The content of the course was extremely fast-paced and in a single day, the teachers covered multiple complicated concepts and terms. As time was limited, the teachers would often rush through their PowerPoint presentations in order to start the practical part of the lesson within the designated time. Some of the complicated concepts had long names that were difficult to spell, and when the teachers called for group work, such as the activity where learners had to work together to label a diagram of the water cycle, it was obvious that the students who were stronger at spelling, or could follow the lessons in their first language, took the lead while the ones who struggled with spelling stepped back.

By default, this meant that the first language English learners, who were predominantly white, took charge of the group activities. When I marked the learners' tests, I noticed that many did not have the vocabulary to match the words on the rubric. The younger volunteers rigidly stuck to the teachers' rubric and scored students who did not use the exact same words as the teacher with low marks. For example, one question on a test on the third day was about biodiversity. At one point, Samantha started sniggering and passed a test over to Caitlin. They both laughed. "Definitely not" Samantha said, giving the answer a cross. The question asked the learners to give an example of an endangered animal, and Mandla had written "rono" and drawn a tiny picture of a rhinoceros in the margins (see figure 19). Caitlin marked this wrong too, before Bianca told her to accept it.

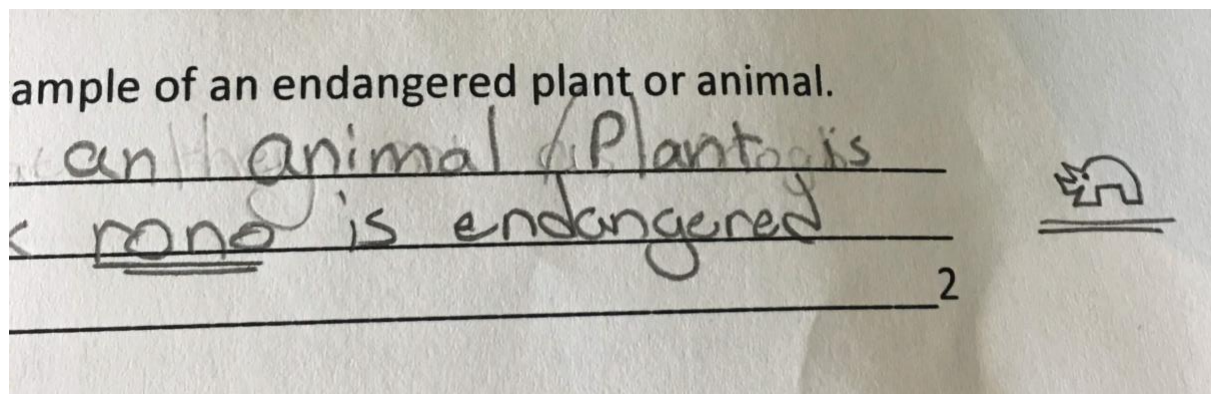


Figure 19: Picture of a Smart Living learners' test paper. Source: photograph by the author (2018).

This rigid adherence to the teachers' rubrics, and the inexperience of the volunteers, meant that children who struggled with English reading and spelling, who were predominantly from disadvantaged schools, did consistently worse in the tests than their first-language English classmates, and classmates who were from more resourced schools and areas of the City. After the first few tests, the teachers identified the children who were struggling. Bianca called their names near the end of the day and asked them to wait behind after class. I noticed that most of these learners were Black and Coloured. After the struggling students were identified, the teachers and volunteers began to take some of these learners out of the class during test period to rather read their tests out to them, writing their answers for them as well. It was obvious that some of these students were embarrassed at having been pulled aside and identified as struggling in front of their peers.

One month later, the children returned for a prizegiving ceremony with their parents in the audience to receive their completion certificates. The classroom was jam-packed with enthusiastic family members. The teachers called the children up to the front of the class, grouped according to their achievement level for an applause. Bianca read out the names, starting from the (visibly disappointed) students who had only received completion (under 50% average) certificates, and progressing on to students who had received the top marks and got diamond certificates. It was striking that most of the students who received the certificates of completion and bronze level ones were Black and Coloured- with the exception of a very few outliers. While there were certainly a small amount of white students who had been struggling throughout the course, and therefore who also received completion certificates and scores on the lower-end of the class (one white girl ran out of the room in tears after receiving a bronze certificate), the grouping of students according to academic achievement made it obvious that

it was predominantly the students of colour who had struggled most in class, while white students who came from more privileged backgrounds got, on average, better grades.

In his radical analysis of the hidden curriculum, John Gatto (2005), captured succinctly how the mechanisms of testing and grading leads to the production of students who internalised messages about themselves and their place in society. “The cumulative weight of these objective-seeming documents”, Gatto (2005: 5) argued,

establishes a profile that compels children to arrive at certain decisions about themselves and their futures based on the casual judgment of strangers... People need to be told what they are worth. Under this efficient discipline the class mostly polices itself into good marching order. That’s the real lesson of any rigged competition like school. You come to know your place.

And that place, as so many scholars working on the hidden curriculum has shown, is often raced and classed in ways that allow students of colour to internalise harmful beliefs about themselves as ‘less than’ when they compare themselves to their white peers, who often seem to have more success in the classroom (Portelli, 2006; Gillborn, 1992). As Giroux (1983: 47) noted, the education system sends out unintended messages to disadvantaged children about their place in society. While the TOA courses were designed to reward and praise children for their hard work, in many respects the courses relied on the “myth of a meritocracy”, a term first used by Bowles and Gintis (1977) in their Marxist analysis of the capitalist schooling system. The authors argued that the schooling system neither provided nor promoted upward mobility through one’s own merits, abilities and hard work but that it perpetuated inequalities, keeping the children of working-class parents working class, and ensuring that the children of bourgeois parents remain bourgeois.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at the TOA’s Smart Living Class, where approximately 50 grade seven children joined to learn about conservation and sustainability topics. While the TOA marketed their courses as prestigious academic undertakings that could unlock future opportunities for children who completed them, I have shown that children from different backgrounds had vastly different experiences of the course with students from disadvantaged backgrounds facing unique challenges in participating and achieving success in the course. I argued that these differentiated experiences were a function of the “hidden curriculum”, a concept that explains how the educational system’s unthinking embrace of middle-class

expectations, norms and values excludes children from other backgrounds. While the course creators and the teachers involved were assertive that they had made the course “free” to all residents of the Western Cape, it became clear that the content and learning outcomes of the TOA’s Marine Sciences courses evinced its (middle-class) hidden curriculum; this was also evident in the courses’ structure and educational goals.

Situating the Smart Living course within the analytical framework of the hidden curriculum allows for a better understanding of the TOA’s environmentalism, of the class biases involved, and the subtle ways in which underprivileged students might be excluded from the field of conservation- or internalise unintended messages about their place in the world and their place in conservation. This bias extended beyond the classroom walls, into their homes, where disadvantaged children found they could not participate in the requisite (overwhelmingly middle-class) environmental activities which the TOA advocated. These environmental activities comprised of a very specific framework of actions that required certain forms of new consumption; of recycling bags and bins, reusable tote bags, straws and cups, and rain tanks and solar panels. Moreover, to participate in this environmentalism, students needed to have access to middle-class infrastructures at home such as a connection to the electricity grid, refuse collection services, flushing toilets and working showers, and even family vehicles.

The next chapter will focus on the “interesting application letters” which Anzio and Russel discussed. In conducting a critical discourse analysis of these letters, I explore the myriad ways that the children who applied to the Smart Living course expressed their concerns for the environment in ways that mapped onto and escaped the class biases I outlined in this chapter.

Chapter Four: Discursive Environmental Imaginings

The application letters

“The back is not apart [sic] of it- we are reusing paper! ☺”, Georgia, a twelve year old student from Hout Bay, had scrawled at the bottom of her application letter to the Two Oceans Aquarium’s (TOA) Smart Living holiday programme (see figure 20). She had written her letter on the back of a printed sheet of paper, which seemed to have come from her parent’s home office. Georgia’s letter was just one of dozens of letters written by hopeful grade seven students from around the City in 2018, all of whom were vying for a spot on the TOA’s Smart Living Course.

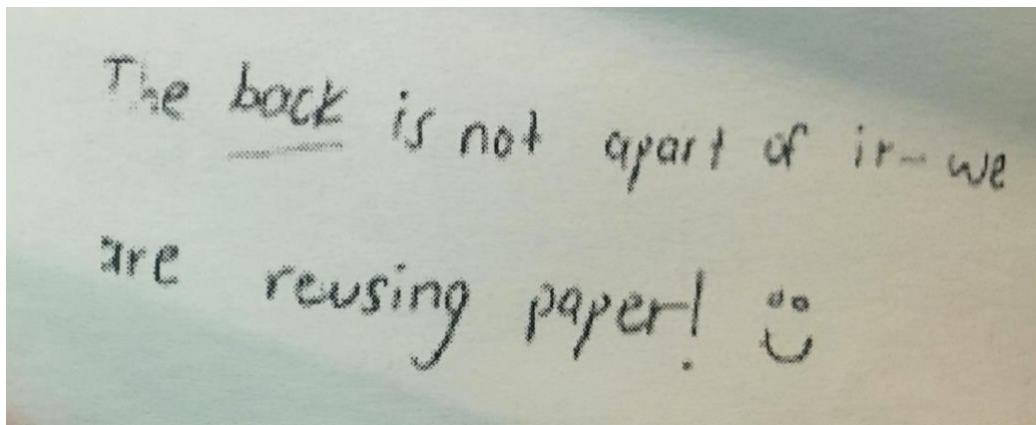


Figure 20: Georgia’s postscript to her application letter. (2018)

I first heard about these letters on my first day at the Aquarium when I overheard the teachers discussing them during their morning meeting (see Chapter 3). My interest was instantly piqued by this interaction, and after a few days I gathered the courage to ask Anzio if I could read them. Anzio kindly agreed to copy the digital file with all the letters to my flash drive so that I could study them at my leisure. “Enjoy!”, he added. I did not fully understand why Anzio’s job of reading through all the letters had become something of an inside joke between the teachers until I had a chance to read them for myself. Anzio had warned me that the children’s letters were often incredibly long-winded and went off topic, while many were hand-written and almost illegible. I immediately understood what he meant; while some read like university essays, clinically neat and well-researched, with added references to scientific facts and inspirational quotes, many were rambling, ‘stream of consciousness’-style stories scribbled in pencil over lined notebook paper, full of spelling errors and words scribbled in the

margins. I often had to squint at many poor quality photocopies of the handwritten letters to decipher them.

What was remarkable, however, was that although the letters had many material differences in quality, they also shared remarkable commonalities. For instance, nearly all the students had, like Georgia, tried to impress the reader with their breadth of knowledge of environmental facts and had boasted about their efforts to lead ‘green’ lifestyles at home. In many letters the children had rather slickly tried to flatter their readers by referencing their knowledge of the Aquarium’s own conservation efforts and stories, and asserting that the TOA had inspired them to embrace environmentalism. As Milly, from Rondebosch, wrote in her letter, “The Two Oceans Aquarium are [sic] offering the first steps to addressing [pollution], youth must be educated to brighten the future”, and Alyssa, from Tygervalley, who wrote “I was shocked to learn [...] how the plastic affects the turtles, especially how they ingest the plastic which makes them ill and they then need medical assistance and help from the Aquarium”. Beyond such rather instrumental ploys, the children’s letters also spoke of a deeply moral concern with a shared environmental crisis but also of very different ways in which they related to the natural environment.

In this chapter, I pay particular attention to the children’s application letters to the TOA’s Smart Living course, and look at what these letters reveal about the ways in which children across the city both share and differ regarding their collective imaginations about nature and the environment. I use the term “environmentality” to capture the nuanced ways in which the children’s letters seemed to be about more than just an *awareness* of environmental issues; their letters evinced deeply moral concerns and a desire to take action. Agrawal (2005) coined the term “environmentality” to refer to the creation of environmental subjects; people who *care* about the environment. Agrawal (2005: 226) suggested that conservation organisations influenced (and disciplined, in a Foucauldian sense) people to conceptualise nature as an object “that requires regulation and protection” and to act “toward care for the environment” (see also Cepek, 2011: 504). I argue that the children who applied to the Smart Living course had been subject to the kind of “environmentality” that Agrawal (2005) described, and that this disciplining force had a variety of sources and influences. In this chapter I explore these sources and their productions of “spectacular environmentalisms” (Brockington, Boykoff, Goodman & Littler, 2016; Igoe, 2010), and messages of “apocalypticism” regarding the state of the environment (Lewis, 2012: 13; Branston, 2016).

A shared world: Turtles, plastic and Sir David Attenborough

Grace, who was from a primary school in Constantia, began her application letter to the TOA with a quote by American anthropologist Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has”. She followed this quote with another, which I had seen in a meme²⁵ once circulating on social media, “Imagine a fish without water. Can it survive? Now imagine a world without trees. Can humans survive?” Grace ended her letter with a call to action, urging that “we” needed to do something to save the world before it was too late.

It was striking that almost all the children who applied to the course shared this imaginary, despite being from different parts of the city and from different communities. Their letters echoed Grace’s plaintive plea that we had to save nature and wild animals. These calls were in the register of extreme anxiety about an imagined future where this nature would be irredeemably ruined. The children wrote about the plight of nature with an overwhelming tone of personal urgency; often using words like “afraid”, “worried” and “scared” to describe their feelings about a future without nature. The ways that they articulated their concerns about one dire environmental issue after another - listing well-known, contemporary environmental issues in different areas of the globe- underscored their expansive, and rather dark, imaginations about the catastrophic future of the planet. The letter written by Daniel, who was from the seaside community of Strand, highlighted this grim imagination,

I am worried that the next generation of kids will not be able to experience nature the same way that I have. All over the world, nature is changing because of our lifestyle choices. The ice caps are melting, woods are being destroyed, endangered animals like rhinos in the Kruger National Park are being poached and great white sharks are being hunted.

Uzair, who was from Grassy Park on the Cape Flats, echoed a remarkably similar imagined future,

I am concerned about animals and I am afraid of the increased rate that humans are destroying the environment and extinction of species. Polar icecaps are melting because of global warming. Water pollution is contributing to the deaths of many marine animals. In India and China the air is so polluted people have to wear masks.

²⁵ An image, video or text, typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users.

In going through these letters, it was striking how the children's shared imagination around environmental ruin caused by humans expanded far beyond the confines of the City to a broader, planetary scale. For instance, Zaid, from Pelican Park on the Cape Flats, shared a long list of all the issues facing nature at the hands of human destruction in faraway lands,

All endangered animals problems are because of humans, manatees live quietly in small family groups in warm, shallow waters in the Caribbean feeding on sea grasses and water weeds. Young calves are at risk of being run down by speeding powerboats, and killed or injured by the propellers. orangutans feed mainly on fruits, shoots and leaves. Like others, too, they are at risk, because the forests are being cleared for timber, leaving less room for all the native animals. Young orangutans are sometimes sold as pets. Animals should live in their own homes and those homes should be protected and cared for.

What was fascinating about the children's shared concern for faraway landscapes and wild animals on land and sea was that almost all of them described human relationships with nature as antagonistic and destructive. In their letters, humans threatened nature, which was why most of the children called for humans to be excluded from nature to preserve it.

Environmental anthropologists have often described the socially constructed idea of an idyllic nature outside of the realm of humankind, often using the term "pristine nature" to demarcate this particular romantic construction of the natural world, particularly within the realm of conservation and environmentalist discourse. As Jason Moore (2017: 4) wrote, "Nature appears, in this same imaginary, as 'out there', somehow pristine and untouched. Nature becomes a fantasy of the wild, of pristine nature, awaiting our protection, fearing destruction at our hands". While this view of nature is often considered to be a Western construct, Anna Tsing (2005: 123) was startled to discover that even in remote Indonesia, an imagination of the fragility and "romance" of nature was overwhelmingly shared by her participants, and further, that this romantic vision of nature seemed to engender their interest in environmentalism. Thus, she argued, this imagination of beautiful and pristine nature can be understood as an overwhelmingly global one.

While Hutchins and Lester (2006: 436) suggested that environmentalism often arises to protect the "special places" from which people derive "meaning, pleasure and identity", it was clear that for many of the children, environmentalism and environmental care was not only rooted in the "special places" they had necessarily visited, holidayed in, or encountered tangibly in real life, but was also greatly inspired by a broad *imagination* about the beauty of

expansive wilderness, which many of the children saw as their responsibility to protect for future generations. In this regard, in voicing their concerns for manatees, orangutans, rhinos, sharks, turtles and polar ice caps, many of the children's letters referenced television and social media sources. Indeed, only a handful of children wrote about their material or 'real-life' encounters with wild animals or the threatened landscapes over which they were concerned. And yet, the threat to an imagined pristine nature was enough to inspire great concern, anxiety and fear.

In many instances, it seemed that the children constructed caring for and protecting pristine nature across the world as a *moral* responsibility entangled with their own wellbeing and sense of self. As Erin, from Kraaifontein, wrote, "Looking after the planet which is our home is also looking after ourselves ... we need to live in harmony with nature". Several children connected the conservation of pristine natural landscapes with maintaining their own spirituality and wellbeing. For instance, Hope, who was from Rylands on the Cape Flats, saw caring for, and maintaining "beautiful nature" as a spiritual practice which showed respect to God, "I would like to help my environment because God created beautiful nature and it is up to us to look nicely after the scenery God created for us". Jordan, from an affluent private school in Sea Point, equated living near nature with living a healthy lifestyle, "We live in a beautiful city. Cape Town has unpolluted air, and is gifted with Table Mountain, natural park and reserve, and its varieties of fynbos, proteas, and wild life. This City, this earth is Our Big Home [sic]. The varieties of plants, animals and other living things ... make it possible for us to enjoy a healthy lifestyle". In reading the myriad ways in which children from vastly different social and economic contexts seemed to share particular ideas about the dire global threats to nature, I wondered what precipitated this collective imagination about nature and the future. It is a question that has animated anthropological work on environmentalism for many decades.

Public knowledge and imagination about environmental issues has grown exponentially since the 1960s. This was in part due to the seminal imaginative work of writers such as Rachel Carson, whose *Silent Spring* was published in 1962. *Silent Spring* is often considered to have precipitated the modern environmental movement, by alerting people to the negative environmental effects of DDT,²⁶ a potent insecticide that had been used since World War II in American agriculture. However, with the rise of the digital age the question of *how* the public has come to know *what* about environmental issues has required new explanations.

²⁶ Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) is an insecticide used in agriculture. DDT and its related chemicals persist for a long time in the environment and in animal tissue.

Focusing on Cape Town, Ordit Ainslie (2002: 33) described the power of the media in shaping children's ideas about nature. She argued that,

Physically living away from some animals does not mean that [ideas about] the environment is conceptually undeveloped. Although personal experiences ... are not part of everyday life for many who live in Cape Town, alternative visual experience is available. Hundreds of children's books feature animals as the main or marginal characters; television programs educate some of the population about the natural environment of various species; school teaches children about animals as part of science studies; cyber space allocates room for an environment related discourse.

Two decades later, Ainslie's (2002) point was brought home for me when I realised just how many of the applicants made mention of the ways in which various media sources inspired both their reverence for nature and their passion for conservation. Imaan, who was from Mitchells Plain, for instance, wrote,

I have been inspired to protect the environment because of how beautiful it is, when I think of under the sea I picture all the colours and sea creatures living in harmony. Amazing documentaries inspired me and showed me the beauty of nature which sparked my passion and I am always glued to the screen to see more.

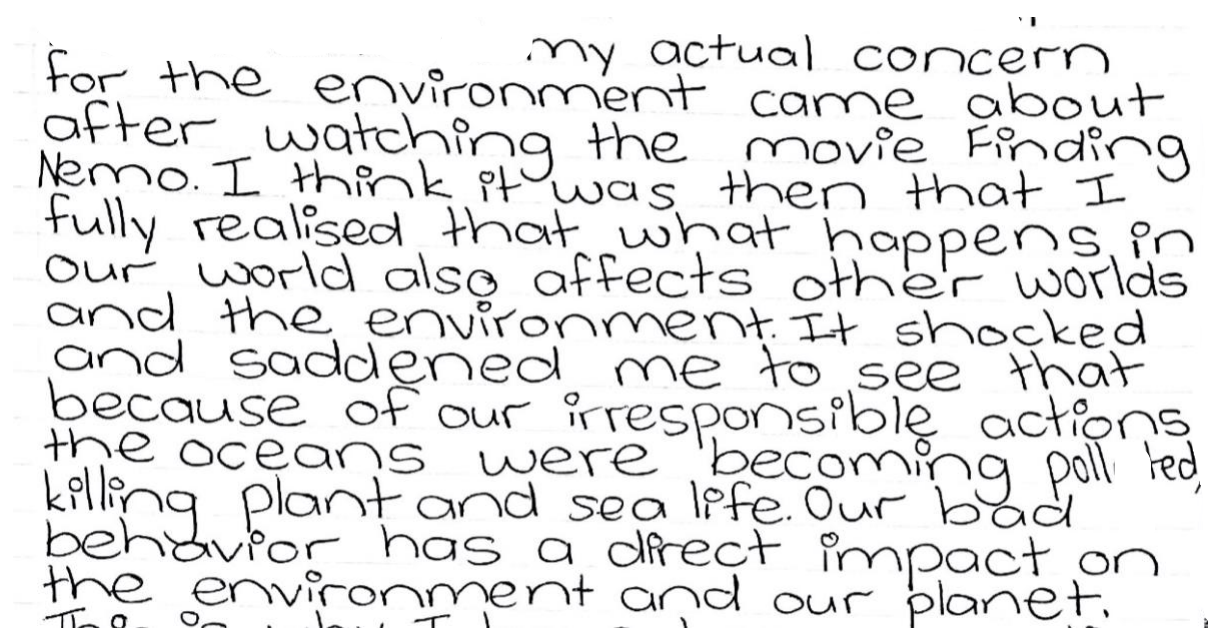
The children frequently mentioned environmental documentary channels such as the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet as sources of inspiration behind their environmental sensibilities and activism. Unsurprisingly, many of the children discussed how celebrity environmentalists had inspired their environmental awareness. In this regard, applicants often mentioned Sir David Attenborough - as one learner named Etienne, from Stellenbosch wrote,

My role model is David Attenborough because he has made an impact on raising awareness about pollution, deforestation and other environmental issues. He made me aware of how humans are destroying the environment and making animals extinct.

Layla, who was from Paarl, also cited the famous environmentalist as her inspiration, as well as the work of adventure author and editor-in-chief of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, Susan Casey,

Ever since I was a young girl, David Attenborough has been my role model and I wanted to be just like him when I grew up. I was absorbed in his documentaries and for a few years I watched nothing else. Susan Casey's book '*Voices in the Ocean*' also exposed me to how people mistreat the ocean, and dolphins in particular.

In her letter, Layla explained that it was through Attenborough's films that she "learned that mankind does not realise how important the natural world is". Layla also mentioned another viral documentary she had seen that had inspired her: "In one documentary I also learned that in Japan dolphins are gruesomely slaughtered and sharks are killed for their fins. I aim to change people's mindsets and make a difference". Even fictional environmental stories carried authority about the environmental crisis. Anya, from Wynberg, highlighted in her letter (see Figure 21) that she had become aware of environmental issues, and the human role within these issues, when she had watched the animated blockbuster film *Finding Nemo*:



my actual concern
for the environment came about
after watching the movie Finding
Nemo. I think it was then that I
fully realised that what happens in
our world also affects other worlds
and the environment. It shocked
and saddened me to see that
because of our irresponsible actions
the oceans were becoming polluted,
killing plant and sea life. Our bad
behavior has a direct impact on
the environment and our planet.

Figure 21: Extract from Anya's handwritten application letter. (2018).

Like many of the other children's letters, Anya and Layla's letters showed how morally compelling some of the media's depictions of environmental stories were. From reading these letters, it became clear that many of the children seemed to repeat the same environmental stories and tropes about protecting certain kinds of nature from particular threats; and that these stories mapped onto familiar media tropes about the environment. For instance, in their letters, the children's depictions of nature under siege were very similar to the ways that media

productions often framed majestic wild animals and scenic landscapes under siege from human destruction, with particular focus on the impact of plastic bags, straws and the like. As Erin, from Kraaifontein also wrote, “I hate seeing pictures of the beautiful environment ruined by pollution. People throw plastic bags into the ocean and turtles eat it thinking it’s a jellyfish”. This story, in particular, was repeated over and over again by the children as they described their concerns in their letters.

Interestingly, these media stories seemed to have expanded the children’s imaginations not only to a planetary scale, but also to a very individual one in which they imagined that their, and the actions of others, impacted directly onto the global health of “nature”. Thus the children were able to imagine the catastrophic consequences of, for instance, using a plastic straw or purchasing a single-use plastic bag as having a concrete, destructive effect far beyond their immediate environments.

A global imagination of spectacular doom

In Chapter 2, I discussed some of the ways in which the TOA’s circulation of stories and lessons about plastic and marine life on its social media pages spurred an imagined community into action. However, it soon became clear, as I read the children’s letters, that the TOA’s conservation marketing made up just one small part of a far broader conversation that almost all the children were engaging in on environmental issues. For instance, beyond mentioning the Aquarium’s own ‘turtle stories’ which viscerally highlighted the dangers of plastic, the children repeatedly mentioned *other* viral turtle stories they had learned about online. One YouTube clip in particular was mentioned by two applicants, Dylan, who was from Hout Bay, and Raziya, who was from Grassy Park. The clip featured a turtle biologist who had rescued and pulled a straw out of a turtle’s nose. Raziya wrote, “One day my dad showed me a video on the internet of a turtle with a straw up its nose, this made me realise how the carelessness of throwing something in the ocean can impact the marine life”. Dylan similarly wrote, “I recently saw a clip about how turtles are getting plastic straws stuck up their nose and eating balloons which can kill them”. The children’s letters repeated these stories about specific environmental threats in ways that were marked by a particular tone of urgency about a looming environmental apocalypse.

In Chapter 2, I suggested that the TOA’s mediascape formed part of what Jim Igoe (2010: 377) called “the spectacular productions of biodiversity conservation”. Reading the children’s letters drew my attention again to the notion of “spectacle”, and prompted a deeper

analysis of how *spectacles* in the media may have come to shape the children's imaginations about the environment. Guy Debord's classic 1967 Marxist text, *La société du spectacle* (The Society of the Spectacle) first drew attention to the concept of "mediated spectacles"; when he highlighted the role of media production in public ideology formation and commodity fetishization. Debord (1967: thesis 67) suggested that the spread of images by the mass media produced "waves of enthusiasm for a given product". While Anna Tsing (2005) did not specifically engage with Debord's work, her work built on his analysis of the spectacle by illustrating the "world making" power of the media in a rapidly globalising world, particularly as it related to environmental perceptions. In particular, she drew attention to global connections in environmental politics and the global "economy of appearances" which "dramatic performance has become an essential prerequisite of economic performance" (Tsing, 2005: 57). Anders Hansen (2010: 7) later linked the concepts of "spectacle" and "performance" by arguing that environmental communications hold "the power to define our relationship with nature and the environment and the power to define what the 'problem' with the environment is, who is responsible and what course of action needs to be taken". Drawing attention to the power of the media in framing how we think about environmental issues, he argued that "There is little or nothing that is 'natural' or accidental about the processes by which we as publics come to learn about and understand environmental issues or problems" (Hansen, 2010: 7). Hansen (2010: 7) further suggested that the very notion that there are environmental "issues" is a product of "active rhetorical work".

Other authors (Brockington, et al. 2016; Igoe, 2010) have echoed and furthered Hansen's (2010) argument by suggesting that much of what we *know* about the environment is constructed through spectacular environmental stories, images and messages shared through the mediascape. This mediascape increasingly shapes our understanding of what must be done to "solve" these issues; through political, normative and, importantly, "moralised" messages that "gesture towards the breath taking complexity of nature, the multiplicity of ecologies, of natural assemblages, of the infinite interdependence of our natural world and the relentless attack on this by people in the age of the Anthropocene" (Brockington et al., 2016: 678).

Many authors have used the term "apocalypticism" to describe the "sensibilities of loss, fear, and imaginings of doom" shared through mainstream environmental media (Lewis, 2012: 13 in Branston, 2016). In this, they have retrieved and built upon Debord's initial arguments about media spectacle, and showed how the rise of the internet allowed for the spectacle to expand to unprecedented proportions. Zygmunt Bauman (2007) for instance argued that as people increasingly interact with digital media, and less with real human beings, spectacle has

become more pervasive and definitive of people's lives. While such media spectacles were "less monolithic" (Brockington et al., 2016: 378) than under the conditions described by Debord in the late 1960s, they have opened up myriad opportunities for spectacular images to stir the public imagination about environmental precarity. This was certainly visible in the children's application letters to the TOA; they recognized a spectacularly doomed future for "nature" and wanted to do something about it.

The conservation of "specific values"

Despite all the commonalities in the ideas and anxieties that the applicants seemed to share, I noticed striking differences too. These differences clearly mapped onto broader issues of class and race, which were embedded within the historical inequalities of the City. In this regard, Elsemi Olwage (2013: 33) has suggested that nature conservation was often enacted as the conservation of "specific values". It is deeply entangled, she noted, with "the emotional and affective aspects of embodied experiences associated with an attachment to a particular emplaced nature" (Olwage, 2013: 33).

Such emotional attachments to specific "emplaced natures" were especially visible in the application letters from privileged children. In their letters, these children often described *direct* experiences in very specific spectacular or pristine natural spots, spaces and experiences to which they often felt entitled. For many of these children, their environmental concerns were clearly embedded in the wonderful experiences, enjoyment and sense of identity they derived from pristine nature spaces - which pollution and other environmental issues threatened to destroy. Because they wanted to protect the emotional and embodied connections they had with particular natures, these children wanted to conserve "nature". In a sense, conservation for these children could also be seen as "care for the self" (Olwage, 2013: 33). For instance, Hannah, who lived in an upmarket seaside neighbourhood called Llandudno, wrote, "I have lots of experience in the ocean, I have swam [sic] with seals, sharks, dolphins and sunfish and I want to be able to continue to experience beautiful sea life in the future". Even if these experiences had happened locally, rather than on a vacation abroad, and Hannah had gone diving in locations around Llandudno or off other beaches in Cape Town, which other, less privileged children in the city could technically also be able to access without paying an entrance fee, there were other factors at play which made this an activity reserved for those with privilege. For instance, swimming with dolphins and sharks would require Hannah to wear

an expensive wetsuit,²⁷ to have access to a motorised boat and diving gear and to have other experienced divers (perhaps pricey tour guides) looking out for boats and aggressive behaviour from these animals.

Matthew, who wrote from an expensive and exclusive private boys' school in the Southern Suburbs, explained that he was worried about nature being "ruined" before his children could experience the same "amazing" holidays as he had abroad,

I have gone on a holiday to a beautiful resort in Bali and saw the beautiful soft beaches and blue clear water. I am worried my children might not get to have those amazing holidays because of mass consumption of plastic. This will not only affect our holidays but also the animals that live on the beaches such as turtles. Many turtles have been rescued with plastic in their stomachs, like Bob and Yoshi the aquarium rehab turtles.

Mia, who lived in Langebaan near a lagoon, also wrote about becoming concerned about the environment after noticing "disgusting" litter while sailing on her family's yacht. Daniel, from Strand, also mentioned his concern for his outdoor activities, which were clearly a large part of his daily life, being affected by pollution: "I grew up around the oceans my whole life, swimming and surfing. I love the marine environment and it really upsets me when I visit the beach and it is flooded with rubbish".

Environmental heroes and environmental villains

Protecting the environment was so entangled with identity and a particular "moral economy" (Fassin, 2009: 15 in Malier, 2021: 8) for many of the privileged children that few of them saw social issues and inequalities as an "excuse" for what they saw as not taking action to save the planet. In this, they shared with the middle-class French activists that Hadrien Malier (2021: 9) studied, in the view that "'everyone' or a universalised 'we' can – and thus should – take action to save the planet". As Malier (2021: 9) wrote, "through everyday practices, the [middle-class] activists' [environmental] discourse erases the unequal responsibilities and capacities to change among social actors". In his study, environmental activists saw it as their moral responsibility to "seek out" errant audiences to change their environmental behaviour,

²⁷ The waters of the Atlantic that lap at Cape Town's coast are very cold, averaging 13 degrees Celsius in summer.

disregarding how social inequalities play a significant role in who can, and should, practice mainstream, prescriptive environmentalism (Malier, 2021).

It was clear that the children overwhelmingly viewed conservation as a very specific framework of action. Across their letters, the children repeated that people needed to recycle, reuse grey water, utilise solar power, install rainwater tanks, plant trees at home and refuse single-use plastic. Their formulaic repetitions were unsurprising; this particular environmentalism was relentlessly promoted by the media, the City, the TOA (see Chapter 2 and 3) and schools. These environmental messages were particularly urgent and ubiquitous during the City's severe drought between 2017- 2019, during which the City ran a myriad of "Day Zero" campaigns, many of which involved celebrity collaborations and impressive media productions (see Mihalopoulos, 2021; Robins, 2019).

Many of the privileged applicants boasted about their environmentality in their letters by bringing attention to just how many of these prescribed environmentally conscious behaviours they implemented at home or school. For instance, Alyssa from Tygervalley boasted that she already practiced an "eco-friendly lifestyle" at home, as she had "convinced her parents to install a borehole and solar power". In her letter, Alyssa detailed the long list of environmental actions she had incorporated in her daily life after learning about the plight of turtles at the TOA. She wrote that she had stopped using plastic straws, had gotten her local rate payers association to buy an owl house made of recycled plastic for the neighbourhood, and had also implemented a recycling drive at school, "all because of what we learned from the Aquarium". Another child, Christina from Fish Hoek, bragged that "we recycle everything in our home. We are water wise and reuse grey water to water our garden and flush our toilets. We wash our clothes in rainwater from rain tanks. I want to educate my friends and community to do the same". In another example, Kristen from Stellenbosch added in her letter that as well as recycling, her family regularly donated to "companies that protect wildlife and nature like SANCCOB (The Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds) and Cape Nature".²⁸

It was also clear that even at school, the children from relatively more privileged backgrounds were extremely well supported in pursuing their environmental lifestyles; many

²⁸ The Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds is a non-profit organisation which rescues and rehabilitates seabirds in South Africa. Cape Nature is a governmental organisation responsible for maintaining wilderness areas and public nature reserves in Western Cape Province, South Africa.

of these children noted that their schools *already* recycled or were environmentally conscious; and that they would be looking elsewhere in their communities to implement their requisite environmental actions after the course was over. In listing the ways in which they were environmentally responsible, none of the privileged children acknowledged that their decisions were made possible by the resources, capital and time that their parents, their schools and their neighbourhoods invested in such activities. Many of these children saw these acts of environmentalism as simple actions that everyone could, and *should* implement in their own lives as an ethical responsibility regardless of their socio-economic position.

Perhaps not surprisingly then, the letters from privileged children reflected a deep sense of anger and frustration directed at those who did not practice environmentalism in the same manner as them (see Malier, 2021). As Michaela from Durbanville wrote when she described her feelings towards those who used single-use plastics, “People don’t care about the environment, they use non-recyclable plastic and straws ... People are too busy to notice the world is falling apart because of litter. The way they are behaving makes me feel shocked, angry, and embarrassed”. Heather, a girl from Camps Bay, echoed Michaela’s sentiments, writing, “I get angry when I hear about people not reusing and recycling because it is a simple and easy way to save the earth”. What followed these expressions of frustration and anger in the letters was almost always a call for the education, or, in some examples, more punitive measures against the perpetrators of the environmental affronts that they described. As Catrina from Kommetjie wrote, “Humans are disgusting to do these things, I can’t believe how people just throw things on the ground, it makes me angry ... I think educating people about why they shouldn’t litter is important”. Maggie from Hout Bay agreed, “Litter won’t stop unless we take action against our main source of litter: humans”. Etienne from Sea Point similarly wrote, “Humans are destroying the environment and making animals extinct. I think that the situation can be reversed by creating awareness because if you are ignorant about something you can’t do anything about it”.

While the collective “humans” that the privileged children often referred to in their letters were framed as the unspecified perpetrators of environmental problems, it is important to unpack this discursively. Without fail, the privileged children used the word to signify people external to their own community. As such, very few of them used wording of “us”, “we” or “our” in relation to the responsibility they felt for acts of environmental destruction - or in relation to the need for more environmental education. Indeed, their letters seemed to position “us”, the environmentally responsible, against “them”, the environmentally destructive. While

some children speculated that “they” did not know any better and would thus benefit from environmental education, others insisted that “they” simply did not “care” enough to conserve.

What was fascinating here was that although these children were applying to join the Aquarium’s Smart Living course, a course concerned with teaching children ways to live more environmentally friendly lives, they did not seem to view *themselves* as in need of these lessons. Instead, they often wrote that they wanted to join the course to *empower* themselves to “educate others”. Interestingly, “educating others” was also the “environmental action” that many of the privileged children proposed would be their chosen intervention after the course. When explaining how they would go about this, it was clear that these children positioned “poor” people and communities outside of their own as in need of their education. For instance, Layla, who was from a school in Paarl, explained, “I aim to change people’s mindsets and make a difference. For example, there are many rural poorer areas around my town that must be educated and clean ups need to be implemented”. Anke, who was also from the Winelands, similarly pointed to poverty and lack of education amongst “farm workers” and unemployed people as the culprit behind pollution,

I live in Stellenbosch on a farm and close by are a large community of farm workers and unemployed people. They live in harsh conditions and do not use bins at all. We need to teach the community to recycle and educate them about the harm that pollution can cause. Even if we clean up the community people will continue to litter until we teach them the dangers that pollution can cause, but if we educate them the environment will be cleaner.

While none of the privileged children explicitly used racial terms to identify the people they would target with their education, their use of geographic place names and of specific jobs were implicit references to poor Black and Coloured communities. For instance, most people in the region know that due to the racial legacies of apartheid, Coloured and Black people make up the vast majority of farm workers in the province. Locals also know that the Cape Flats was generally a Coloured area, while the townships were Black. So, when Paige wrote, “I live in Rondebosch, [and witnessed] on the Cape Flats ... all the time how other people who live there don’t respect the environment and litter without thinking so I would like to educate the Cape Flats communities”, she was saying that she thought Coloured people were the culprits of the litter problem that she observed. Besides educating these communities as the solution to the environmental problem, some of the privileged students suggested that these poorer communities may be persuaded to not litter if they were incentivised. For instance, Dylan from

Hout Bay, wrote that he had seen a litter problem in a local township after attending a township tour there with his parents, and was concerned as the polluted river ran through the township to the beach,

As a family we always recycle and make eco bricks. I would like to start a project in IY (Imizamo Yethu)²⁹ teaching the residents how to make eco bricks and we can donate prizes for an incentive. The river that flow through the township ends up on the beach so we must start at the source and reduce the litter in that community.

Dylan rationalised that because he and his family regularly recycled and made eco-bricks, it would be simple for the Imizamo Yethu community members to also do so, and that they would be more motivated to do so if there was a “prize” on offer. Similarly, Alyssa, from Tygervalley wrote that her school was in the process of implementing ways to encourage environmentalism amongst “the people” through their “outreach”³⁰ activities, which included incentivised recycling initiatives;

At my school we are trying to combine environment and outreach to teach the people the necessity of saving the ecosystem and preventing pollution in nature. My school has a recycling centre already and we are thinking of ways to incentivise children to use it ... Also educating them about ecosystems and the need to plant trees and not remove them ... I want to educate people by telling them to recycle to save the environment because so many people don't.

It was clear that many of the white, privileged learners constructed their environmental identities around a particular moral authority which hinged, in many regards, on their ability to easily practice what they saw as the *right kind* of environmentalism in their daily lives. Discursively, many of the privileged children then conceptualised themselves as environmental saviours and custodians whose responsibility it was to change the mindsets of the careless, poor, and uneducated people in Other communities, who they had not-so-subtly identified as people of colour. In this, the privileged children displayed the kind of beliefs and dispositions that accompany conservation that Arturo Escobar (1995: 195) first wrote about nearly three decades ago, describing how sustainable development discourse often framed the poor as having a lack of “environmental consciousness”, despite the global South only being

²⁹ Informal settlement or “township” in the village of Hout Bay, with a predominantly poor Black population.

³⁰ Many relatively affluent schools in Cape Town run their own “outreach” activities, which refer to charitable programmes or activities offered to other schools or communities in more economically disadvantaged areas.

responsible for a fraction of the planet's total resource consumption. Escobar (1995: 195) wrote that,

Ecoliberals believe that because all people are passengers of spaceship Earth, all are equally responsible for environmental degradation. They rarely see that there are a great differences and inequities in resource problems between countries, regions, communities, and classes; and they usually fail to recognize that the responsibility is far from equally shared.

Escobar (1995: 195) also called attention to the “development processes” that give rise to the so-called “irrationality” and “lack of environmental consciousness” (labels given to undeveloped countries by the global North) on the part of the “dark and poor peasant masses [who are] destroying forests and mountainsides with axes and machetes” or who “dump waste in cities”. Escobar reasoned that this discourse of blame and scapegoating, served to “shift... visibility and blame away from the large industrial polluters in the North” and the cities that do not render them the necessary services. More recently, and specifically on South Africa, scholars such as Lesley Green and Michela Marcatelli have also written a great deal on this subject, particularly regarding the lingering racial patronisation seen within the field of conservation and environmental discourse.

Green (2020: 111) argued that in South Africa, a set of dispositions associated with whiteness, of “being saviour, judge, expert, martyr”, are *also* associated with environmentalism, and that the resulting “Green whiteness” often leverages the privilege of scientific authority to frame itself as “planetary stewards”. While whiteness continues to position itself as “the judge of what must be saved”, Green (2020: 111) argued that “Blackness becomes the source of ecological damage”.³¹ Marcatelli (2021: 99) has also pointed to the discourse of Othering that has become prevalent in environmentalism, writing, “If raciali[s]ed marginalization, in relation to [B]lack people, is becoming more, and not less, acute ... that is because whiteness as a symbol and structure of power is still alive and kicking. And environmentalism only serves to nourish it”. Marcatelli (2021: 99) described a common scenario where, “white people belong- inevitably as holders of private property in natural resources such as land, water, or even wildlife- while black people are othered, reduced to waste and threat”.

³¹ The irony of this pervasive rhetoric is that the blame for the dire state of the environment lies directly at the feet of the global rich. This paradox is captured neatly by Indian historian Ramachandra Guha (2000: 367), “the people who are the most vocal in defence of nature are the people who most actively destroy it.”

“We need to clean up our mess”: internalising the message

Reading the letters from children who applied from disadvantaged schools and communities, it became clear that these children had internalised some of these racialised environmental messages. It was particularly striking that many of the underprivileged Black and Coloured learners identified their *own* communities as being responsible for a range of environmental issues and problems in the City. As Shakira from Mitchells Plain noted, “There are many dump sites in my community. People litter and dump where they please ... People don’t care about nature around us. People in my neighbourhood have gotten sick from the bacteria from dump sites”. Tamara, also from Mitchells Plain, likewise wrote about the issue of dumping in her neighbourhood, and said “we need to clean up our mess”. Kauther from Mannenberg on the Cape Flats also wrote, “my community does not look after the environment and people are getting sick and diseased from the dirty water”.

Although many Black and Coloured applicants came from poverty-stricken areas on the Cape Flats, where little to no service delivery and huge economic challenges had clearly precipitated the environmental ‘crimes’ that they witnessed (see Chapter 1), what was striking was that many of these children, like their privileged peers, were overwhelmingly blind to the ways in which their circumstances contributed to their supposed lack of environmentalism. Very few of the disadvantaged children understood that issues such as littering, pollution and resource misuse in their communities was embedded in the complexities of what Ross (2010) called “raw life”. Instead, the children seemed to conceptualise people in their communities as lacking in understanding, care, and a sense of responsibility towards the environment- and therefore in need of help and education to change their ways. For instance, Shakira and Tamara’s complaints about the littering and dumping in their communities could be directly attributed to the fact that the city did not have municipal waste collection services in their neighbourhoods - yet they did not seem to understand the environmental issues within their communities as a symptom of this.³² Many other children from disadvantaged areas echoed these sentiments. As one applicant, Khuza, from Khayelitsha wrote,

³² A 2019 study by the Centre for Social Science Research at the University of Cape Town showed that the lack of service delivery in informal settlements was the root cause of pollution and dumping issues- not the lack of “responsibility” on the part of residents (Green, 2019).

In my community people are cutting down plants to put up houses in its place. I am worried that we don't have any oxygen in the future and our grandchildren won't survive. I want to help educate my community, because most people don't understand why they must not harm nature.

Apart from internalising the racial message of environmental culpability, Black and Coloured students also believed in environmentalism's promises that it could save their communities. For instance, Kauter suggested in his letter that he thought that the severe problems of illness, disease, and drug use in his community, arising from lack of services and poverty could somehow be solved by "recycling",

People always wash their clothes in the river and then people get sick from swimming there. People dump their drugs and pollute the water so I would like to encourage my school and community to recycle because nobody does right now.

Tiana, from Bishop Lavis on the Cape Flats, similarly saw "saving electricity" (interestingly, by purchasing an expensive solar panel) as a way to potentially mitigate the appalling crimes which affected her community,

I am really concerned about our environment and how bad it is affecting our community especially in Bishop Lavis. Our crime rate is high and people get mugged and murdered if there is load shedding. So I want to tell people how to save electricity and why they should use solar electricity rather... I think it would be difficult teaching people in Bishop Lavis to save the environment because of the crime in our community and the poverty. But I think if I can teach kids at school they could tell their parents and neighbours and slowly people would change their ways.

The connections that Tiana drew between electricity and crime were connected to the rise in criminal activity during scheduled power-outages known as "load-shedding",³³ in her neighbourhood. It is interesting that Tiana positioned the "environment" as badly "affecting" her community rather than connecting the power cuts with the impotence of the government to provide basic services. For Tiana and Kauter, and many other disadvantaged applicants,

³³ Loadshedding is the deliberate shutdown of electric power, by Eskom, the state's electricity provider, according to a schedule. In South Africa, different neighbourhoods are given an area code and the power is shut off according to a roster, to prevent the failure of the entire system when the power demands have placed the capacity of the electric grid under strain. South Africa's failing infrastructure and mismanagement has made these shut-downs commonplace and frequent.

environmentalism had become an alternative to politics, in that severe issues connected to service provision were seen not as a governance issue, but rather as an issue of simply *caring* for the environment. Thus, if community members could just be encouraged and taught to care *enough*, then perhaps these desperate problems may be solved.

It was striking too, that for these children, environmental concern seemed to be grounded in a deep sense of compassion, concern and care for the wellbeing of their own communities. Like Tiana and Kauter's letters iterated, the children from disadvantaged communities shared a profound faith that environmentalism could provide a healthier, safer place to live. As Zinakele, a boy from an informal settlement in Nyanga wrote, "Our big environmental problem is that people live in nucleated shacks, where residents do waste disposal everywhere. This is dangerous because people can become very sick and get tetanus". Zinakele thought environmentalism held the power to make a healthier environment for his community to live in, yet understood, too, *why* people may be hesitant to pick up trash. He wrote, "I want to educate my community to help clean up the trash so that they can live in a health [sic] environment but I think people are scared they might get tetanus so I will make sure they get a tetanus injection before they help me pick up rubbish".

In reading these applications, it became clear that for many of the underprivileged children, environmentalism and environmental concern were deeply entangled with acute struggles for survival in extremely underserviced parts of the City. This finding echoes a pattern that other scholars working on highly unequal societies in other countries have also noted. For instance, Sastry (2015: 107), in a study of Indian children's conceptualisations of the environment, wrote that underprivileged students tended to practice a "particular form of environmentality that derive[d] from anxieties about access to resources and space".

While environmentalism allowed underprivileged children to imagine non-political ways to address issues such as crime, poverty, illness, and lack of access to clean water and sanitation in their communities, their letters also indicated that these environmental fixes which they so obviously desired, were out of their reach. For instance, while many privileged students described how their schools recycled, many Black and Coloured students wrote that the schools they attended did not have the same services, and that they desired to convince their teachers and peers to take up recycling initiative in school. Interestingly, these students did not seem to connect their schools' relative lack of environmental activities and resources with economic and other structural barriers; and rather hopefully viewed it as a simple matter of encouragement and "asking" for these environmental structures to be implemented. As Chante, from Philippi noted: "Many turtles and dolphins are killed every year by plastic pollution. My

school doesn't recycle, or have an eco-club, so I could talk to a teacher about purchasing recycling bins in bright colours to make people want to recycle". Aqhama, from Palm Park, also wrote about her concerns about the amount of litter she saw around her school, and thought that asking her school to install more bins and "encouraging" the students to clean up would make a difference. Hafsah, from Grassy Park, too, called for "education" as the solution to the problem of the lack of bins within her community and school because, as she said, she had "seen first-hand all the problems with pollution on our beaches and parks".

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed the TOA Smart Living course's application letters, and looked at what they revealed about the children across the city who wrote them. I have shown that regardless of race and class boundaries, the children all seemed to share remarkably similar concerns about the looming environment crisis, concerns that were emotionally heavily inflected. I argued that one reason for this collective concern was the media's dissemination of "apocalyptic" and "spectacular environmentalisms" (Brockington, et al., 2016; Igoe, 2010; Lewis, 2012: 13; Branston, 2016), a deduction I have made based on the frequency with which the children mentioned the same media personalities and platforms. Children from across the city referenced David Attenborough, the kind of turtle rescue stories that the TOA circulated (see Chapter 2), and cartoons with environmental messages. None of the children differentiated between the sources of their information, which they treated as a single mediascape- in line with arguments that other authors working on environmental conservation have made about the field (see Bauman, 2007; Hansen, 2010; Lewis, 2012). From their letters, it is also clear that the children found this mediascape both compelling and that they have been spurred into action by it as they repeatedly state that "we" need to do something about plastic pollution and environmental destruction. In this, we can see the efficacy of environmental organisations such as the TOA (see Chapter 2).

However, despite their common fears of an imminent environmental collapse and the ways in which they participated in the same environmental mediascapes, I have also shown that there were striking differences between the children evident in the letters and that these differences clearly mapped onto race and class inequalities in the City. Many of the children from more privileged backgrounds and schools traced their motivation to conserve nature to particularly privileged experiences they had with often exclusive 'natures' in beautiful natural surrounds in the City and in similar settings abroad. In their descriptions of these experiences,

the children were markedly proprietorial about the natures involved; they wanted to preserve it for their children and protect it from Others in the City who did not share their values or did not know any better. The letters from privileged children reflected a deep sense of anger and frustration directed at these perpetrators, which they subtly identified as economically and racially Other. Thus privileged, mostly white children, seemed to have internalised a broader middle-class environmental discourse prevalent in South Africa, that other anthropologists have outlined (Green, 2014; 2020; Marcatelli, 2021; Robins, 2019).

Strikingly, I have also shown that disadvantaged applicants, many who came from extremely marginalised areas of the City, had internalised this rhetoric, identifying their *own* communities as culpable for the environmental destruction they identified. In framing their communities as wilfully destructive or ignorant of environmental issues, the children never mentioned the structural inequalities in the City that made environmental issues such as littering more widespread in poorer areas. For these children, middle-class environmentalism which involved recycling and new forms of consumption held an alternative to politics, an alternative in which simply *caring* for the environment *enough* could solve crime, poverty and all manner of other social ills. In this chapter, I have illustrated how children from more privileged backgrounds, who in the main were white, came to feel proprietorially about nature of a particular kind- and it was this nature that they felt compelled to protect from Others. It was clear the children from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds (who predominantly were children of colour) had internalised the message of culpability, and seemed to see themselves, and their communities as responsible for these environmental issues. I have argued that this internalisation of culpability stemmed in part from messages disseminated by the broader narrative of mainstream environmentalism, in which the TOA participated (see chapter 2 and 3).

In the next chapter, I will look at the TOA's outreach programme in poorer areas of the City, where the TOA outreach teachers, Thabo and Anzio, took the TOA's environmental lessons and conservation messages to disadvantaged school children.

Chapter Five: Outreach

From the Waterfront to the Cape Flats

“Do you know what this neighborhood, “Langa”, means in English?”, Thabo asked me, gesturing at the brightly painted flats and crowded clusters of shacks that bordered the N2 highway. We were sitting in the 7.30 am commuter traffic on a cold winter morning in July. I had no idea, never having given it much thought, although I drove past Langa frequently. Thabo explained, “Langa means Sun, and that other neighborhood over there, Nyanga, means Moon”. Thabo then told me that these were the oldest townships in Cape Town, established long before the other townships and informal settlements across the Cape Flats came into being. I had never been in these townships but Thabo quickly put me at ease, assuring me that he did not think many of his white Two Oceans Aquarium (TOA) colleagues had spent much time there either. Wandi chuckled in agreement.



Figure 22: The Oceans in Motion outreach bus parked in front of the Aquarium. Picture by the author. (2019).

Thabo and Wandi were TOA education department teachers, and I had already met them both a few months earlier when I had done research inside the Smart Living classroom

on-site at the TOA (see Chapter 3). On this occasion, however, we were travelling from the centre of Cape Town to visit a disadvantaged primary school in Du Noon, which formed part of greater Khayelitsha. Earlier that morning, I had joined Thabo and Wandi at the TOA. We had quickly filled our flasks with instant coffee, and Thabo finished packing the Oceans in Motion bus (see Figure 22) with plastic boxes filled with various marine animals. The starfish, urchins and anemones would be shown to the children at the schools. Thabo also packed various life-support apparatuses such as air pumps and filters which would keep the animals alive on our drive.

After driving close on 40 minutes, we turned off the highway, and began to travel deep into Khayelitsha, with Thabo taking several shortcuts through winding, narrow streets and past crammed informal housing and *spaza* shops. On the side of the road, women were setting up their *shisa nyama* (barbeque) stalls by making fires in steel drums. Thabo clearly had driven this route many times before, and he navigated the streets with confidence. We finally arrived at the school and were greeted by a high barbed-wire fence which wrapped around the school and sports fields. The sprawling school building and sports field contrasted sharply with the surrounding small tin dwellings sandwiched up against the school's periphery. Some homes were built so close to the school it seemed that one could touch the corrugated iron walls of the houses through the steel bars of the fence. A security guard sat in a small hut at the school gates, and he stopped us and asked Thabo to fill in a visitors' form. After a lengthy inquisition about the nature of our visit and the contents of our van, he finally let us in. The guard was visibly disappointed that we did not have a shark in our possession, but pointed where Thabo could park.

The head teacher of the grade six class we would be teaching that day came out to greet us in the large car park, where colourful murals were painted on the walls of the prefabricated classrooms. As Cape Town had been in the throes of a dire drought situation the year before, the mural urged the children to "keep saving water" (see Figure 23)³⁴

³⁴ Also see Robins (2019) for context of the drought and the controversies of CoCT's 'Day Zero' messages).



Figure 23: A mural painted on the side of a classroom. Picture by the author. (2019).

The principal was there too and shook our hands as he peered into the buckets of small invertebrates with interest. He pointed inside one and asked what each animal was. At this point, one of the teachers of an older grade also came out to shake Thabo's hand and greeted him as if an old friend. After he went back inside, Thabo explained that he had visited this school several times before with the outreach van, and that establishing a relationship with the school many years ago now allowed him to return and do lessons here often.

Thabo was the head teacher of the TOA's Oceans in Motions division, which formed part of the Aquarium's outreach programme. The other division was run by Anzio, a young Coloured man, who taught a condensed version of the TOA's holiday Smart Living course (see Chapter 3) during term time to schools on the Cape Flats. While both teachers visited other schools, in the main, Thabo's Oceans in Motions bus visited schools where the majority of children were Black while Anzio's Smart Living classes were taught in schools where the majority of children were Coloured.³⁵ Both programmes were offered free of charge to disadvantaged schools in the City as part of the Aquarium's corporate social responsibility and NPO (non-profit organisation) initiatives.³⁶ On its website, the TOA asserted that it also offered

³⁵ The schools that Anzio primarily visited were relatively more resourced than the ones that Thabo visited.

lessons to “schools with capacity” (Anon, n.d) for a fee. This apparently seldom happened, as none of the teaching staff I spoke to mentioned such lessons during my time at the TOA.

The rationale for the TOA’s outreach programmes was to teach underprivileged children who, due to “personal circumstances “ (Anon, 2019a) could not take advantage of the Aquarium’s holiday courses, to teach the children “the value of living animals [and inspire them to] contribute to the conservation of our oceans for generations to come” (Anon, 2019a). “[C]onnecting with the ocean” was, according to the TOA, “something that is often absent from [underprivileged children’s] daily lives” (Anon, 2017b). For this reason, the TOA wanted disadvantaged children to learn to conserve biodiversity, water resources and energy, as well as to minimise waste. “Once these messages are absorbed by our children and implemented in their daily lives, we are one step closer to a more sustainable lifestyle that protects both us and our environment” (Rockstroh, 2014b). The two programmes differed in the ways in which they interpreted their outreach brief. Thabo’s ‘hands-on’ environmental lessons encouraged children to touch and interact with live animals such as starfish and anemones while Anzio’s Smart Living classes did not include any live animals.

In this chapter, I look at the TOA’s two outreach programmes; the content of their lessons, how the children responded to these lessons and the agency of the two teachers involved. I expand on the idea of middle-class environmentalism that I developed in Chapters 3 and 4 and explore how this contributed to the framing of the TOA’s outreach activities in almost religious terms.

Mandela Day on the bus

While Thabo often visited schools during term time in Khayelitsha and elsewhere on the Cape Flats - several schools a week, in fact - our outreach excursion was different. It was billed as the first activity in a week-long environmental education (EE) outreach³⁷ programme that the TOA launched in honour of ‘Mandela Day’.³⁸ For the programme, the TOA’s Oceans in Motion outreach bus visited classes of grade sixes at four different schools in Khayelitsha. Thabo explained that these ‘Mandela Week’ activities did not differ much from the Aquarium’s

³⁷ Outreach is the activity of providing services to any disadvantaged population that might not otherwise have access to those services. A key component of outreach is that the group providing it is not stationary, but mobile; in other words, it involves meeting someone in need of an outreach service at the location where they are.

³⁸ Instituted in 2010 on Nelson Mandela’s birthday, the 18th of July has become known as Mandela Day, a day on which many South Africans try to spend 67 minutes doing charitable work to commemorate the 67 years that Mandela spent fighting for human rights and the abolition of apartheid.

usual Oceans in Motion outreach activities, except that several Aquarium teachers and a few volunteers from the TOA staff were going to join us later in a separate car, armed with lunch boxes filled with sandwiches, juice-boxes, an apple and a small bag of potato chips sponsored by a local company. These were going to be handed out to the grade six classes after the lessons were over.

Thabo said that he was looking forward to having more hands to help out as he typically handled the Oceans in Motion lessons alone. However, he lamented that none of the white Aquarium staff had volunteered to help that day. Wandi speculated that perhaps the white staff did not join the trip because they might have been anxious about being in the unfamiliar surrounds of the Cape Flats, noting that they probably did not want to feel uncomfortable or like “outsiders”. Thabo conceded this point, but lamented that white staff did not make more of an effort with outreach in less affluent areas, because if they did, perhaps the few who joined would become less visible and less like outsiders. Thabo might have been referring to my presence at the lessons that day; the children and teachers certainly did not treat me in the same way as they treated Wandi; while Thabo was teaching, many of the students gave me sidelong glances and whispered amongst themselves. At break time, we stayed in the classroom while the kids played outside and ate their lunch. The unlucky students in other grades who were not chosen to be part of the lesson gathered outside the school hall and tried to take a peek through the windows at what was going on inside. At one point, about 40 children had their faces pressed against the glass shouting, “*Mlungu! Mlungu!*”, trying to get my attention.

While reluctant to volunteer “to ride the bus” with Thabo, white staff often volunteered for Aquarium outreach activities in white areas. Thabo mentioned that when the Aquarium hosted its frequent voluntary beach clean-up events in relatively affluent areas such as Hout Bay and Muizenberg on weekends, many of the white staff would attend. Thabo was bemused that the same staff did not sign up to help with his Mandela Day activities. Wandi added that she thought that it was important that everyone at work should experience the different social dynamics on “this side of the N2” because working in an affluent space like the Waterfront could easily make people forget how poor some areas in Cape Town are. Later, I casually brought up Thabo and Wandi’s points in a conversation with one of the white TOA staff members, John. I asked John why white staff volunteered at the beach clean-ups on weekends but did not sign up for Thabo’s Mandela Week activities. John replied that it simply had to do with the fact that when staff volunteered for beach clean-ups on the weekends, they were allowed to “claim the time back” by leaving work early during the working week. In other words, the TOA incentivised them to attend these events. When it came to joining Thabo on

the bus for Mandela Week, the staff were given no such perks. John praised the “wonderful work” that the outreach team did, but stated that he, and the other staff at the Aquarium could not be expected to donate their time and effort to the programme when Thabo and Anzio were paid for theirs.

Inside an Oceans in Motion lesson

After the school principle summoned them, three boys, who looked to be around 13 years old, hurried to assist us with carrying equipment. They looked inside the boxes curiously (see Figure 24). Seizing the limited opportunity to interact with the children before the formal lesson started, I pointed to the animals and asked the boys whether they had ever touched any of them before. As I asked this, I sunk my hand into the bucket, tickling the anemone tentacles so that they would retract. The boys immediately started laughing and shouting. One of them exclaimed, “Oh my God! Sweet Jesus!”, as his friends chortled. I explained that the anemone tentacles could not harm them, and invited them to also try touching the creature. One of the boys was brave enough to give it a go, and feigned getting an electric shock to entertain his friends.

At this point, the other Aquarium staff members Chante, Tamsyn and a volunteer named Kieron, had arrived. The head teacher of the grade led all of us to the school hall, where the first class was waiting impatiently outside the doors in a long line. Their teachers half-heartedly attempted to keep them quiet. Thabo and Wandi eventually managed to split the unruly learners into smaller groups and led them into the hall, asking each group to huddle around the tables that held the makeshift ‘miniature rockpool’ containers on top (see Figure 25). Kieron had brought the Aquarium’s camera and immediately tried to capture the children’s excitement as we set up the tables and projector screen. He told me that the Aquarium’s social media manager had asked him to capture the day for a special Mandela Week blog post.



Figure 24: The plastic containers filled with "learning aids" after we unpacked the van at the school. Picture by the author. (2019)



Figure 25: The first grade six class gathered around the "rockpools" in the school hall. Picture by the author. (2019).

On catching a glimpse of the content of the plastic boxes, the children went wild with excitement. One group of kids screamed in fear as I again stuck my hand in one of the containers to demonstrate how to stroke the urchin gently. A girl asked me how I was able to touch the sharp spines without being cut. Another child grabbed their friend's arm and tried to manoeuvre it into the water. Some of the quieter children knelt on the floor and looked through the transparent plastic, fascinated by the swaying tentacles of the anemone and moving limbs of the starfish. Clearly struggling to keep order, Thabo and Wandi threatened to withhold the lunch boxes that we had stacked against the sides of the hall if the children did not settle down and listen.

Children from other grades who were not partaking in the day's activities constantly ran past the hall to stop and stare through the large windows which looked out to the courtyard. They only left to join their respective classes after the school bell had rung and their own teachers had resorted to shouting for them to come inside. Once the lesson began, it was clear that Thabo was a gifted teacher and could hold the children's attention with his animated teaching style (see Figure 26).



Figure 26: Thabo showing the children the correct way to "tickle an anemone". Source: TOA website (2019).

Thabo encouraged the children to touch and feel the animals to find answers to questions such as, "How many legs does a starfish have?" and "Where is its mouth?". He then pulled up diagrams of the starfish on the projector screen and explained the animal's

physiology. One of the grade six teachers sitting next to me wryly remarked that she wished the learners would express such enthusiasm when she taught *her* Life Sciences classes. Whenever Thabo asked a question, many hands shot up, and the children shouted “Sir, Sir!”, straining to be the first to answer him. Toward the end of the lesson, most of the children were confidently wielding fistfuls of the rockpool animals without any apprehension. Thabo had to shout at one boy who grabbed the starfish out of the bucket and chased a girl around the class with it.

Thabo skilfully wove conservation messages throughout the lessons but made a particularly pointed effort near the end of the lesson to underline the message that ocean pollution killed a great many marine species each year, telling the class how sea turtles in particular mistakenly ate plastic bags floating in the ocean and died. The children looked shocked at this news, and one girl asked Thabo why the turtles were “so greedy” that they did not look at their food properly before they ate. Thabo explained to her that turtles and other animals could not tell the difference between plastic and their food, as in the water a plastic bag looked similar to the seaweed and jellyfish that turtles normally ate. To illustrate this, Thabo showed a slide on the projector of a jellyfish and then a slide of a turtle eating a plastic bag. The plastic bag and the jellyfish looked remarkably alike, a point that he underscored by passing around a glass bottle filled with water and a plastic bag inside it.

Thabo then held up a two-litre plastic soda bottle filled with non-recyclable plastic, such as sweet and chip packets - the kind of snacks the children could buy from their school tuck shop. He explained that the learners could help the turtles by making Eco Bricks³⁹ at home with their rubbish. Thabo then passed the Eco Brick around the room and explained that similar ones could be dropped off at collection points around the city to be used for building houses and classrooms. Before the lesson ended, we handed out the lunch boxes and the children tore into the sweets and sandwiches as they spilled out to the field. After breaktime, Thabo and Wandi returned to the classroom with their hands full of sweets and chips that they had bought from the tuck shop, dutifully pushing their wrappers and packets into an Eco Brick once they were finished eating. After lunch, another grade six class lined up outside our makeshift classroom in the school hall, ready for the next lesson.

After the first day of Mandela Week activities, Thabo, Wandi and I stopped off briefly at another school in Gugulethu on the way back to the Aquarium. Thabo wanted to meet with

³⁹ Empty 2 litre plastic soda bottles which are stuffed with non-recyclable plastic, and can be collected and dropped off at collection points around the City. Some schools also participate in Eco Brick drives.

a grade six teacher there to remind him that he was coming to the school the next week to teach. Wandi and I waited in the van. The school was quiet as all the learners had gone home for the day. When Thabo got back to the van, he said that it was much easier to just “show face” than to send an email or phone. Apart from being easier to explain things in person, showing up helped to build relationships with teachers. He added that he kept relationships going with each of the schools he visited regularly, often stopping by the schools on his way to others to “touch base” and to observe the TOA programme’s impact at particular schools.

Inside a Smart Living lesson

A few weeks after my time with the Oceans in Motion team, I attended a Smart Living outreach class with Anzio at an underprivileged Coloured school on the Cape Flats. On our drive there, Anzio said that his lessons were based on the national school curriculum and that in each term, he would make sure that his lessons complimented what the students were learning in Life Sciences. Every visit to a school was different, he said; sometimes he would spend a whole day at a school, while at other times, the school would not “make an effort” to fit him in to their schedule. When this happened, teachers and principals often explained that learners could not afford to miss “actual” classes. This reminded me of a comment that Russel, the head of the TOA’s education department, had made during one of the morning teachers meetings I had attended earlier that year. Russel lamented that there were too many outreach programmes teaching environmental education in the non- profit (NPO) space, “messing it up for the rest of us”. In particular, he complained, these “other programmes” were often unstructured, did not follow the national curriculum, and often left “chaos” in their wake. Despite this, he said, a lot of programmes in the City targeted “under-resourced schools to teach environmental education” because “Environmentalism is a trendy topic right now”. He asserted that, “If a programme is going to take time out of a child’s school day, then it should be to consolidate what they are learning in class. There is a time and place for fun activities, but activities must be grounded in theoretical class work- otherwise what is the point?”. Russel gave me an example of how this impacted the TOA’s outreach activities; one school with which the TOA had a long-standing relationship suspended outreach classes after another environmental NPO’s visit disrupted the school day and made the kids unruly. After this experience, the school did not want anything to do with any environmental education outreach anymore. For this reason, Russel said, “We need to do more than just giving the kids one fun day...there needs to be theory, there needs to be structure”.



Figure 27: the makeshift Smart Living classroom. Photograph by the author (2019).

It was a sentiment that Anzio shared. When we arrived at the school, I helped Anzio unload the projector screen and other equipment. We then waited in the reception area for a teacher to take us to a tiny music room in the back of the school hall (see Figure 27). There were no tables or chairs, so the grade sevens had to fetch some from the hall before the class could begin. Before Anzio began the lesson, the school principal stopped by and peeked into the box of plastic toys that Anzio had brought along to teach the children about biotic and abiotic factors. He rapped the box with his knuckles and told me, “This is what I like to see, nice, hands-on practical activities. We have too much theory in school, this is rather how the kids must learn!”. The theme of the Smart Living lesson that day was biodiversity, and Anzio started his lesson by projecting images of the Western Leopard Toad on the screen. He then asked the class why it was important to protect it. He highlighted that protecting the toad was important because “it’s localised, it’s something we can relate to, something we can find in our backyards”. Much of the lesson was spent defining terms and concepts that the children seemed to know already, terms such as biodiversity, habitat, and extinction.

Like Thabo’s lessons, Anzio’s had a clear conservation message too. To underscore how important biodiversity was to the future of our society, Anzio asked the class to give examples of things that we “get out of” animals. One of the children shouted out, “Meat!”.

Anzio agreed, and then showed a slide of a list of other things that humans “got” out of animals, like wood for furniture, oxygen, and medicine. He then asked the class what “we” did to destroy ecosystems. The answers from the class included poaching, pollution and habitat destruction. One of the children then asked Anzio why rhino horns were poached. Anzio replied that people were greedy, and wanted to use the horns to make medicines that “don’t work”. He then ended the lesson by playing a YouTube clip made by Conservation International in which actress Julia Roberts narrated a script as the character of “Nature”. To the backdrop of a montage of dramatic nature scenes, Roberts said,

Some call me nature. Some call me mother nature. I’ve been here for over 4.4 billion years, 22,500 times longer than you. I don’t really need people but people need me. Yes, your future depends on me. When I thrive, you thrive. When I falter, you falter or worse. But I’ve been here for eons. I have fed species greater than you and I have starved species greater than you. MY oceans, MY soil, MY flowing streams, MY forests they all can take you or leave you. How you choose to live each day whether you regard or disregard me doesn’t really matter to me. One way or the other your actions will determine your fate not mine. I am prepared to evolve—are you? Nature doesn’t need people. People need nature!

On that sombre note, Anzio switched the projector off and without a word, the class filed out of the small room; and the next group of children trickled in. Anzio repeated the same short 45-minute lesson to three grade seven classes that day.

Word Wetlands Week

I returned to the Oceans in Motion bus with Thabo and Wandi six months later, this time for the TOA’s annual week-long World Wetlands Day⁴⁰ activities. Every year, the Aquarium’s outreach team picked up a grade six class in a huge rented Golden Arrow bus from a different school each day of Wetlands week and took them to the Khayelitsha Wetlands Park. Here, the children collected data about the wetland’s environmental health before they boarded the bus again to go to the Aquarium where they did a tour and analysed their findings. According to an TOA blog post, the aim of these Wetlands Week activities was to encourage children to take care of their surrounding environment, “especially those living in communities that border wetland ecosystems” (Jonga, 2020).

⁴⁰ World Wetlands Day is celebrated internationally to mark the adoption of the Convention on Wetlands in 1971.

On the first morning of the World Wetlands Week outreach activities, I sat in a teachers' meeting at the Aquarium waiting for Thabo to finish packing the van. I was surprised to learn that participating schools were asked to only select high-performing students in life sciences to go on the field trip, a fact that many of the teachers lamented. Chanel explained that although they would have liked to take more children, the Aquarium was always limited by "capacity", and they lacked the space and teaching resources to take on more kids. She also explained that many of the children who were invited could not attend as their parents had not signed the consent forms. She added, "We would love to be able to have them all come and to spark a new interest for those children who haven't expressed an interest in Life Science before".

The hired bus picked us up at the Aquarium and drove to the first participating primary school of the week. Around 50 students, accompanied by two of their teachers, were lined up outside. They piled onto the bus, gleefully shouting and laughing, clearly excited at the prospect of getting a day off from regular school. We drove the short distance to Khayelitsha Wetlands Park in Makhaza, an enclosed park on the border of Khayelitsha township and the N2 highway (see Figure 28). As we pulled up outside the gates, I found it difficult to ignore the contrast between the congested roads, cramped tin houses, taverns, and *spaza* shops and the expansive wetland park which was cordoned off from the neighbourhood by a large spiked steel fence.



Figure 28: The Khayelitsha Wetlands Park looking towards Devils Peak, Cape Town. Photograph by the author. (2019).

A few guards sitting on plastic chairs under scraggly trees at the entrance gate controlled access. Thabo, Wandi and Fikile were the Aquarium teachers responsible for the wetland outing, but we were also joined by Aquarium volunteers Bernice and Simon. Together, we ushered the children off the bus and onto the grassy banks of the wetland. Once settled, Thabo asked the class who had been to this wetland, or other nearby wetlands before. Several students raised their hands. Thabo then asked the class why they thought wetlands were useful to nearby communities. The children shouted out, “It’s a nice place to exercise!”, “A special place for animals to live” and “A place to be in nature”. Thabo added that in addition to these things, wetlands could also be culturally and economically important because people use wetlands to collect medicinal plants, for washing before traditional ceremonies or for swimming. Thabo told the class that because wetlands were so useful, it was important to keep them clean and free of pollution. He explained that this was not always the case in Khayelitsha where the wetland was often contaminated by wastewater flowing into the Kuils River, which then flowed into the wetlands. Thabo added that a lack of refuse removal and poor infrastructure in Khayelitsha also played a big role in polluting these wetlands.

After Thabo’s lesson, the volunteers and I handed out binoculars, gumboots, fishing nets and buckets with lids amongst the children to collect water samples, and worksheets to fill out their findings. We then divided the grade sixes into groups, and Thabo asked that one

member of every group put on the gumboots and waded into the shallow waters to collect the water samples. Chaos quickly ensued as children bickered over who would get to don the prized gumboots and wade into the water (see Figure 29). The teachers gave the remaining members of each group different data collection tasks; with some going with Fikile to record birds in the area while another group walked the wetland perimeter with Wandi to do a litter and pollution count. Simon took pictures of the experience for the Aquarium's blog.



Figure 29: Children collect water samples from the wetland. Picture by the author. (2019).

Once the children had collected their data, we ushered them back onto the bus and headed to the TOA. The children were very excited at the prospect of seeing the city, and once we reached the end of the highway and the sea became visible through the bus windows, some children screamed so loudly that the teachers had to shout to get them to quieten down. When

we pulled onto the road which leads to the TOA, the children caught sight of the Ferrari shop with its gleaming sports cars on display. Pandemonium broke out on the bus and the teachers simply gave up trying to get them to calm down. It was only as we disembarked at the Aquarium that the learners began to calm down, and the teachers and facilitators ushered the children into lines to file up the stairs to the classroom. Once seated in the education classroom on the top floor of the Aquarium, Bianca led the lesson on how to analyse the data the children had collected. First, each of the teams' water samples were placed under a microscope connected to a camera, and the microscopic particles were displayed on a projector screen for the whole class to see. To the amazement of the children, small, blob-like organisms moved around the screen, and Bianca asked the children to count the number of organisms they saw. The children were then asked to use a scientific scoring system to calculate the health of the wetland on a worksheet, by tallying the data they collected on fish and bird numbers, litter, as well as the organisms they counted under the microscope. This led to a final score, which Bianca revealed was very poor. Many of the children seemed really surprised at this news, and Wandi took the opportunity to explain that this was a clear example of how litter and pollution effected biodiversity, and why it was important to discard rubbish correctly.

After the lesson, the volunteers, teachers and I lined up the children and took them on a tour of the exhibits - the part of the day's fieldtrip activities which the children were clearly most excited about. We led the children into the large exhibit hall full of other Aquarium visitors and several other school groups visiting on their own fieldtrips (see Figure 30). Here an Aquarium staff member gave yet another presentation about the dangers that plastic pollution posed to marine life.



Figure 30: An Aquarium staff member gives a lecture on pollution while the school group watches. Picture by the author. (2019).

The presenter suggested that the solution to the plastic pollution problem was for people to buy reusable bags, bottles and cups rather than single-use items. Her PowerPoint presentation gave visual examples of “eco-friendly” consumption choices that included a reusable coffee cup, canvas bag and steel water bottle instead of single use plastic options (see Figure 31). The reusable steel bottle pictured in the slides sold in the Aquarium gift shop for R300, almost double the government’s child support grant.

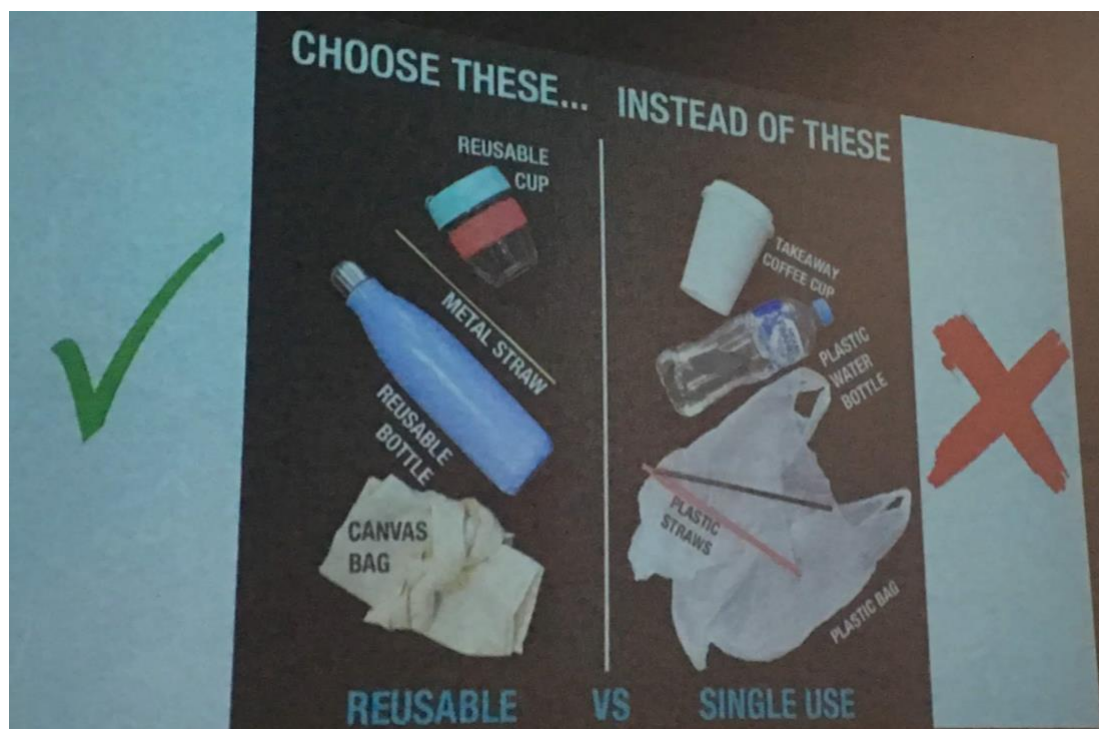


Figure 31: A PowerPoint presentation to teach the children about making "environmentally friendly" choices. Picture by the author (2019)

While we led the class through the Aquarium, I chatted to one of the children named Nondi. Talking about her day, she expressed her surprise at the “niceness” of the Khayelitsha wetland park, remarking that her family had forbidden her to visit wetlands near her home because they were “dangerous and dirty places”. Her father had told her that criminals lived in there and that there were diseases in the water. Nondi also said that discovering how the pollution in the wetland affected the health of the animals that lived there made her sad and angry at community members for littering so much. “Why are the people so stupid? They must throw their trash away so we can have a nice area to come and see the animals. The police must stop them from littering”.

“We want to change your normal”

Even though Thabo had noted during his lesson that poor service delivery and infrastructural failings were the primary drivers behind pollution in the severely underserved areas surrounding the Khayelitsha Wetland Park, Nondi, like her peers who applied to the TOA’s holiday course (see Chapter 4), blamed her *own* community as responsible for pollution and asserted that they needed to be disciplined for this. Looking at the structure and pedagogy of the TOA’s outreach lessons, I suggest that we can understand why Nondi may have come to

this conclusion. In each of the lessons and activities I attended, the primary outcome was to encourage a specific conservation ethic, one that I have identified as “middle-class” (see Chapter 3 and 4). In reaching this objective, the structure and flow of the outreach lessons repeated the same form, regardless of the topic of the lessons.

First, the teachers exposed the students to the beauty and spectacle of nature, in an environment removed from the normal classroom. In this context, they allowed the children to have fun and interact with a particular “nature”⁴¹. Next, the teachers showed the children dramatic pictures of the visceral and disturbing consequences of irresponsible environmental behaviour such as littering. The teachers often supplemented images of environmental destruction or animal suffering with scientific findings about the extent of the problem and the urgency of these issues. Finally, the lessons *always* ended with the teachers encouraging the children to take action; to not use single-use plastics, to recycle, or to turn their trash in to eco-bricks, among other prescriptive solutions. While some of the environmental problems that the TOA teachers highlighted were perhaps far removed from the children’s everyday lives, such as Thabo’s lessons about sea turtles, other lessons were closer to home. The Wetlands Week activities, for instance, aimed to galvanise the children’s opinions and action on pollution in spaces close to their *own* homes. The shift from relatively abstract to more immediate contexts highlighted that the environmental crisis was a local reality that the children could experience, and should therefore be concerned about.

As a number of authors have shown, environmental discourses, particularly in the media (see Chapter 2) and in environmental education emphasise “doom and gloom” (Branston, 2016: 808). As Murphy (2021: 199) wrote, “tropes of ‘extinction’ and ‘climate crisis’ are an effective means through which to evoke the cultural resonance of environmental apocalypticism”. However, in recent years scholars such as Bellino and Adams (2017) have criticised what they called “damage-centred” environmental education. They argued that this approach did not situate urban environmental issues within the *social* and *political* contexts within which they were enmeshed (Bellino & Adams 2017). As such, the approach “fails to question the association of environmental ‘damage’ with low-income communities of colour (Bellino & Adams 2017: 271).

⁴¹ The TOA’s valued “nature” was, as I have shown earlier in this thesis, of a very particular type. It was the nature of “wild” and exotic marine animals and “pristine” areas distinctly separate from human impacts and interference. Thus, in many ways, the TOA’s valued “nature” was in line with Jason Moore’s (2017: 4) argument, that [for the environmentalist] “nature becomes a fantasy of the wild, of pristine nature, awaiting our protection, fearing destruction at our hands”.

The message that children like Nondi heard in the TOA's lessons was that they were able to solve pollution and other environmental problems in the underserved areas where they lived by simply changing their consumer behaviour, and that such problems existed as environmental ones alone. Like Nondi, other children may have come away from these lessons with a conviction that environmental problems stemmed from *individual* behaviour- and moreover; that such behaviour was more prevalent in their own disadvantaged communities than in more affluent, resourced ones (see Chapter 4).

For their part, the TOA teachers, who were at the forefront of its outreach activities, certainly acknowledged the structural inequalities and marginalisation of the communities in Khayelitsha and the Cape Flats - and how these contributed to the visible environmental issues there. In his lessons, Thabo explicitly talked about these issues. And yet, while Thabo and Anzio acknowledged the role of structural political issues in pollution, their lessons ultimately centered on individual agency and consumer choices. Thabo's lessons focused on cultivating an appreciation of marine animals but also highlighting their precarity in the face of pollution, while Anzio's lessons dramatically underscored how nature and biodiversity was important to the survival of human life and thus why the children needed to conserve it.

Such nuanced understandings were less visible if one looked at the TOA outreach project as a whole. These outreach activities were based on two assumptions. First, that many disadvantaged children from areas on the Cape Flats did not have the right kind of encounters with pristine nature and thus had not yet been "inspired" to become conservation stewards. Secondly, that children from disadvantaged schools and communities were unaware of, or uninformed about environmental issues. TOA staff echoed these beliefs in their conversations with me and formed the narrative backbone of many posts about the Aquarium's outreach activities. Wandi for instance blogged about the Wetlands Day activities by saying that,

One of the highlights for me was hearing some of the children saying that they had never been to the Aquarium, and that they have never even been to the beach. When they saw the ocean while driving to the Aquarium, one girl said: "Teacher, I have never seen so much blue, it looks beautiful... Exposing the learners to the environment around them, and unlocking its secrets and wonders is vitally important for the future well-being of our planet. This course, and the love and respect that it instils in the learners is part of the bigger education process and their subsequent stewardship of this planet (Jonga, 2020).

The TOA and its staff thus imagined its outreach activities to have city-wide and planetary-wide impacts. In an interview with Fred Roed of the popular entrepreneurial blog *Heavy Chef*, the Education Foundation's CEO,⁴² Maryke Musson, identified "pollution" as the most concerning environmental issue facing the City. Maryke acknowledged that "[the Aquarium] can't expect areas with no waste management [pause], I can't criticise areas which are heavily polluted because the infrastructure is not there [pause] the information's not there and the guidance is not there" (Heavy Chef, 2020). It was for this reason, Maryke said, that the TOA saw it as a massive responsibility to "reach as many people" as possible through its outreach initiatives. She made clear, however, that the "many people" they wanted to reach though their outreach were primarily children, who lived in disadvantaged areas in the City.

It's easy to work with kids because they're the next generation and it's much easier... you know they're still very sort of... liquid - you know we can change minds and we can inspire them the easiest. We can say 'what you've been used to up to today - your normal - is not where we want to be. We want to change your normal and you're going to understand why, because it's actually an amazing world.

While Maryke held that children were "still" malleable and open to influence when it came to "changing their minds" regarding conservation, she also inferred that adults in the same communities were set in their ways and opposed to conservation and environmentalism. In this regard, the TOA framed itself as "planetary stewards" (Green, 2020: 111) shaping a new generation of disadvantaged people to "change [their] normal" and make better environmental choices. Interestingly, while Maryke clearly understood the structural issues at play behind pollution in disadvantaged communities, she quickly dismissed these factors to talk about environmentalism, and *teaching* children to make better personal choices. Maryke also lamented that in this "mission", the TOA had very limited time with the children, but that they hoped that the encounter with the outreach teachers would have a lasting impact,

Thabo and Anzio do amazing work. They go out to the rural, generally under-resourced schools that would never be able to come to a facility like the Aquarium - or the beach. And then they've got an hour to spend with these kids to show them all this cool stuff, and we hope that something stays behind. We're on a mission now to increase contact time, basically get the communities

⁴² Maryke was initially the curator of the Aquarium before moving to the position of CEO of the Education Foundation. Maryke has since left her position at the Aquarium and moved abroad.

involved and then repeat, repeat, repeat the message [to conserve] - but in a fun way. I really dislike this message of *do not do this* [wags finger for emphasis].

Reading this, the Heavy Chef's audience could be forgiven for believing that Thabo and Anzio routinely worked in rural areas far from Cape Town. In fact, the TOA's outreach programme predominantly serviced schools in the Cape Town metropolitan area. Describing the Cape Flats where the outreach programmes were situated as "rural areas" imaginatively placed it at a remove from the city. This Othering echoed the othering of the children targeted by the programme; children who needed to change their individual (taught) behaviours to embrace a love for nature which they did not have. In targeting children in rural areas, Maryke imagined that the TOA's outreach would also impact on under-resourced schools that do not "even understand that [they can promote conservation in school] so we want to hold their hand [...] so it becomes the new norm" (Heavy Chef, 2020). The infantilisation of school authorities here strikingly retrieves some of Lesley Green's (2020: 2016) arguments regarding the embeddedness and pervasiveness of what she called the persistent paternalism of environmental discourse and ideology in South Africa which echoed the language of *religious* missions in former colonies. Green (2020: 206) wrote, "the language of saving souls and saving the earth tend to be very similar ... Whether technological or spiritual when the narrative of saviours becomes a performative script, one represents one's work as transcendent, neutral, and universal".

This was certainly the case here. In Maryke's description of Thabo and Anzio's involvement in the outreach programme, the teachers were discursively transformed into saviours who reached the (unsaved) poor in the City, and who worked (hopefully lasting) miracles in a single hour. These miraculous changes were, like religious conversion, based on individual convictions and changed behaviour. Maryke also spoke about the TOA's "mission" to repeat these messages and to extend their reach to a wider community. The language that described the TOA's outreach programme in this instance - and in a broader media that depicted the targets of the outreach programme, the children, certainly evinced comparisons with the tenets of religious missions and evangelical paradigms.

The parallels that Green (2020) drew between the environmental "mission" and religious evangelism was not new. In 2003, 'celebrity' anthropologist, author and filmmaker, Michael Crichton (2003), penned an essay entitled *Environmentalism as Religion*. In the essay, Crichton (2003: no page number) proposed that, "environmentalism is one of the most powerful religions in the Western world", and argued that environmentalism mapped onto

traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs and myths. Crichton specifically posited that the language and framing of environmentalism often overlapped the Christian “mythologies” of *sin* and *salvation*. He wrote,

There's an initial Eden, a paradise, a state of grace and unity with nature, there's a fall from grace into a state of pollution ... as a result of our actions there is a judgment day coming for us all. We are all energy sinners, doomed to die, unless we seek salvation, which is now called sustainability. Sustainability is salvation in the church of the environment (Crichton, 2003: no page number).

Crichton further likened environmentalists to “preachers” who were “in the business of salvation, and ... want to help you to see things the right way. They want to help you be saved” (Crichton, 2003: no page number; see also Ricketts, 2010: 52). And like preachers, these authors tell us, environmentalists have powerful personal conversion stories that echo narrative arcs of Biblical prophets; of being ignorant of the state of sin in which they lived, of experiencing a crisis, learning the truth, conversion, spreading the message and leading others on a similar path of salvation (Harding, 2000; van Wyk, 2014: 66-68). In some respects, Thabo and Anzio described their entry into the field of EE and of conservation in terms that can be described as religious. Thabo was passionate about the TOA’s outreach programme and saw his work as an outreach teacher as more than “just a job”. For Thabo, this was a “calling” and one that had been cultivated over time. Originally from the rural Transkei in the Eastern Cape, an area economically and socially far removed from Cape Town, Thabo initially came to Cape Town to train and work as a sound engineer. When that did not pan out, and he struggled to make a living, he applied to work at the Aquarium when a position opened up in 2008. Thabo’s appreciation for the ocean, he told me, had only come later, *through* working in the Aquarium. When he first started at the TOA, he was quite scared of the sea and marine animals because, he explained, he had never seen or been near them before. However, over time, he developed a love for animals and nature, and now wanted other disadvantaged students to have the same experience through the outreach encounters. Anzio had a similar start in conservation. In 2001, he had attended one of the TOA’s holiday courses during his school holidays, and was so captivated by the Aquarium’s work that he eventually began volunteering there on weekends. He went on to study conservation so that he could work at the TOA after graduating.

This framing of Anzio and Thabo as environmental preachers, however, overlooked their individual agency as they taught the TOA’s environmental message, the ways in which

their messages went beyond the TOA's individual conversion narrative of environmental sinners, and the extended work they had to put in to secure one-hour classes with the students. Thabo's lessons for instance situated environmental problems in a wider context of economic and political inequality rather than in the sins of individual children. Both Thabo and Anzio constantly worked at relationships with the schools and teachers to secure valuable school time for the TOA programme; their efficacy was not due to their charismatic presence or to the content of their message. I saw just a little sliver of this work on the days that I drove around with both teachers. Thabo and Anzio had to build this rapport in a context where other environmental NPOs were constantly pushing to gain access to the same schools - often with disastrous results for already overburdened local teachers. Thus, while Maryke seemed to imagine that the biggest part of the job was to make lessons memorable and fun, the outreach teachers spent considerable time negotiating access to specific schools and the shifting NPO environment of EE teaching in disadvantaged schools.

Conclusion

This chapter looked at the TOA's two outreach programmes; Oceans in Motion and Smart Living, which targeted schools on the Cape Flats. The TOA made it clear that these outreach lessons were intended for the most economically disadvantaged children in the City, in places where the schools and students were severely under-resourced, and where children supposedly had limited access to a particular pristine 'nature'. On its website and through media interviews with its management, the TOA insisted that its outreach programmes were motivated by an understanding that because the targeted children had not had the 'right kind' of experiences in nature, such as visits to the TOA, they had not yet been inspired towards conservation, and were thus uninformed about the importance of positive environmental behaviours (which they lacked). In the previous chapter, I discussed how this message - that certain inhabitants of the city were environmental villains and others saviours - was a message that a number of environmental agencies repeated. Such was its ubiquity that I could trace the ways in which children in different parts of the city had internalised its message in their application letters to the TOA's onsite holiday programme.

In this chapter, I have (with other anthropologists) argued that there are multiple overlaps between the language of environmentalism and religious evangelism, and that we can trace some of these overlaps in the TOA's outreach programme. Like religious evangelists, the TOA "adopt[ed] an outward orientation" (Buchs et al., 2015 in Malier, 2021: 9) seeking to

reach out to audiences who were not yet convinced of their middle-class environmentalism (see Chapter 3) through charismatic ‘preachers’. In this, the TOA, like religious organisations felt a “moral obligation” to “modify others’ behaviours ... to save the planet” (Malier, 2021: 8). In this analogy, environmentalism attempted to ‘make disciples’ by spreading its message, through a *modus operandi* that rested on a kind of education that shared a narrative of planetary abjection while evangelising about conservation’s redemptive potential. In this, EE taught the message that *individuals* could secure such redemption if they embraced ‘sustainable’ behaviours and consumption practices.

To this end, I have shown that the TOA framed the two outreach teachers, Anzio and Thabo, as preachers; men who were personally transformed by environmentalism and who could work ‘miracles’ in their short contact with marginalised students. And like evangelical conversion scripts (see Harding, 2000), the structure of all of the outreach lessons were remarkably similar. In all the outreach lessons I attended, the children were first engaged in fun activities *with* and *within* ‘nature’. These activities were immediately followed by lessons that stressed the urgency of the environmental crisis, even on their own doorsteps, and called on the children to take action. In this, the TOA teacher aimed to inculcate a kind of ethic of caring for the environment amongst the children through encouraging them to take responsibility for local pollution – often by suggesting ‘middle- class’ solutions which were economically far out of the students’ reach. In this regard, the ‘redemption’ that the TOA preached was an impossible hope for many of the children who participated in the classes and who enjoyed the lessons.

While I show that there is a compelling case to be made for drawing parallels between the TOA’s outreach programmes (and by implication its other EE) and religious evangelism, I have also noted a caution in this chapter about the wholesale application of such an analogy. As I showed, the outreach teachers (the TOA’s ‘preachers’) sometimes framed their lessons in terms that could be described as heretical in middle-class conservation; they acknowledged that structural poverty and politics caused environmental problems. Their work also stretched far beyond the one hour ‘sermons’; in a context where Thabo and Anzio competed with a number of other NPOs who tried to bring the ‘good gospel’ to poor children, their lessons were not enough. Both men spent considerable time building rapport and networks with schoolteachers, principals and school bodies to ensure that they could return for future lessons. An evangelical narrative overlooks this crucial work, the limits of EE, and the agency of the children. If we just interpret EE as possible Damascene experiences (that could lead to

conversion or not), we miss out on the discoveries they make in these lessons, the fun they have and how such lessons are inserted in the tedium of a school day.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In this thesis, I focused an ethnographic lens on the Two Oceans Aquarium (TOA), a for-profit aquarium situated at the glamorous commercial hub of the V&A Waterfront in Cape Town. Like many zoos and aquaria around the world, the TOA had to justify its existence to a “witnessing public” (Chua, 2018:a) who were increasingly aware of animal rights issues and critical of keeping animals captive for mere ‘entertainment’. In the face of this challenge, the TOA distanced itself from the traditional image of the aquarium as space for public entertainment and leisure, meticulously building a public reputation as a *serious* environmental organisation. To this end, the TOA established a non-profit (NPO) arm in 2018 that would oversee and extend its myriad philanthropic environmental activities (see Chapter 1). This thesis focused on the TOA’s Education Foundation and its various environmental classes, both onsite and in “outreach” locations.

In Chapter One, I situated the TOA within the historical evolution of zoos and aquaria globally and argued that the organisation’s move towards conservation was in line with a global paradigm shift amongst similar institutions. I also situated the TOA within the historical context of colonial and apartheid conservation in the City and showed how the class and racial legacies of these regimes continue to “haunt” conservation – and the Aquarium. As such, nature conservation in the City became embedded in a particular white, middle-class ideology which legitimated particular claims to certain types of “nature”, a project that has long animated anthropological interest (see Chapter 1).

As a number of anthropologists have shown, this middle-class environmentalism is globally hegemonic and lies at the heart of many conservation projects (see Green, 2020; van Sittert, 2003), government development (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1990; Marcatelli, 2021), and a global mediascape concerned with conservation. In Chapter 2, I pay attention to the ways in which the TOA portrayed itself on various online platforms. I showed that the TOA relied heavily on “dramatic”, morally compelling stories, often centring on ‘charismatic’ animals such as turtles to “spur” its audience into environmental action (Gua & Saxton, 2014). In this online universe, the TOA’s stories often travelled beyond the TOA mediascape to become part of a wider conservation world while the TOA often linked and shared stories from multiple *other* serious environmental agencies and organisations. The TOA’s online universe thus became an “additional reality” (Boellstorff, 2016: 9) where the organisation shaped its community around its causes, responded to critics, and most importantly, legitimised their image as a ‘serious’ environmental organisation (see Chapter 2).

As a number of scholars have shown, middle-class or mainstream environmentalism also often reproduce particular ideologies around class and race (Escobar, 1995; Green, 2020; Marcatelli, 2021). While this came across in the ways in which the TOA framed the aquarium and its conservation causes online, specifically in the individual consumer remedies it promoted to solve marine pollution, it was also a discernible influence on the classes that they taught on-site, and in their outreach programme.

One of the clearest ways that this was brought home to me was within the TOA's Smart Living classroom, where children from different backgrounds had vastly different experiences of the course. In Chapter 3, I describe how students from disadvantaged backgrounds faced unique challenges in attending the course, achieving academic success and participating in the follow-up environmental action that the course demanded students complete before they could graduate and receive their certificates. To be specific, I found that the disadvantaged children could not participate in the requisite (overwhelmingly middle-class) environmental activities that the TOA advocated in the same manner as their privileged, white peers. These environmental activities comprised of a very specific framework of actions that required certain forms of new consumption; to use recycling bags and bins, reusable tote bags, straws and cups, and to install rain tanks and solar panels at home. In the classroom, students from disadvantaged areas were confronted by lessons that assumed that they had access to the kind of municipal infrastructures that middle-class neighbourhoods had; refuse collection, electricity, sewerage systems, recycling facilities, running water. I argued that these differentiated experiences were a function of the "hidden curriculum", a concept that explains the education system's unthinking embrace of middle-class expectations, norms and values. Thus, while the Smart Living teachers acknowledged that some of the children were from disadvantaged areas or poor, many felt that making the course "free" to all residents of the Western Cape would allow equal participation in the course. However, they routinely overlooked the hidden transport, food and time costs of the course and expected all parents to behave in ways that conformed to middle-class norms. Situating the Smart Living course within the analytical framework of the hidden curriculum allowed me to get a better understanding of the TOA's environmentalism, of the class biases involved, and on a broader level, the subtle ways in which disadvantaged communities were excluded from the field of environmentalism from an early age.

For the most part, the TOA's prescriptive environmentalism simply formed part of a broader, *universal* narrative that was relentlessly shared by the media, schools, and by municipalities such as the City of Cape Town (see Mihalopoulos, 2021). As I showed in Chapter 2, remarkably *similar* environmental messages and stories were repeated and reshared

online and on other platforms, all echoing the same causes and tropes. Such was their ubiquity and effectiveness that these messages were internalised by children who had not even participated in the TOA's EE courses yet. As I showed in Chapter 4, an analysis of the children's motivation letters to join the Smart Living course, revealed that children from across the City, and from all backgrounds, repeated mainstream environmentalism's alarm about climate change and imminent ecological collapse (see Chapter 4).

One of the most striking findings in this project was that middle-class environmentalism unthinkingly produced certain ideas around 'heroes' and 'villains' in conservation and that children internalised these messages. In Chapter 4, I showed how this played out in the ways that children from different backgrounds talked about the causes of climate change, pollution and environmental collapse- and what remedies they imagined to these ills. White, privileged students who applied to the course generally saw themselves as custodians of a particular "pristine" or "wild" nature and identified racial Others as environmental villains who needed more education - or more punitive measures to behave in environmentally responsible ways (see Chapter 4). For their part, it was striking that many of the children from disadvantaged backgrounds had *internalised* the view that their *own* communities were culpable for a myriad of environmental issues that social scientists have long shown were political and structural in origin. Moreover, these children imagined middle-class environmentalism with its new forms of consumption and individual rather than structural solutions as an alternative to politics, an alternative in which simply *caring* for the environment *enough* could solve crime, poverty and all manner of other social ills (see Chapter 4). In this, the disadvantaged children believed mainstream environmentalism's promises of *salvation*, a promise that lay beyond their abilities to realise because they did not have the financial means to participate in its technologies.

In this regard, a number of scholars have called mainstream environmentalism a "new religion" (Rickets, 2010: 52) which inculcates a "moral obligation" to "modify others' behaviours ... to save the planet" (Malier, 2021: 8). In some ways, the TOA conformed to this depiction of environmental organisations as akin to religious ones. This was clear to see in the ways that the TOA tried to extend its environmental message beyond its doors to those who perhaps had not been 'converted' in its image yet. In Chapter 5, I analysed the TOA's outreach initiatives, and found that those involved in implementing these programmes often echoed the language of a *religious* mission. The TOA premised its outreach programmes on the belief that it had to reach (underprivileged) children who supposedly had limited access to a particular pristine 'nature' and who had not yet been inspired towards conservation. Like religious

evangelists, the TOA “adopt[ed] an outward orientation” (Buchs et al., 2015 in Malier, 2021: 9) seeking to reach out to audiences who were not yet convinced of their middle-class environmentalism through their charismatic ‘preachers’, Thabo and Anzio (see Chapter 5).

The TOA structured their outreach lessons in such a way that the disadvantaged students were left with a firm understanding of the planetary crisis, and a belief that they could secure ‘redemption’ for all manner of social ills in their communities if they simply embraced ‘sustainable’ behaviours and consumption practices. In this, the TOA teachers aimed to inculcate an ethic of caring for the environment amongst the children through encouraging them to take responsibility for local pollution – often by suggesting middle-class solutions which were economically far out of the students’ reach. In this regard, the ‘redemption’ that the TOA preached was an impossible hope for many of the children who participated in the classes and who enjoyed the lessons. As such, the message was enticing - as evidenced by the frequency with which the children expressed obvious concern and care for their home environments but it was a message that many of its audience simply could not ‘convert to’ due to unbridgeable structural barriers (see Chapter 5). However, I also cautioned against the blanket application of such an analogy. As I showed, the outreach teachers sometimes deviated from the conventions of middle-class conservation; they acknowledged that structural poverty and politics caused environmental problems and spent considerable time building rapport and networks with schoolteachers, principals and school bodies to ensure that they could return to disadvantaged schools for future lessons. It is also important to acknowledge the undeniably positive experiences of the children in these lessons; in the discoveries they made, and the fun they very clearly had with the TOA teachers in lessons that broke up the tedium of a normal school day.

This project has showed that even at its most innocuous, teaching school children to conserve and protect marine animals, mainstream environmentalism of the type embraced by one of Cape Town’s most iconic institutions, could unthinkingly reproduce messages that map environmental destruction on race and class- with unintended consequences. As I have shown in this thesis, the teachers who worked at the TOA, the volunteers who helped out in the lessons, the staff who worked on the TOA’s media and its management were all committed, skilled and enthusiastic about the TOA’s conservation and education mission. However, as I have shown in this thesis, even the best intentions can have unintended consequences; particularly so in spaces like in which the TOA operated, where race and class inequalities were deep seated and stark. In its very middle-class, prescriptive environmentalism, the TOA unintentionally depoliticised the environmental crisis and shaped the ways in which a new generation related

to the environment or “nature”; a relationship in which the privileged retained a proprietary interest in conservation while poorer children internalised their own culpability and the impossibility of becoming true environmental stewards. In this, the TOA was not unique, and participated in a much wider mainstream, middle-class environmentalism, which operated according to certain norms and expectations that were often unvoiced.

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