

Whale House Museum

By early 1990's whales became a chosen tourist attraction. Hermanus became known as the heart of the Whale Route and the museum has one of the best close up whale watching spots in town as well as a telescope. On 24 June 1991 a member of the Board of Trustees & chairman of the Friends of the Old Harbour Museum, Jose Burman, had the foresight to propose a whale museum on an open section of the Fishermen's Village. A whale museum to inform and educate the many local visitors and learners, as well as national and international tourists, who view the beautiful whales in Walker Bay. This museum will be entirely dedicated to whale exhibits, specially the southern right, and anything pertaining to cetaceans. Architect Pat Riley designed the 'Whale House' and plans were ready by the beginning of 1994. Fundraising to build was started and the support and response of the local community was excellent. The building was completed in 3 phases as funds became available, during the chairmanship of the Board of Trustees, Hans Moore: (1) Lecture Room & built by Richmond MacIntyre (1995); (2) Whale House foundation, shop, office & toilets - built by Richmond MacIntyre (1996); (3) Main Hall - built by Bruce Green (1998).

The Whale House consist of an exhibition hall especially designed to house a suspended whale skeleton and whale exhibition. Establishing a natural & cultural history exhibition in the Whale House & 'The Whales of Walker Bay' (Transformation Projects of the Old Harbour museum - first phase).

The adjacent Lecture Room was previously used by members of the public for lectures, talks, functions, exhibitions and arbitrations(CCMA). Since July 2007 'The Whale Show' can be viewed at either 10:00 or 15:00. It is a 25 minute audio visual show compiled by artist Noel Ashton. The show sponsored by IFAW gives a superb account of these magnificent cetaceans.

The search for a 'right' whale skeleton was on. In 1998 negotiations was started with the Technical Division of Museum Service (Dep of Cultural Affairs) to do the research & compile a world-class exhibition on cetaceans. In July 2003 a suitable skeleton was found after many unsuccessful attempts. A young female Southern Right whale washed up on the rocks at Onrus River. She was exactly the right size. Recovery of the bones were done by taxidermist, Piet Pretorius assisted by the Overstrand Municipality and Hermanus Coast Care. Because it was at the beginning of the school holidays, a lot of interest was shown from visitors and many parents had to keep inquisitive children away from touching the smelly bones.

As this washed-up whale was in an advanced stage of decomposition, some of the bones came loose and went missing. These bones had to be remoulded by the taxidermist with a bone-like substance, which is a very costly affair. The other bones had to be cleaned and treated in huge containers filled with water and enzymes. After completion of this project, Piet Pretorius assembled all the bones to construct a complete whale that is now hanging in the Whale Museum. Piet was also responsible for the preparation of the whale skeletons in the whale well of the Iziko/SA Museum in Cape Town.

Final preparations were started to prepare the building to hang the skeleton. The museum and Piet Pretorius consulted structural engineer, Thys van Rooyen on how to re-enforce the roof trusses to carry the weight of the whale.