

# Saving MUSSELS

When it comes to endangered species, most of us would put the Panda or the Siberian tiger at the top of the list. But for a small community of people clinging to an ancient way of life in Coffee Bay, it's the little creatures who cling to the rocks that hold the key to survival

BY PIPPA HETHERINGTON

When the moon gathers up the tide like the hem of a dress, it is time for the women of the village to wander down to the waves. They leave their beehive huts and follow the trail that has been carved into the face of the mountain.

Some carry buckets, some carry basins, and some carry sharpened blades of iron, rusted by the sun and the salty air. When they reach the windswept shore, they clamber onto the jagged rocks, treading carefully in their old takkies or bare feet.

There, the women of Coffee Bay, just like their mothers and grandmothers before them, begin scraping their living from the sea.

For generations, the mussels that cling to the rocks have been a staple source of protein for the people of this Wild Coast enclave, as well as a source of income in an area where

poverty and unemployment are rife. But today, these two communities – the mussels and their harvesters – are under threat.

Rocks have been stripped of their marine colonies, and of the seed-beds that make it possible for the mussels to return. That's where the World Wildlife Fund comes in.

Better known for its campaigns to save endangered species like the Snow Leopard, the Panda and the Siberian Tiger, the WWF is now working together with the Green Trust of South Africa to help the people of Coffee Bay save their mussels and in turn, preserve their own way of life.

"I remember, when I was growing up, how visible the mussels were on the rocks", says Mbongeni Mvimbeni, a monitor from the WWF's Mussel Rehabilitation Project.

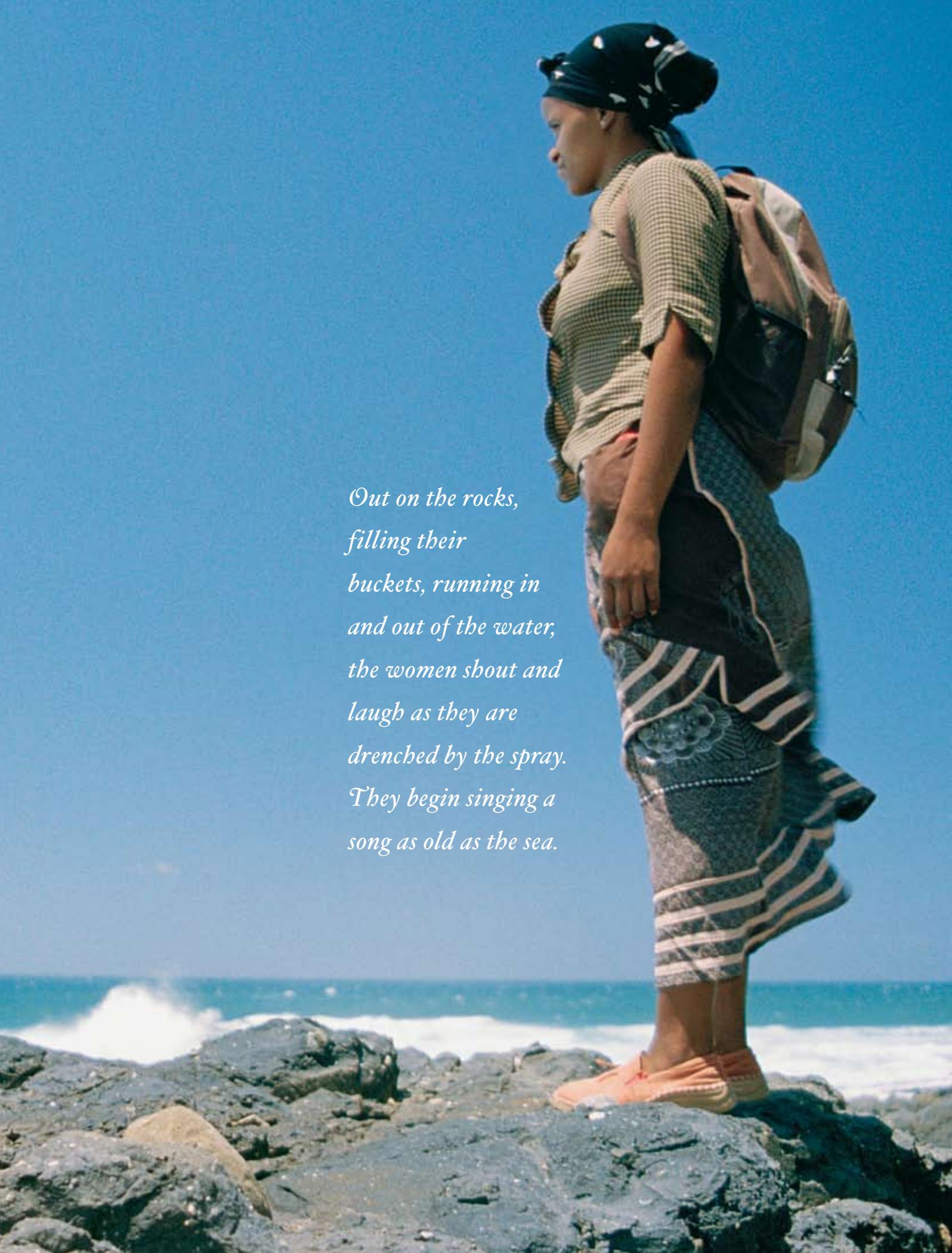
"I learned how to harvest the mussels by

watching my mother and grandmother. They used to go down to the rocks with big woven sisal bags slung over their shoulders, and after sitting patiently on the rocks while the tide went out, they would sing prayers to encourage a successful harvest."

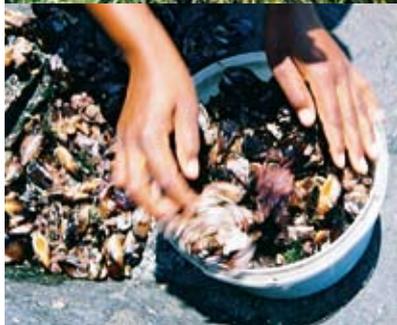
Mvimbeni and his colleague, Nokhaya Mphehleleli, both born and raised in Coffee Bay, are two of the 10 monitors paid by the project to walk along the coastline, 16 days a month, monitoring the harvesting that is taking place.

Carrying backpacks and open notepads, the monitors spend each day counting and weighing the harvested mussels, feeding the information into a database for research. They don't have authority to police the area, so the community feels unthreatened by their presence. ▶

Time and tide...Nokhaya Mphehleli, a monitor for the WWF's Mussel Rehabilitation Project, gazes out to sea

A woman is standing on a rocky shore, looking out at the ocean. She is wearing a patterned headscarf, a light-colored short-sleeved shirt, and a long, patterned skirt. She has a large backpack on her back. The ocean is blue with white waves crashing against the rocks. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

*Out on the rocks,  
filling their  
buckets, running in  
and out of the water,  
the women shout and  
laugh as they are  
drenched by the spray.  
They begin singing a  
song as old as the sea.*



Out on the rocks, the women shout and laugh as they are drenched by the spray. They sing a song as old as the sea.

Nosimo Vulindlela, a community member, mussel harvester, project committee member and grandmother, translates for us: “Here he comes,” they sing if a wave is about to break, or “he’s asleep” if the water is still.

When the women have collected their daily fill, the monitors get to work. The harvesting tools collect both large and small mussels. The large ones are kept for food, and the harvesters are encouraged to place the smaller ones in designated areas for replanting.

### Scraping a living from the rocks, the people of Coffee Bay are working to save their coastal heritage for future generations

To assist in the process, a group of “mussel drillers” drills holes in the rocks, preparing enclosures where the mussels can grow. Using cordless drills, they work to the ebb and flow of the tide. They need to make it out to the mid-intertidal areas where the mussels grow naturally, before the waves come crashing in. Their work is swift and accurate.

Mvimbeni tells me we’ve been invited to a harvester’s houses to taste mussels. We drive through the main village of Coffee Bay, along the road to Hole in the Wall, and then down another road that looks more like a footpath. We screech to a halt next to a stream.

We begin yet another climb, approaching a traditional Transkei hut through long grass. By the time we arrive, Vulindlela has lit a fire.

In the potjie, she adds a small amount of water to her mussels and allows them to steam

until they open slightly. She uses an old saucer and she empties the mussels onto the grass. The Gogos sit and eat together, talking gently among themselves. Vulindlela offers me some mussels to taste. No cream, garlic or parsley. No butter, onion or wine. Just the taste of salt, the sea and the sun.

Now the community has been mobilised, and the mussel rehabilitation technique has been perfected. People have been trained to put the smaller mussels back on the rocks, allowing them to reattach themselves for growth. All that remains is to spread the message to future generations.

The following morning, we’re met by a hip young woman named Ntombekhaya Tsheyi. Everyone calls her “Ntosh”. She’s the assistant coordinator for the WWF sponsored Eco-School Programme at the Coffee Bay node.

She leads a group of students out onto the rocks, and gives them an informative lesson on marine conservation. The children gather closely, touching, feeling, smelling the hidden creatures of the coastal rock-pools.

“We often discuss how things would be if there weren’t mussels anymore,” says Ntosh. “These kids have never thought about the

danger of losing them forever. When they do, they become passionate and committed. It’s cool to care now!”

Some of these children will move on to the cities. Some, perhaps, will stay to look after the mussels and their environment. Either way, they are learning at a young age to care for their community and their planet.

“The bond that the people from this area have with their environment is very strong and ancient, and it needs to be respected and understood,” says project monitor Nokhaya Mphehleleli.

“I learned to harvest mussels from my mother,” she remembers, gazing out at the sea. “She would tell me, ‘Nokhaya, you must always watch the moon in the night sky. If you harvest the day after the moon is full, or when there is no moon, it will be a good harvest.’”