



African penguin youth ambassadors fighting to ensure the species doesn't die out in their lifetimes

(Cape Town, 22 September, 2023) – Sophumelela Qoma and Keira King are no ordinary young women. They've already started conservation initiatives, spoken publicly about their passion for the ocean and led their peers to get involved in protecting marine resources. The #NotOnOurWatch African penguin survival campaign is proud to introduce them as its Youth Ambassadors.

If predictions about there being too few breeding pairs of African penguins in the wild by 2035 to ensure the species' survival come to pass, the penguins will be extinct before Keira is 30. And Sophumelela and Keira's time, passion and commitment will have been for nothing. But not on their watch is that going to happen.

“Sometimes problems seem insurmountable, but I've learnt that nothing's impossible. After completing high school, I faced a three-year hiatus from furthering my education due to circumstances beyond my control. During this time, I battled mental and emotional struggles as I grappled with the overwhelming challenges in my life. But, with self-discovery, clear goals, guidance, embracing change and learning continuously, I found a vision that was bigger than myself, and it propelled me forward. That's why I believe that if we work together with passion and determination, we can save the very special African penguin from extinction,” says Sophumelela Qoma, who is the co-owner of the Shark Research Unit in Mossel Bay, the founder of an ocean investment trust and a key representative for five conservation programmes.

The endemic African penguins, found only in South African and Namibia, are faced with multiple pressures that are cumulatively contributing to their decline. Historically, egg-harvesting and guano collection caused their colonies to shrink. But the more recent decline has been attributed to food shortages caused by shifts in the distributions of their prey species; namely a significant drop in the numbers of anchovies and sardines in the sea and direct competition with fisheries for food. A growing threat is the expansion of harbours and an increase in ship traffic. Another emerging threat for the African penguin is the ship-to-ship bunkering that enables vessels to refuel out at sea and increases the risks of oil spills – this has started in Algoa Bay, home to some large colonies, and is planned to expand to the West Coast. The destruction of the African penguin's nesting habitat is also a concern.

“It's because of these threats that I decided to raise money to rescue and rehabilitate African penguins this year. I trained for three months on a prone board, which you have to paddle by hand, and then I paddled from Salmon Bay in Ballito to uShaka pier in Durban. It took me 7 hours and 20 minutes and I was really tired, but it was worth it. I'm now only about 6,000 rand away from reaching my target of raising 50,000 rand for African penguins at [Sanccob](#). It will help, but to stop their extinction, people around the world will need to care enough to get involved and raise awareness and make sure that authorities step in to protect the species from all of the threats. As young people that's the opportunity we have – we can save the African penguin and if we can do

that, we can save the ocean,” Keira King, who is 17 years old and last year embarked on a 7.5 kilometre swim in freezing waters to support turtle conservation, says.

In just over 100 years the African penguin population has declined by 99% to an estimated 10,400 breeding pairs in the wild. Barbara Creecy, South Africa’s Minister of Fisheries, Forestry and the Environment has enacted some protections for the birds. But she can’t save them on her own.

“That’s why we started the #NotOnOurWatch campaign. It’s only by raising public awareness and encouraging the authorities in South Africa and around the world to make wise decisions for their survival that we’ll win this battle,” says Dr Judy Mann, President of the International Zoo Educators Association, Executive of Strategic Projects at Two Oceans Aquarium Foundation, and a founder of the #NOOW campaign. “Anyone can help, starting today. Support and tag #NOOW in social media, follow Sophumelela and Keira, and join our [worldwide waddle](#) on 14 October. This global event has been endorsed by the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development as a Decade Activity. We’re partnering with zoos, aquariums, conservationists, animal lovers and concerned citizens across the world to pull off the biggest International African Penguin Awareness Day event yet. Please join us and our youth ambassadors.”

To contact the #NOOW campaign, please email: info@africanpenguins.org

To visit the website: <https://www.africanpenguins.org>

To access media resources go to: <https://www.africanpenguinnotonourwatch.org/media-and-resources>

To read about the upcoming worldwide waddle on 14 October go to: <https://www.africanpenguinnotonourwatch.org/join-a-waddle>

To visit the Two Oceans Aquarium Foundation’s website: <https://www.aquarium.co.za/foundation/conservation/not-on-our-watch-african-penguin-campaign>

To see #NOOW’s television advert go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zr4yyjUZ-5g>

To find out more about the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development: <https://oceandecade.org/>

For biographies and photographs of the youth ambassadors, please scroll down.



About Sophumelela Qoma

Sophumelela Qoma comes from Ngqushwa in the Eastern Cape and is a passionate advocate for marine conservation. She earned a Diploma in Nature Conservation from Nelson Mandela University and is now the co-owner of the Shark Research Unit and founder of an ocean investment trust in Mossel Bay. Sophumelela was featured in National Geographic Wild's 2021 Shark Attack Files and the 2023 Shark Eat Shark special premiere. With her dedication to outreach, education, and conservation, she also holds key positions as the African Regional Coordinator for Minorities in Shark Sciences, the Biodiversity Representative for Africa and Deputy Secretary for the IUCN African Protected Areas Congress youth programme, a Dive Fellow at the Nature Environment & Wildlife Conservation Trust, and the Keep Fin Alive Ambassador.



About Keira King

Keira King is 17 years old and attends school in La Lucia, KwaZulu-Natal. She has been in love with the ocean ever since she can remember, having been influenced by her grandfather, who has a passion for underwater photography and fish identification, and her dad, who was a South African surfer in his youth as well as being involved in lifesaving. In April 2022, she completed the Robben Island swim, which was 7.5km in 10.5 degree Celsius water, and raised 25,000 rand for the Turtle Conservation Centre at the Two Oceans Aquarium. In August this year, Keira completed a 46km paddle from Salmon Bay in Ballito to uShaka pier in Durban on a prone board, which is paddled by hand. It took more than 7 hours on the water, but she has raised 43,800 rand so far for the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Seabirds (Sanccob), which rescues and rehabilitates African penguins.

About the #NOOW campaign

The #NotOnOurWatch campaign's worldwide waddle on 14 October 2023 has been endorsed by the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development as a Decade Activity.

#NOOW was created in 2022 after scientists and conservationists agreed there needed to be a public action project to try to stop the functional extinction of the unique African penguin by 2035. The campaign's goal is to create a movement and raise awareness about the need for urgent action to reverse the decline of the African penguin population in the wild. Public support in South Africa and around the world, including in the USA, Europe, Japan and Australia, will help to ensure that the South African government, the conservation community and private industry make wise decisions concerning the future of the African penguin.



2021 United Nations Decade
2030 of Ocean Science
for Sustainable Development

This publication is endorsed by the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development as a Decade Activity. Use of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development logo by a non-UN entity does not imply the endorsement of the United Nations of such entity, its products or services, or of its planned activities. For more information please access: <https://forum.oceandecade.org/page/disclaimer>