

## Sardine Run – Fish Flood on South Africa's Beaches

“In summer, billions of sardines migrate along South Africa's coast, sharks and albatrosses drive them towards the beach - directly into the buckets and nets of the fishermen.”

This is how Der Spiegel titled its article on the Sardine Run in its issue of 27.06.2021.

The Sardine Run is a spectacular natural phenomenon. It takes place between May and July. Huge shoals of sardines are attracted by the cold Benguela Current, which flows from the southern tip of Africa northwards, along the east coast of Africa towards the equator. The Benguela Current is very rich in oxygen and plankton and therefore offers ideal living conditions for schools of fish. Sardines prefer water temperatures of 14 to 20 degrees Celsius and stay in water 25 to 100 m deep during the day. Due to the rising water temperatures in summer, the sardines migrate from their spawning grounds off the coast of South Africa around the Cape of Good Hope to the north-east into the subtropical coastal waters of South Africa, the so-called Wild Coast. On this way, the sardines form large shoals to protect themselves from predators such as dolphins, whales, sharks, and seabirds.

Dolphins have developed an ingenious technique to break through the sardines' protective shield; they swim up to the sardines from the depths and drive the shoal to the water surface. By doing this, they isolate smaller shoals from the main shoal. At the same time, the dolphins are accompanied from the air by a flock of Cape Gannets, which are quite large seabirds. They watch the dolphins' every move from above. At the appropriate moment, the birds, stretching their wings far back before impact, shoot torpedo-like into the water from a height of about 30 m at up to 100 km/h. The dolphins are then hit again with their wings. With another thrust of its wings, the dolphin can dive up to 12 m deep to snatch a sardine and resurface. Upon surfacing, the bird immediately devours its prey to avoid annoying fights with its conspecifics. After about 20 minutes, all participants are satiated, and the spectacle is over. This natural phenomenon is described as one of the most spectacular in the world. It is very sensitive due to its unique interplay of wildlife, climatic and oceanographic conditions.

Unfortunately, humans exploit the Sardine Run for their own purposes. Often the sardines flee from their natural enemies to the coast. There, fishermen wait with their motorboats to fish them out of the sea by the ton with little effort. In addition, the sardine run is a tourist event and triggers mass gatherings of people year after year who observe the phenomenon on the beaches or in the water as divers. This leads to lasting disturbances of the ecosystem.

Moritz Bell (Q1)

The fragile paradise – Essays on issues of selected photographs

