

How artwork is helping save the albatross - by Meidad Goren

Title

For over 30 years Bruce Pearson, a professional artist, has worked on a range of themes to convey his enthusiasm for wildlife and especially birds, giving a sense of wonder to the wild places they inhabit. More recently he has focused some of his time on developing creative links between art and conservation as a contribution towards a wider effort by an informal grouping of artists, writers, musicians, poets and others inspired by the natural world.

Years ago Bruce spent considerable time on Bird Island, South Georgia as a research assistant working with albatrosses and other seabirds where he developed a deep passion for these animals. When he realised that the same birds he ringed and studied 30 years ago are seriously threatened he decided to use his skills and experience to raise awareness about the issue and funds for the conservation of the seabirds. And so the 'Troubled Waters' project was born. The time Bruce spent with albatrosses in the southern ocean produced sufficient artwork but in order to tell the complete story of these birds Bruce had to experience the birds' interactions with humans at the heart of the issue - fishermen.

When BirdLife's Global Seabird Programme coordinator Dr Ben Sullivan asked me if I could take Bruce with me on a longliner, I was little reluctant as I knew how hard it is to organise a trip on a fishing vessel for just myself, let alone for me plus a guest. Despite this, three local captains agreed to take us onboard but upon arrival, Bruce had to wait in Richards Bay for three weeks as the three boats had been grounded and never left the harbour. While we were waiting for the vessels to make repairs and return to sea we managed to take a day trip while one vessel steamed to Durban for further repairs.

Bruce also spent time in the harbour drawing the fishermen offloading fish and fixing gear. We eventually realised that the trip was not going to happen, so we decided to fly to Cape Town to undertake a 5 day trip onboard a trawl vessel instead. It wasn't the original plan as Bruce was very keen to experience a trip onboard a longline vessel but nevertheless he was happy to spend some time at sea on a fishing boat with thousands of birds around (who wouldn't?). For four days Bruce was painting his heart out. He was able to directly observe the gannets diving at the nets, the albatrosses fighting for food and how we collect the data on bird mortality and fishing operations. By the end of the trip Bruce was happy with the results.

Together with his Richards Bay work in the harbour and the sea trip he had enough material

to go back to the studio and start working towards the main objective; the production of a book and an exhibit which will raise funds for albatross conservation. For me it was a privilege to spend these weeks with Bruce; a great artist and an amazing soul and to be a part of this beautiful project which hopefully will help to save more albatrosses. By Meidad Goren of BirdLife South Africa's Albatross Task Force team. To read more Albatross Task Force please [click here](#).