Searching for living fossils

Imagine diving in the waters of Sodwana, looking for fish and finding a (thought to be) extinct species. Underwater explorer Peter Timm, who set up operation Triton together with Rolleen Jacobs in 1996, is the man who made the discovery in 2000.

Timm famously rediscovered the Coelacanth, a primitive-looking fish that was thought to have gone extinct nearly 65 million years ago.

To celebrate his legacy, a group of friends who call themselves The Unified Dive Team gather annually and go off on the amazing adventure in search of the illusive Coelacanth. The group submit their dive and emergency plans to DAN Southern Africa for approval before heading off on their quest – to keep operation Triton alive in the name of research. They collect data for the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) Marine Biologists and document the progress of the Coelacanth.

There are only two known species of this fossil fish: one lives in the waters just off Indonesia and the other off the East Coast of Africa. They are found in extremely deep waters and have been known to reach over 2m in length and weigh up to 100kg.

This year, operation Triton came with the usual weeks of planning and preparation – backup divers, descent plans, emergency plans, financial issues, sponsors, sunburn, hyperthermia, hypothermia, equipment, cameras. All for 10 minutes at the bottom. This is how it went at Jesser Canyon:

THE DIVE

Day 1. They had 12 minutes: 2 minutes to reach the bottom and 10 to search for the lost beauty.

Once they reached 108 metres under, everything happened quickly. Searching for the caves, finding the famous U-shaped cave.

Nothing came up in the first 7 minutes. And then… there she was. The Coelacanth, the very reason that started this, looking at them straight in the eyes.

Easily, without scaring her, they did their jobs in wonder, collecting data, taking pictures from all sides, looking for indicator species.

Time was up. They started making their way up to 60 meters, to meet with the deep back up divers. A message went up: “One fish was spotted and all the divers are ok!”. Celebrations started on board and DAN was updated about the progress.

It took 2 minutes to get down and 2 hours to resurface. But it was worth it.

The second day came up with seriously tough conditions: howling wind and a current of 70m/min. Don Hauman’s first dive down to that depth was a tough one. At 100m, the team stopped their descent, unable to locate the caves. A further 10m down still brought nothing. Time was up.

You’d say third time’s a charm, but no. The third day was overcast and conditions were choppy. It was Janko’s turn at a first deep dive. Once under the surface, conditions weren’t as rough and they hit the U-shaped cave spot. Loads of fish were spotted in the third cave – but no Coelacanth.

On the fourth day they woke up to rain – pouring, soaking torrents of rain.

Kitting up, analysing and marking their cylinders in silence, everyone kept their eyes on the clouds that were showing no sign of clearing up. Grant, the skipper, made the call: “We dive! The rain fills the potholes and the ride will be smooth, albeit wet.”

On the ride out it dawned on everyone: they were the exact same group of people (with the addition of Don Hauman) who saw the last Coelacanth more than two years ago. Of course Timm, who passed away in 2014, was no longer with them, a gap that never goes unnoticed. It was the same divers, same skipper, same deck hands, even the same surface marshal.

They rolled over into the water and hit 90m in 2 minutes, landing about 15m from the U-shaped cave. Inspecting the surrounding areas, they found nothing. Until their lights shone into the actual cave.

And then it happened again.

She was approximately 2-3m inside the cave, calm and gracious. Jesser (as she is fondly known) was filmed, photographed (turning for the divers as if she knew the drill) and generally stared at by all.

Before anyone realised, it was over and it was time to deploy the buoys and head for the surface. History had repeated itself to the very same team.

Days 5 and 6 saw Riaan and Elaine doing their first super deep dives but, unfortunately, the Coelacanth remained elusive to them, leaving it up to next year’s expedition team to continue documenting her progress.

TEAM SPIRIT

Coming back to reality, you just have to face the facts: you cannot do this by yourself. The Unified Dive Team is a group of friends, who support each other. They plan their DAN safety plans together and rally together for sponsors. A special thanks needs to go out to the surface crew who sat in the rough seas and pouring rain for the entire time – without them it simply couldn’t happen!

This is a team of people who love diving, love the ocean and have an interest in the beauty of corals and fish. To them it’s about so much more than the Coelacanth. It’s about forming bonds that last lifetimes and creating stories that will be shared for generations to come.