

ZAMO PHUNGULA AND FRED KOCKOTT

FALLING overboard while on a yacht far out at sea is no longer a concern for 25-year-old marine biology student Zodidi Gwayisa.

Braving the chill of winter, Gwayisa this week learnt to "froggie" in a swimming pool, under the guidance of the Sea Quests project co-ordinator, Nikki Chapman.

"This is exciting. Now I know that if I fall overboard, I will not panic and freeze up," said Gwayisa, who is among 17 marine biology students selected by the Blue Fund – a joint initiative of Grindrod Bank and Wildlands – to serve as Ocean Stewards on a deep-sea research expedition, which got under way yesterday.

Over the next 30 days, the students will work alongside a team of five leading marine scientists in exploring deep water canyons off the uThukela and Protea banks, at depths never surveyed before.

The expedition on board the 72-foot wooden research vessel, the Angra Pequena, aims to provide insight into unique and rich biodiverse habitats off the KwaZulu-Natal coastline.

Previous expeditions on board the Angra Pequena have made world science history, compliments of live footage of coelacanths discovered in similar canyons off Sodwana Bay.

Gwayisa said the first leg of the expedition included a four-day "shake down" to test-run the deployment of state-of-the-art research equipment, including a remote underwater vehicle (ROV).

Mounted with a high definition video camera, the ROV connects to the vessel through a series of cables, which transmit command and control signals, allowing remote navigation by the ROV pilot, Ryan Palmer, from the South African Institute of African Biodiversity.

Researchers will also make use of baited remote underwater video (BRUV) systems, which attract fish into the field of view of cameras.

"This is a well-established



Top: A pair of butterfly fish nest in a fragile black coral tree on a deep reef off the uThukela Banks. Above: This gurnard, a bottom-dwelling fish which uses its legs to stir up food on the seabed, was filmed on a remote operating vehicle (ROV) at a depth of 137m, also off the uThukela Banks.

PICTURES SUPPLIED: AFRICAN COELACANTH ECOSYSTEM PROGRAMME (ACEP)



In exploring deep canyons off the uThukela and Protea Banks at depths never surveyed before, marine biology students hope to find species never documented in South African waters. From left: Sandile Ntuli, Njabulo Mdluli, Zodidi Gwayisa, Sea Quest's Nikki Chapman, Nobuhle Mpanza, Zanele Ngwazi, Shthokozile Mamba and Lethiwe Nxumalo. Back: Thamsanqa Nkosi (right) and Ocean Watch reporter, Zamo Phungula.

The Big Blue awaits

technique to record fish diversity, abundance and behaviour of species," said Tamsyn Livingstone, who is among the leading Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife marine scientists concerned that less than 0.5% of South Africa's ocean is protected.

Livingstone said the Ocean Stewards Programme aimed to create awareness, particularly in decision-making circles in government and industry, about the need to protect what we could soon lose – unique ocean habitats and abundant marine life already discovered

on previous Ocean Stewards expeditions.

Inspiring mentors

"We ultimately want to see protection increased to cover some of these areas," said Angra Pequena skipper and head of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife scientific services division, Dr Jean Harris.

In mentoring marine biology students, Harris said the scientists and Angra Pequena crew would not only impart skills and knowledge, but also

inspire the young Ocean Stewards to play critical roles in ocean conservation.

Learning to swim has become part and parcel of all this. Over the last few days, Gwayisa and several of her fellow Ocean Stewards have been practising "Froggie-Y-I" breast stroke kicks, as taught to them by Chapman.

Having now mastered the basics, Gwayisa is keen to take her first plunge into the ocean while far out at sea over the next few days.

"I have always wanted to



Sea Quest's Nikki Chapman helps Ocean Steward Sandile Ntuli learn survival swimming techniques.

swim in the ocean, but never thought an opportunity like this would arise," said Gwayisa.

You can read more about Ocean Stewards at www.rovin-reporters.co.za

This story forms part of Roving Reporters' Ocean Watch series, supported by the Human Elephant Foundation.

You can watch videos of the Ocean Stewards' swimming lesson at www.rovin-reporters.co.za

SURVIVAL SWIMMING THE SEA QUESTS WAY

The "Froggie-Y-I" and "medium-sized pizza" strokes

It was worth braving wintry swimming pool waters to learn survival swimming the Sea Quests way, say a cohort of Ocean Stewards.

For non-swimmers, going out to sea for several days can be scary. In preparing the group of marine biology students for the expedition, Nikki Chapman of Sea Quests introduced them to the basics of breaststroke using the tried and tested "Froggie-Y-I" technique.

"You start the froggie by spreading your knees wide apart and putting the soles of your feet together," said Chapman. "Make sure your toes aren't kissing. Then you kick them as far apart as possible creating a Y shape with your legs and body. The further apart your Y is, the further you move forward. Keeping your legs straight, you then bring them together with your arms at each side to create an I shape."

Then came the demonstration of what to do with one's arms.

"With your arms bent at the elbow like chicken wings, you push them out to make a round pizza. Make sure you web your fingers tight together like a duck's feet."

"No, it's not a large pizza," said Chapman, correcting one student. "It's a medium-sized pizza. As your hands meet at the bottom of your pizza, put them together and slice your hands in half. And as your hands come in to your chin, breathe in. Pull, breathe, kick, glide."

Afterwards, still shivering, Chapman's lesson had helped reduce her nerves about going out to sea for the first time.


"Even though the pool is different to the ocean, I am now prepared!" She said that besides being a vital life skill, swimming would enable her to witness first-hand the marine environment she has dedicated her life to studying and protecting. — Zamo Phungula

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