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Beakie: A big adventure for a little penguin



13 October 2012 marked a day of celebration for African penguins the world over. While SANCCOB celebrated the day with the release of a group of penguins rehabilitated at SANCCOB back into the wild, Beakie was not that lucky. Knocked down by a speeding vehicle in Simon's Town (Cape Town), his lower mandible was severely damaged by the impact of the car and his lower beak split in half.

He was brought to SANCCOB where the veterinary team tried several procedures unsuccessfully. Not ready to give up, SANCCOB's Rehabilitation Manager, Nicky Stander, consulted ex-SANCCOB veterinarian, Dr Tertius Gous, who in turn got in touch with Dr Gerard Steenkamp, an experienced veterinary dentist based at the University of Pretoria. After examining photos of the penguin's beak, Dr Steenkamp was confident that he could mend the mandible and offered to do the reconstructive surgery free of charge. Tracy Shaw, from the National Zoological Gardens (NZG) in Pretoria agreed to take care of the penguin at the zoo after the operation had been completed.

With a flight-sponsorship by Bid Air Cargo (Cape Town), Beakie was flown to Johannesburg in his own personal 'enclosure' and was taken to the Faculty of Veterinary Science of the University of Pretoria in Onderstepport in preparation of the big day. On 18 December, he underwent a CT scan and Dr Steenkamp performed the surgery. When the brave little patient came to, he had a beautiful new beak, with the help of some delicately placed stitches, pins, wire, and dental acrylic. The operation was very successful and Beakie was taken to the NZG to get back on his feet.

Since the operation, Beakie has been under the post-operative care of Dr Adrian Tordiffe, who administered a 14 day course of antibiotics to fight off any potential infections to the wound. The first few days he was very sleepy and claimed a permanent spot in the colony where he dozed alongside his 32 new penguin friends. At first, he wriggled a lot during feeding times, but became more comfortable as the days went by. After 3 weeks, he surprised everyone at the NZG by coming right up to the bucket and taking his first fish all on his own. Now he pushes his way to the bucket and is really starting to show his own special personality. The big adventure of Beakie has proved that the endangered African penguin is most certainly the most resilient of species, and we need to do everything in our power to help save these incredible little birds.

The experiment, and subsequent success of Beakie's operation, expands our knowledge and the level of expert veterinary care we can offer birds during rehabilitation. We trust that future patients can benefit from this, which will see more birds with severe beak injuries being released back into the wild.