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PB research hits bottom: ecology of kelps in South Africa

Kelps are large seaweeds which serve important ecological functions and provide a range of socio-economic services. School of Plant Biology researchers Thibaut, Scott (PhD students), Gary and Thomas recently visited colleagues John Bolton (University of Cape Town), Rob Anderson and Mark Rothman (Seaweed Unit, South African Fisheries) in Cape Town, as part of a collaboration to identify threats of climate change to kelp beds.

The trip was a reciprocal adventure after hosting the South Africans at UWA in November 2011, and aimed at completing comparative experiments on the performance of Australian and South African kelps. There were many very long days in the lab, completing a lot of very tedious eco-physiological measurements using the 'STD' (Seaweed Temperature Device), a purpose-designed contraption built largely of components sourced from a shop called "All Plastics Africa".

However, the work also involved field experiments and sampling between False Bay near Cape Town and Doringbaai a couple of hundred kilometres up the west coast, diving in stunning kelp forests with fur seals frolicking in the frigid 8 °C water – a tough job, but someone had to do it! The trip also offered an impressive live performance from John at his birthday party (as he said, "it's my party and I will sing if I want to"), hikes in Table Mountain National Park, a surf or two for Scott and Rob, excursions into the night life of Cape Town, led by postdoc Lydiane Mattio, where Gary got to show off his salsa skills, lots of boerewors and ostrich steak on the braai, ostrich eggs and good drops from Stellenbosh.

On the less flattering side, the Australian gas-barbecue culture was put to shame when we had to suffer the indignity of taking lessons in how to get the wood fired braai going. The South Africans were impeccable hosts! It is safe to say that these exchange trips have been very successful in establishing strong professional friendships. The trips have also produced some very promising results and ideas for the future - we are, of course, working on several papers and grant applications!

The collaboration was supported by the ARC, a UWA Research Collaboration Award, a Research Development Grant from the Worldwide Universities Network and a Convocation Postgraduate Research Travel award. It also could not have been done without the keen assistance of Derek Kemp and Chris Boothroyd in Cape Town.

A: Team Wernberg Lab all dressed up and ready to hit the (cold) water near the Cape of Good Hope in the Cape Peninsula National Park.



B: *Ecklonia maxima* kelp forest at ~7 m depth on the Cape Peninsula.



C: Professors at large (or large professors?) - Gary and John at our farewell braai (South African for barbie).

