

# Wild, indeed!

Annual sardine run captured in amazing detail by IMAX lens

By **Derrick Bang**

ENTERPRISE ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

This film seriously rocks.

Recent IMAX ocean documentaries have been a mixed lot; "Deep Sea 3D" and "Coral Reef Adventure" were engaging and informative, while "Sharks 3D" and the laughably misnamed "Ocean Wonderland" were little more than grade-school science movies with delusions of grandeur.

That's an important distinction. Although we're enjoying a renaissance of quality documentaries these days, the sheer volume allows one to be more selective; when the bar is set high with something like "Young @ Heart," then other nonfiction films must work harder to justify their ticket prices.

"Wild Ocean 3D" does so. And then some.

Luke Cresswell and Steve McNicholas — who share credits as directors, writers, editors and soundtrack composers — have found a thoroughly fascinating wildlife phenomenon that takes place each year off the coast of South Africa. They've filmed it superbly and condensed what must have been hours and hours of raw footage into a 40-minute film that is, by turns, astonishing, educational, fascinating and downright exciting.

These thrilling images gain further power from a captivating, heavily percussive soundtrack — no surprise, when one is reminded that the multi-talented Cresswell founded the street performance group Stomp in 1991 —

'Wild Ocean  
3D'

★★★★

Starring: dolphins, sharks, seals, penguins and lotsa little fish

Rating: suitable for all ages

that is delivered at a volume sufficient to rattle your rib cage.

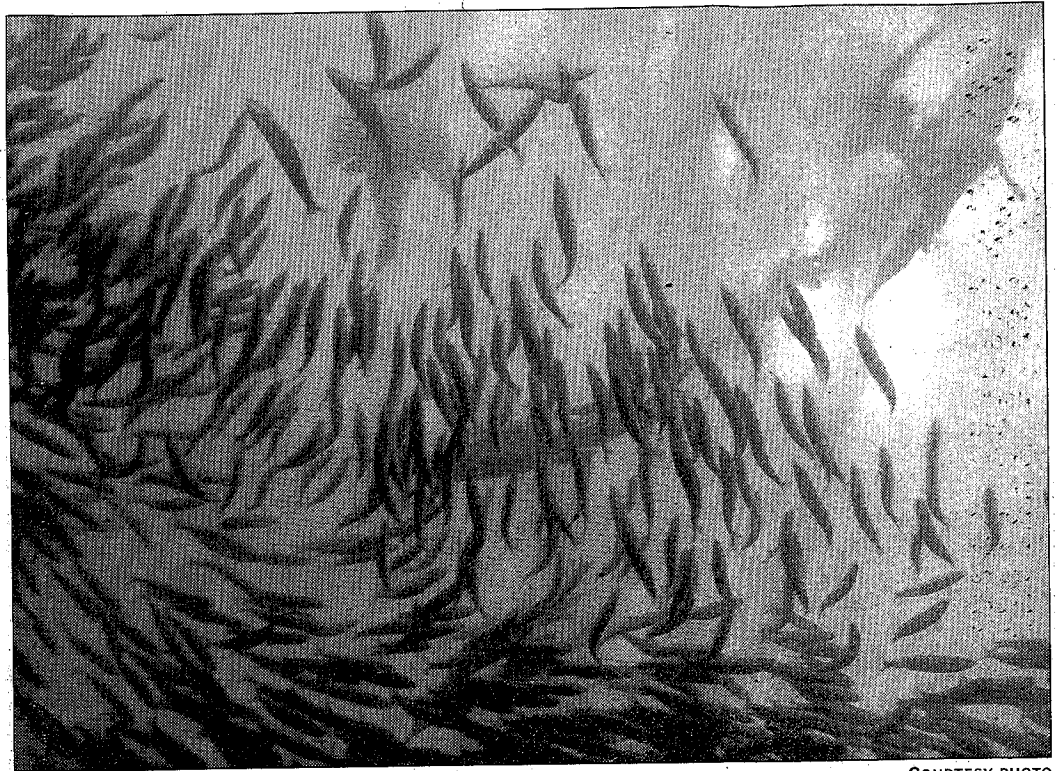
The film chronicles the annual migration of the billions of sardines that travel up South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal shoreline, known to locals as the "wild coast."

This migratory phenomenon used to take place all over the world, but (sadly) overfishing in the United States and elsewhere destroyed these massive sardine runs. They continue to exist now only off the coasts of South Africa and Portugal.

(I can't help thinking that these runs still exist in South Africa only because the entire region boasts an inhospitable coastline that never permitted the establishment of a harbor. Shall we call that geographical luck?)

The presence of so much food attracts an assortment of ocean predators, and "Wild Ocean 3D" begins as these other creatures — seals, bottlenose and common dolphins, sharks and Cape gannets — assemble for the approaching feast. Roughly 20,000 common dolphins alone pursue the sardine run northward from the continent's Eastern Cape.

Coastal villagers in a region just north of the wild coast also prepare for the sardines; if these people are lucky, enough of the tiny fish will be pushed into their nets by the



COURTESY PHOTO

On initial impact, the diving Cape gannets have a reasonable chance of spearing and then devouring one of the billions of sardines that travel up the South African coast. But if the birds miss this first shot, their clumsy underwater movement makes it highly unlikely that they'll score a fish. Back into the air, then, for another dive ... then another, then another.

all-important convergence of warm and cold ocean currents.

Once the sardines arrive, the subsequent underwater feeding frenzy is nothing short of amazing.

In a film loaded with jaw-dropping sights, none is more impressive than the diving gannets. These birds swoop into the air by the hundreds, then rocket into the ocean as if shot from a cannon; I can't imagine how they don't break beaks, bones or wings.

(The helpful press notes tell me that Cape gannets have air sacs in their face and chest, beneath the skin, which acts like bubble-wrap and cushions the impact with the water.)

The film's narrator, John Kani, doesn't reference this point, but we gradually realize that the gannets put everything into that initial plunge; if they don't spear a sardine immediately, the birds are too

slow and ungainly, trying to swim underwater, to have much chance of catching a fish at that point. So it's back to the surface and into the air, for another plunge.

Simply amazing.

The sardines are not completely without recourse. Once threatened by predators, the fish instinctively form a massive glistening "ball" that is shaped something like a huge underwater beehive. The sardines in this formation move as one, and the sheer mass of this formation clearly intimidates some of their enemies; the Cape fur seals, for example, seem utterly bewildered.

Not so the much smaller Cape penguins, which swim enthusiastically right into the center of such a mass. Although much smaller than the seals — and with similarly smaller brains — the penguins seem to have figured out the problem.

The sardines' encounter with seals and penguins is the warm-up, taking place south of the wild coast; the main event primarily involves dolphins, gannets and sharks. Having built our expectations, with Kani explaining everything we need to know, the film's climax is breathtaking.

Along the way, we also get brief glimpses of South African culture, particularly the degree to which dance, music and ritual have accompanied this annual sardine migration for thousands of years. And as the feeding frenzy recedes, we subsequently watch a young boy carve and then employ a smoldering splinter to decorate a wooden fish, a clever symbol of South Africa's desire to preserve this delicate balance between man and fish, so that the former can continue to reap the latter's bounty.

# WILD: This film avoids sounding preachy

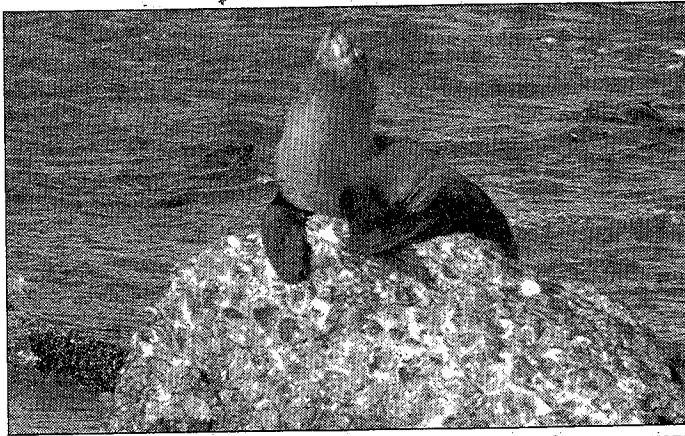
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Cresswell and McNicholas also deserve credit for that aspect of their film. Although informative, the rich-voiced Kani's narration is never preachy or didactic; the message arrives gently and goes down smoothly. More to the point, the filmmakers have documented such a magnificent slice of wild nature that helping preserve it seems as essential as breathing.

We'll never again see the massive herds of bison that once carpeted our American Midwest; they're gone forever. How fortunate, then, that Cresswell and McNicholas have shared this ocean-bound phenomenon, with its similarly impressive magnitude.

Maybe mankind has smartened up in the last few hundred years, and this display of nature's majesty can be saved.

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COURTESY PHOTO

Although Cape seals catch their share of sardines, these lively water mammals aren't part of the true feeding frenzy that takes place farther up the South African coast.

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