

Diving in Antarctica ñ dangerous marine animals

Dear Editor,

I refer to David McD Taylor's article on scuba diving in Antarctica.¹ He refers to the leopard seal (*Hyurga leptonyx*) and states that there have been no reported incidents of these animals injuring divers, but that harassment, which necessitated the abandonment of the dive, has occurred.

Writing in the News section of *The Daily Telegraph* on 24 July 2003, David Derbyshire, the Science Correspondent, reported that Kirsty Brown, 28, a British marine biologist was dragged to her death the day before by a leopard seal as she snorkelled in the bay close to the Rothera research station of the British Antarctic Survey (BAS).

A qualified and experienced diver, Miss Brown was studying the impact of icebergs on marine life on the sea floor. She had been making dives regularly, checking and laying hundreds of concrete and clay markers on the sea floor. The soft upper surfaces of the markers record the scrapes of the bottom of icebergs as they float overhead.

She and her buddy, who were both wearing wetsuits, were swimming on the surface when she was pulled underwater by the seal. She was recovered, but attempts to resuscitate her, including by the station doctor, were unsuccessful.

BAS confirmed that leopard seals, which can grow up to 12 feet long, are fast and powerful hunters. While they are often inquisitive, the BAS had no records of unprovoked attacks on Antarctic researchers. One theory is that the seal mistook the divers for penguins, their main source of food. After pulling Miss Brown under the water, the seal may have realised its mistake and let go.

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Reference

- 1 Taylor McD D. Scuba diving in remote locations: Antartica. *SPUMS J* 2003; 33: 6-10
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