

diving

YEAR IN THE WILD



SCOTT RAMSAY

PETER TIMM grew up in the farmlands of the landlocked Free State province. When I met him for the first time at Sodwana Bay on the Indian Ocean shore a few months ago, the burly 51 year-old came across like a straight-talking farmer, yet he was quick to poke fun at others – and himself.

He jokingly called himself a boer (even though he had an English name), and you could imagine someone like him driving a tractor in the mielie fields on the interior plateau of Southern Africa, hundreds of kilometres from any large body of water.

The ancient, rare fish known as coelacanth, however, typically only lives in ocean waters at depths of 100m or more.

The dark underwater canyons of Sodwana Bay, in north-eastern KwaZulu-Natal, are one of the few places on Earth where coelacanths have been found. Sunlight can barely reach these extreme depths, so you have to use torches to see anything, and the crushing pressures makes diving exceptionally dangerous.

It's an environment so different from the sundrenched *vlaktes* of the Free State that you'd probably bet your boerewors roll that someone like Timm would have been the last person to find a coelacanth.

Yet the broad-shouldered man could pirouette like a ballerina in deep ocean waters and in 2000, he and two trainee divers saw the first living specimen of Earth's most ancient large animal.

For 20 years since moving from the Free State, Timm owned Triton Dive Charters at Sodwana. He was a leading expert in the dangerous world of Trimix diving, where scuba divers use an artificial mixture of oxygen, nitrogen and helium to descend to depths of 100m or more.

With their elaborate and expensive scuba gear, Trimix divers look a bit like astronauts. It's possible that more people have travelled into outer-space than have dived below 100m in the open ocean.

"If you don't know what you're doing – and even if you do – you can end up dead very quickly," Timm explained to me with tragic irony, just a few weeks before his own death on June 18, when he tried to help another diver who had got into trouble.

Despite the dangers, Timm logged hundreds of deep dives, nearly all of them at Sodwana Bay in the canyons that lie offshore, where the continental shelf plummets.

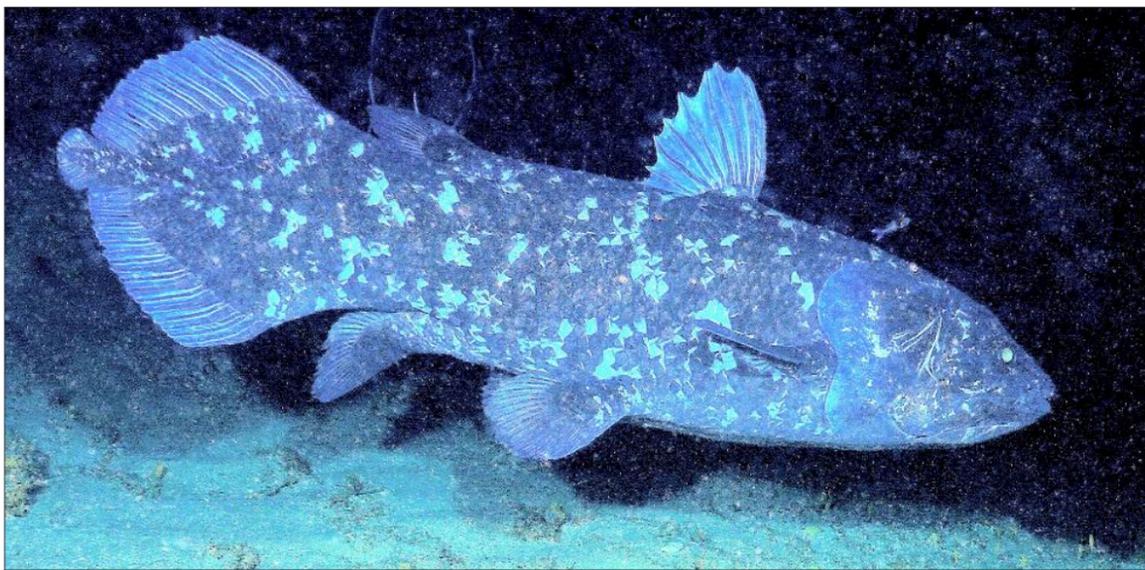
It's why Sodwana is considered a good place to find coelacanths. On the north-east coast of South Africa, the steep drop-offs are less than a kilometre from the shoreline, and consequently the canyons are more easily accessible to divers than other areas of the continent's coastline.

On October 28, 2000 at a depth of 104m, Timm and two other divers – Pieter Venter and Etienne le Roux – saw what they first thought were three large potato bass in a cave.



PREPARING FOR DESCENT: With their expensive scuba gear these Trimix divers, who are about to go deep into the ocean, look a bit like astronauts.

TRIBUTE TO PETER TIMM



IN THE DARK: Sunlight can barely reach these depths, so you have to use torches to see anything.

"We had this big underwater torch," explained Timm. "We saw pink eyes reflecting back at us, as bright as a car's reflectors, so we swam over to investigate. They were coelacanths."

Since then, he dived with coelacanths more than any other person, and no one saw more living specimens of these ancient fish than the big, friendly man.

"As I always like to joke," chuckled Timm, "it took a boer from the Free State to come show these Natal *boytjies* what's in their own backyard."

Named after the Greek words for "hollow-spine" (the coelacanth doesn't have a traditional vertebra like other fish), this weird-looking creature first started

swimming around the oceans about 400 million years ago near the beginning of the Cambrian era, when life started proliferating on the planet.

Paleontologists once estimated that these fish – of which about 80 fossil species have been described – died out about 65 million years ago, at around the same time that dinosaurs became extinct.

Certainly no one expected any to be swimming around in modern-day oceans.

Then on December 22, 1938 about 45km south-west of East London, the captain of a fishing trawler, Hendrick Goosen, saw a strange (but dead) fish in his boat's nets.

It was unlike any that Goosen had seen, so he sent word to his

friend Marjorie Courtney-Latimer, who was the curator of East London's museum.

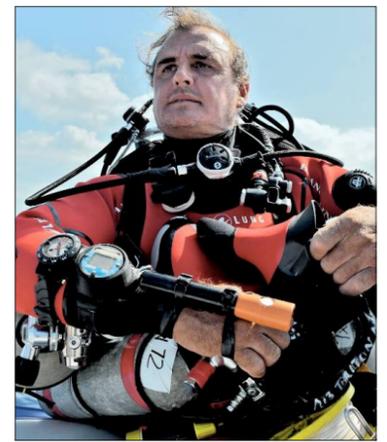
Courtney-Latimer went down to the docks, retrieved the dead fish from Goosen, wrapped it in paper and put it in her fridge to preserve it as best she could.

Intrigued as to its identity, she sent a letter and a sketch of the specimen to her friend James (JLB) Smith in Grahamstown.

Smith, a chemistry professor, was also one of the world's leading ichthyologists.

On arrival in East London, Smith realised the bizarre creature was a coelacanth.

Consider the improbability of it all. Seeing the body of this fish was akin to stumbling across the



TOP OF HIS GAME: The late Peter Timm was an expert in Trimix diving, where scuba divers use a mixture of oxygen, nitrogen and helium to descend to 100m and more.

flesh-and-blood carcass of a *Tyrannosaurus rex* in your backyard.

(Actually, dinosaurs only appeared on Earth 150 million years after the coelacanth appeared.)

The blue-grey coelacanth adults are about 2m long, weigh about 80kg, and have strange tails, limb-like fins, thick scales and prodigious teeth.

The fins have bones that resemble toes on a reptile.

Such are the dangers of deep diving, that no more than 20 people have seen coelacanths in their natural habitat.

See www.tritondiving.com and www.yearinthewild.com. Partners include Cape Union Mart, K-Way, Ford Everest and Goodyear.