

Creating African Penguin Colonies Frequently Asked Questions

General project questions

1. Why is this project happening?

The need for assisted colony development has come about because the African Penguin's favoured prey, sardine and anchovy, have shifted in distribution from the west coast, where many of the penguin colonies are, to the southern coast and Agulhas Bank. The shift, combined with continued localised overfishing on the west coast has reduced food availability for the penguins and caused the stronghold of the penguin population on the west coast to plummet. It also means that the penguin population is concentrated in just 2 regions- the west coast and Algoa Bay. This leaves the population vulnerable to any catastrophic event - an oil spill or disease outbreak – in either of these two regions. Establishing colonies in the gap will provide an “insurance policy” for the population.

The challenge for the penguins is that coastal islands - safe breeding habitat - in the southern coastal region are few and far between. Breeding on the mainland is risky as there is increased predation from mainland animals such as leopard, caracal and mongoose. Being unable to fly, penguins are particularly vulnerable to these predators. The mainland colonies of Boulders Beach and Stony Point have persisted due to the protective buffer human habitation has provided around the colonies.

2. How do you establish a new colony?

Following from successful seabird colony establishment elsewhere in the world, we will use a combination of social attraction techniques (taking advantage of penguin colonial behaviour) and translocation. Social attraction will involve using penguin decoys (life size models), mirrors and call playback to make it seem like there is already a colony there.

Translocation refers to moving penguins to the new site. African Penguins generally return to their natal colony to breed but can go elsewhere if conditions are better. However, once they have started breeding at a colony, they stay there for life as it makes it easier to find the same mate each year (which in turn increases breeding success). For this project we will need to move young birds that haven't yet decided where to breed.

3. How will you keep predators away?

We will use a combination of predator deterring measures. One of the most important will be a predator-proof fence which animals cannot jump over or burrow under. We are also investigating scent deterrents and other non-lethal ways of keeping predators away.

4. What if the fish move back to the west coast again?

It is unlikely that there will ever be a situation where there are no sardine and anchovy on the south coast because even before the shift, there were fish on the south coast, but in lower numbers.

If the fish stocks do shift back to the west coast while the colony is still establishing, it will likely cause the failure of the attempt to establish the colony. If it occurs after the colony has already established and there are substantial numbers of penguins breeding there, the colony size will decrease.

5. How long will it take to establish the colony?

African Penguins begin breeding around 3-5 years of age. This means that if fledglings (under 1 year old) are released at the site it will be a minimum of 3 years before any are likely to return to breed. However, it is also possible that young penguins looking for breeding sites will be attracted to the site because of the calls being played.

6. Where will the translocated penguins come from?

Each year, some chicks at existing colonies are abandoned due to flooding of the nest or because the parents started breeding late and started to moult and could no longer look after their chicks. There are also chicks that are removed for their own safety from nests in residential gardens in Simon's Town and Betty's Bay. These chicks are hand reared at rehabilitation centres and then released back into the wild when they are old enough. Some of these chicks will be moved to the new colony site.

7. Where will the colony be?

BirdLife South Africa is investigating two sites at which to establish colonies.

- I. De Hoop Nature Reserve: In the mid-2000s, African Penguins started breeding on the eastern side of the De Hoop Nature Reserve. Unfortunately before they could be adequately protected, caracal predation caused the penguins to abandon the site. We will attempt to re-establish this colony.
- II. Keurbooms River mouth (Plettenberg Bay): This would be a new site for African Penguins.

8. How were the sites identified?

Workshops were held with local and international penguin experts to identify "ideal" site criteria. Candidates were identified from a visual inspection of maps and local knowledge. They were then compared to the criteria.

9. Is this definitely going to happen?

As this has never been attempted before for African Penguins, the process is unclear. BirdLife South Africa is working closely with the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), CapeNature, Nature's Valley Trust, BirdLife Plettenberg Bay and other organisations. As the managing authority for De Hoop Nature Reserve, CapeNature is evaluating the re-establishment of the colony there by looking at the potential risks to the penguins and surrounding environment. In Plettenberg Bay, the process is not as far advanced as a risk assessment still needs to be conducted as well as engaging with the public. CapeNature and DEA still need to officially approve and provide permits for both sites.

10. Where can I get more information, or follow the project progress?

Follow progress on our website www.birdlife.org.za
Or on Facebook or Twitter

11. What can I do to help with this project?

You can donate to the project on <https://www.birdlife.org.za/support-us/donate> (check the "African Penguin conservation" box).

Keurbooms River mouth, Plettenberg Bay

12. Will my access to the beach be impacted?

Access to the area in which we hope to establish the colony still needs to be discussed with all stakeholders involved (public, CapeNature, municipality etc.). Access to Lookout Beach and Poortjies will remain unchanged. Access to the river side of the Keurbooms peninsula will also likely be unrestricted. To avoid disturbing the penguin breeding area, it would be best for people to avoid walking across the peninsula between the river and the beach and to avoid walking on the beach along the seaward side of the peninsula.

13. Isn't the site vulnerable to being washed away or affected by the movement of the Keurbooms River mouth?

While the mouth of the Keurbooms River does move, the northwestern section has been stable for the last 100 years. The colony would be established on the vegetated dune section further inland on the peninsula, and would be less affected by the shifting sandbanks and the dynamic mouth.

14. Aren't penguins noisy and smelly? Will this affect my quality of life?

The prevailing wind direction in Plettenberg Bay is northerly/northwesterly, especially in winter when the penguins are likely to breed. This will blow the smell and noise away from residential areas.

15. Will penguins come into my garden?

This has been an issue at other mainland colonies (Boulders Beach and Stony Point). However it is unlikely that the same problems will occur in Plett. The residential areas are not as close to the potential site as the houses at the two other mainland colonies. It is unlikely the penguins will go try to nest at the houses up the hill at Strandmeer. And as penguins are marine birds and have not been known to swim in estuaries, it is equally unlikely that they will cross the river to the caravan park and golf estates.

In fact, the potential site being near to suburban areas is not necessarily a bad thing. The mainland colonies at Boulders and Stony Point have benefitted from human presence to a certain extent as this reduces the density of terrestrial predators. Experience from where seabird colonies have been established elsewhere in the world (e.g. Australia and New Zealand) has shown that community support is vital to the success of a colony.

16. What will be the impact of the penguins on the vegetation?

Penguin guano (faeces) and indeed all seabird guano can affect vegetation because of high nitrogen levels. If the colony becomes successful, there would almost certainly be an impact on the vegetation. However, the vegetation found at the site is very common coastal vegetation and there are no endangered plant species found there. To reduce the impacts of erosion, damage would be managed carefully by replanting where necessary, with potentially more tolerant, yet still indigenous coastal species. We will also learn from the management of other colonies where vegetation damage has occurred.

17. Will there be increased tourism if the colony is successful?

Our primary concern in setting up the new colony is for the conservation of the African penguins. If the colony is successful, there will be the potential for tourism to the colony (and

increased tourism for Plettenberg Bay as a whole) but this will be done in a way that limits disturbance to the birds and will be discussed in detail with the local roleplayers.

18. Will the penguins affect the fish populations in the lagoon?

African Penguins feed almost exclusively on sardine and anchovy, which are not species that use estuaries. There have been no reported instances where penguins have been documented feeding in estuaries.

19. Is the sandy beach good habitat for them?

Penguins at other colonies (e.g. Dassen Island) do land on sandy beaches. They can also land in very rough sea conditions at all their colonies so the beach conditions should not pose a problem for them.

In terms of nesting habitat, the penguins will be able to dig their own burrows where the sand is held together by vegetation but we will put in artificial nests as additional breeding habitat.

20. Won't the gulls breeding at the site affect the penguins? Or will the penguins affect the gulls?

There would be little overlap between the gulls and penguins both in space and breeding times (gulls breed in summer, the penguins in winter). The gulls breed on the very eastern end of the peninsula where it is sparsely vegetated. The penguins would breed on the more heavily vegetated middle/western portion. Gulls would try to prey on chicks and eggs, but if the penguins breed under bushes and in burrows they will be safe from most aerial attacks.

21. How will speed boats in the lagoon affect the penguins?

As mentioned above, it is unlikely that the penguins will enter the lagoon/estuary where they could be struck by propellers. The municipality, with the support of CapeNature is conducting more patrols on the lagoon to prevent boats from speeding there. This is for the protection of the other birds, fish and mammals that are already found in the area and will continue regardless of if the penguin colony becomes established.

22. What about all the great white sharks and seals off Plett?

There is a seal colony at the Robberg Peninsula. While seal predation on penguins is a concern, this can happen anywhere at sea, not just near colonies. The behaviour also seems to be a learned behaviour by sub adult male seals. BirdLife South Africa will approach the Department of Environmental Affairs and CapeNature before the project goes ahead to plan what seal predation control measures could be put in place if seal predation becomes a significant concern.

Great white sharks have been known to prey on penguins but the frequency of this is unknown.

23. How will you keep people and tourists away from the penguins?

The planning for access control still needs to be finalised as detailed in question 12 but it is likely that there will be rangers on patrol as well as informative signs.

24. Will there be any effect on anglers or fishing activity around the colony?

Fishing may still take place on the lagoon side of the peninsula (where fishing is normally permitted). We will explore options to limit disturbance of penguins by people fishing on the beach side of the peninsula.

25. Do penguins carry diseases?

Wild African Penguins are affected by several diseases but these are all specific to birds and cannot be transferred to humans.

26. Will we be able to touch/interact/get close to the penguins?

Penguins are very sensitive to disturbance, especially during breeding and moulting. You should remain at least 5 m away from penguins – especially because they can give a nasty bite! If tourism is allowed at the colony site, this will be conducted in a controlled manner with boardwalks (similar to Boulders Beach and Stony Point).