



MEDIA RELEASE

Embargo: Immediate

Ground-breaking efforts to create new penguin colonies begins

Cape Town, 16 December- BirdLife South Africa and CapeNature have taken the first concrete step in an ambitious project to help conserve the African Penguin. The idea of creating new African Penguin colonies has been discussed and planned for a number of years, but now is closer to becoming a reality with work starting on the ground at the De Hoop Nature Reserve.

African Penguin numbers have decreased dramatically over the last 60 years, with little sign of slowing despite the best efforts of many stakeholders. The populations on the west coast of South Africa have suffered the most, with an over 60% decrease in the last 20 years. This has been largely driven by decreases in the availability of the penguin's preferred prey: sardine and anchovy. Since the mid-1990s stocks of the fish, once abundant on the west coast, have shifted south and eastwards, away from the former penguin breeding strongholds.

The penguins cannot move with the fish because of a lack of safe breeding sites, and so they struggle to find enough food to feed their chicks and survive. "By helping the penguins to colonise new areas that were previously unavailable to them, we hope to increase their population and decrease the risk to any one colony", says Christina Hagen, Pamela Isdell Fellow of Penguin Conservation at BirdLife South Africa, who is leading the project.

In the mid-2000s, African Penguins naturally attempted to establish a colony at the very eastern edge of the De Hoop Nature Reserve, part not frequented by the public. Unfortunately, before they could be adequately protected, predation by a leopard caused them to abandon the site. This natural colonisation attempt, supplemented with evidence that there are adequate food resources in the area provided some of the impetus to choose this site.

"Re-establishing the colony will likely take several years, with unfortunately no guarantee of success" says Christina Hagen. "But because this site was used previously by penguins and we know from tracking studies and observations by CapeNature patrols, that penguins forage in the waters around De Hoop, we think there is every chance of success.

At first, we will be attempting to establish the colony using "passive" attraction techniques. This involves convincing penguins that there are already birds breeding at the site, using call playback and decoys (model penguins) to help simulate an existing colony." If the passive attraction techniques are unsuccessful after a year, the process of physically translocating penguins will begin.

After a lengthy engagement with penguin and predator experts, including conducting a risk assessment, CapeNature approved BirdLife South Africa's proposal and

management plan for the colony in August 2018. Since then, preparations have started at the site to protect it from predators by putting up a fence, the call playback speakers and penguin decoys.

“CapeNature is committed to supporting and contributing to ecologically sustainable projects which are based on sound science and are in accordance with the IUCN Guidelines for Reintroductions and Other Conservation Translocations, aimed at ensuring the long term survival of the African Penguin in the wild.” says Dr Razeena Omar, CapeNature CEO.

“BirdLife South Africa is pleased and exceptionally proud to be working on such an ambitious and project which gives us the opportunity to make huge strides for penguin conservation” says Mark D. Anderson, BirdLife South Africa CEO.

Another site for establishing a new colony is also being considered further down the coast at Plettenberg Bay. It is hoped that techniques learned from De Hoop can be put to good use there as well.

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Notes for the editor: The mission of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the enjoyment, conservation, study and understanding of wild birds and their habitats.

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2. While establishing new seabird colonies has been attempted in various parts of the world, this is a first for South Africa and for the African Penguin.
3. More information on the new colony project can be found at <http://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/seabird-conservation/african-penguin-conservation/creating-penguin-colonies>