



MEDIA RELEASE

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First release of African Penguins at De Hoop Nature Reserve

Cape Town, 15 June – The attempt to re-establish an African Penguin colony on the south coast of South Africa took a big step forward this week with the release of 30 juvenile penguins at the De Hoop Nature Reserve. BirdLife South Africa, CapeNature and SANCCOB have partnered together in this ambitious attempt to help save the Endangered African Penguin.

The African Penguin population is decreasing rapidly, primarily due to a lack of food. A shift in fish stocks away from historic feeding grounds on the west coast as well as competition with the fishing industry have meant that African Penguins breeding on the west coast of South Africa especially, are struggling to find food. Penguins have been unable to follow the changed prey distribution because of a lack of safe breeding sites along the southern Cape coast. A small colony of penguins established at the De Hoop Nature Reserve in 2003 but predation by caracal caused them to abandon the colony a few years later.

When in 2015, BirdLife South Africa began investigating whether it would be possible to establish new African Penguin colonies, the De Hoop colony was chosen as an ideal candidate site. In partnership with CapeNature, BirdLife South Africa designed and constructed a predator-proof fence to ensure that, this time, the penguins would be safe. To entice penguins to re-colonise the area naturally, life-like penguin decoys and penguin calls being broadcast by loudspeakers help create the impression that penguins are breeding there.

After waiting two years to test whether natural colonisation would happen, the BirdLife South Africa and CapeNature approached the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB) to assist with taking the next step, which is to release penguins at the colony. The first release took place on 11 June.

“This release, which will hopefully be the first of many, is the culmination of many years of work so I’m immensely excited to see it finally happening!” says Christina Hagen, the Pamela Isdell Fellow of Penguin Conservation at BirdLife South Africa, who has been running the project since 2015. “Although there are more years of hard work ahead of us, it is an important step to take now, as every year we wait, we lose more and more penguins.” continues Hagen.

CapeNature CEO, Dr Razeena Omar confirms the value of this partnership, saying “CapeNature is proud to be part of this innovative project on one of our flagship protected areas, De Hoop Nature Reserve. It

is critical that we reverse the decline of the endangered African Penguin, and the release of the rehabilitated fledglings is an important next step in achieving the goal of establishing a colony.”

The released penguins were hand-reared at SANCCOB; most hatched from abandoned eggs rescued at the Stony Point penguin colony and incubated at the organisation’s Table View facility. Dr David Roberts, Clinical Veterinarian at SANCCOB, says, “We received an unusually large number of African penguin eggs earlier this year and it was a tall task to hand-rear so many chicks at once. Events like this one indicate the trouble that African penguins are in when extreme weather conditions and lack of food cause adult birds to abandon their nests to save themselves”.

According to Roberts, “The penguins are released as fledglings as they have not yet chosen a place to breed and once an African penguin starts breeding at a colony, they return there year after year. By releasing fledglings, we hoped that they will return to De Hoop Nature Reserve to breed when they are ready to do so in three to six years.”

In addition to the released birds being individually marked with Passive Integrated Transponders for post-release monitoring, two African penguins will be fitted with GPS trackers to monitor their movements immediately after release.

“We are grateful to our partners, CapeNature and SANCCOB, and all the donors who have made this work possible, particularly Pamela Isdell, the Patron of the African Penguin” says Mark D. Anderson, CEO of BirdLife South Africa. “This is a vital step towards re-establishing this colony and will improve the conservation status of our iconic penguin.”

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For further information, please contact:

BirdLife South Africa: Christina Hagen, Pamela Isdell Fellow of Penguin Conservation, phone: +27833018765, christina.hagen@birdlife.org.za

CapeNature: Petro van Rhyn, General Manager: Advocacy, pvrhyn@capenature.co.za

SANCCOB: Dr Lauren Waller, Leiden Conservation Fellow, Ph: 071 689 6910, lauren@sancocob.co.za

More information:

- Penguins are vulnerable to predation by terrestrial predators such as leopard and caracal when they breed on the mainland. There are no islands off the southern Cape coast, where the penguins could safely breed, which is why a mainland colony will be established
- A small number of penguins tried to follow the changed fish distribution and started breeding on a peninsula on the eastern edge of the De Hoop Nature Reserve in 2003. By 2008, there were at least 18 pairs breeding and larger numbers of penguins roosting at the site. Unfortunately, before anything could be done to protect them, predation by caracal caused the penguins to abandon the site.
- The rescued African penguin eggs and chicks were cared for in SANCCOB’s chick rearing unit to begin with. Once chicks reach 1.2kg in weight they are transferred to the facility’s nursery until old enough to start swimming, and then placed in the rehabilitation pens leading up to their

release. Before release, the penguins are checked to ensure their plumage is waterproof and a good body weight is achieved. They also undergo veterinary checks, which includes blood sample evaluation to ensure they are healthy enough for release.

Notes for the editor:

BirdLife South Africa

BirdLife South Africa is the country partner of BirdLife International, a global partnership of conservation organisations that strives to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity, by working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources.

BirdLife South Africa contact details:

Isdell House, 17 Hume Road, Dunkeld West 2196, Gauteng
Private Bag X16, Pinegowrie 2123, Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa, Tel. +27-11-7891122, Fax. +27-11-7895188, e-mail address: info@birdlife.org.za, website: www.birdlife.org.za

CapeNature

CapeNature is a public institution mandated to promote and ensure biodiversity conservation within the Western Cape. The entity manages most of the mountain catchments and reserves that supply ecosystem services to the citizens of the Western Cape. This requires good scientific data, a sound understanding of fynbos ecology and commitment to the principles of integrated biodiversity management and planning. Most of this work is in remote areas out of the public eye, but has a direct bearing on the quality of life of millions of people in the province.

SANCCOB

The Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds is a non-profit organisation that rescues, rehabilitates and releases southern African seabirds, which have been oiled, injured, are ill or abandoned as chicks to bolster wild populations.

SANCCOB contact details:

22 Pentz Drive, Table View, 7441, Cape Town
PO Box 11116, Bloubaerg, 7443
Tel: +27-21-557 6155, Fax: +27-21-5578804, website: www.sanccob.co.za, email address: reception@sanccob.co.za