



# CAPE GANNET



## WHAT IS GUANO?



Guano is a mixture of seabird **excrement**, seabird carcasses and eggshells. Over thousands of years, this highly prized nitrogen and phosphorous-rich material accumulated on islands where seabirds such as gannets, penguins and cormorants breed. In **arid** parts of the world, such as the coasts of Peru and southern Africa, it was not washed away with the rain, building a layer of guano up to **40 meters** deep.

## ANCIENT KNOWLEDGE

The use of guano as a powerful **fertiliser** in **agriculture** has been recorded as far back as the **Inca Empire**. The Andean people collected it off the coast of Peru (in South America) for well over 1500 years, perhaps even as far back as 5000 years. In fact, the word "guano" originates from the Andean indigenous language (Quechua) word, 'huano' which means 'dung to fertilize'.

## Interesting numbers

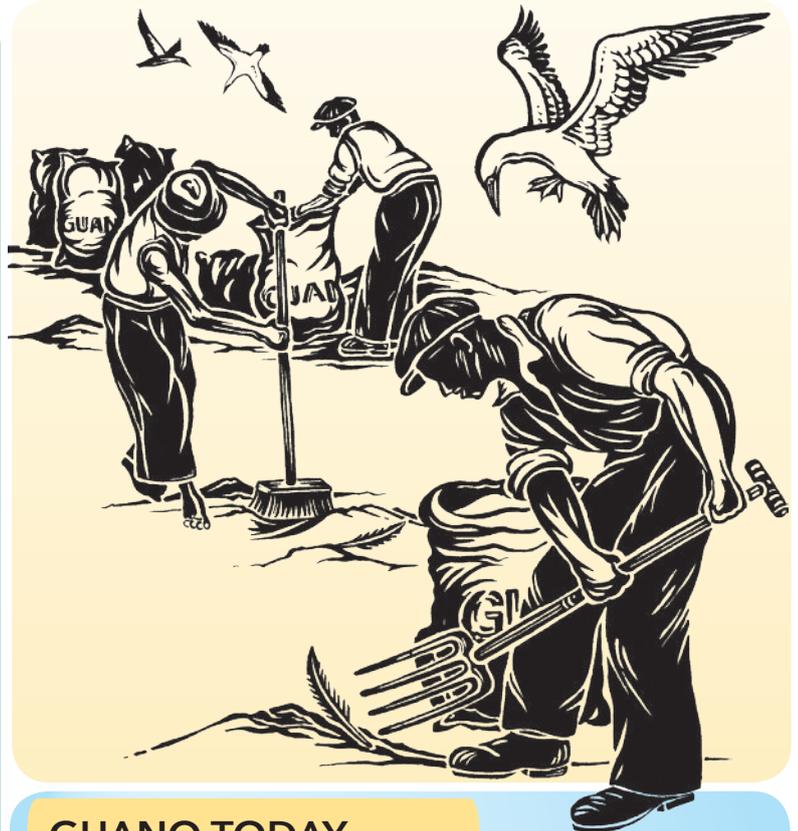
In **1845**, at the height of the Guano Rush:

- **450** ships lay anchored off Namibia's Ichaboe Island.
- About **6000** men harvested guano.
- The guano on Ichaboe Island was **23 meters** deep.
- A total of **1.8 million tons** of guano were removed from southern African islands.

## THE GREAT GUANO RUSH

During his travels in South America (1799-1804), the great naturalist Alexander von Humboldt discovered the use of guano in farming practices. He sent a sample to France and its value was revealed to the wider world. In 1840, Justus von Liebig, an organic chemist and pioneer in plant science, discovered that when **nitrogen** was added to soil, it doubled or even tripled agricultural crop **yields**. These discoveries led to a frenzied rush to find guano, with its rich source of **nitrites**. Prospectors sailed the world to find this valuable fertiliser, calling it **White Gold**. It was so valuable that outbreaks of violence and even wars between nations were fought over guano.

Over the course of only two years in the 1840s, thousands of workers harvested millions of tons of guano from seabird islands off the coast of southern Africa. This led to rapid declines in the **populations** of these birds and the destruction of their breeding **habitats**. Because guano was so valuable, the Cape Colony government finally established the Guano Islands Division to manage and control the harvesting. Even though guano continued to be harvested outside of the seabirds' **annual** breeding season, the guano industry eventually collapsed.



## GUANO TODAY

In southern Africa, guano harvesting continued until 1986, with the last stored guano sold in 1990. Thanks to modern, cheaper, **synthetically** produced chemical fertilisers, organic guano is no longer in demand as a fertiliser. Imported guano, mostly from Peru, is sometimes used in **organic farming**, but it is expensive and no longer used on a large scale.

### References:

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