

SAVING WHAT'S LEFT...

MANLY'S STRUGGLE ACHIEVES A WORLD FIRST

FOR

TWO COMMON SPECIES

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Judy is the Founding Director of the Manly Environment Centre, which is now 6 years old. The Manly Environment Centre is a unique co-operation between Manly Council, local business and the community.

Abstract

It is symbolic that the sensitive North Head environment in Manly should be home to the first two common species in the world to be listed as threatened populations under the new Threatened Species Conservation Act. (1995).

The Manly Environment Centre (MEC) has played a vital role in the listing of the little penguin and the long-nosed bandicoot through researching the issues, linking the key groups, lobbying and organising volunteers for revegetation, penguin counts, etc.

A brief history of the colonies and the community action, which led to their listing, is given, as well as some surprising reactions to their new status.

Introduction

"The natural landscape and marine environment of North Head encompasses a large number of vegetation communities whose integrity and diversity is unique in the Sydney Region. Flora and fauna communities have evolved and adapted and, in some cases, are regionally significant for their restricted distribution. It has national value recognised through its inclusion in the Sydney Harbour National Park and contains some 600 naturally occurring plant species and five vegetation communities considered significant and vulnerable; this represents a rare combination for the Sydney region. The designation of the North (Sydney) Harbour Aquatic Reserve recognises the high value of the harbour environment".

The above extract is from the Statement of Significance of the North Head Planning Strategy prepared by the consultants, Clouston, for the North Head Section 22 Committee. This committee was formed under the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning when a number of changes to the existing uses were proposed by various North Head stakeholders, e.g. the Army, Catholic Church, and National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

It is symbolic that this sensitive and island-like environment, itself under threat from the 'sell off the farm' mentality, provides the last mainland sanctuary for two very small colonies of Sydney's once common species, the Long-nosed Bandicoot and the Little (Fairy) Penguin.

Little (Fairy) Penguin (*Eudyptula minor*)... the little Aussie battler

In 1952 there were a number of penguin colonies in the Manly area totalling about 500 birds. People camping on Store Beach recall the penguins marching through their tents at night whilst others talk about sighting many during daylight in Spring Cove. However, 300 penguins were shot in the 1950s and a number were destroyed by dogs alighting from boats near Store Beach.

In 1990, a long-term Manly resident became alarmed at government plans to 'flog off' the foreshore and the impacts it would have on the already shrunken habitat of the Manly penguins. His story is remarkable in that he contacted and brought together stakeholders from Taronga Zoo, NPWS, Maritime Services Board and Manly Council to save the remaining colony. He raised the issues to Manly Council's Community Environment Committee, under the chairmanship of Dr. Peter Macdonald and I must say Peter Macdonald and I were both stunned and delighted at the news. Apparently some locals knew about the penguins but Manly Council and the majority of residents had no idea they were there.

When Manly Council was informed in confidential session, regarding the penguin colony's plight, Council resolved that every effort be made to protect this colony, which was threatened with extinction, whilst keeping the location of the colony a secret.

A Fairy Penguin Management Committee was convened with all of the above-mentioned stakeholders and local residents, with myself (Director of the MEC) as chair. The successful installation of six nesting boxes, and habitat restoration through planning controls to prevent the building structures such as gazebos in the nesting area were hampered by the inability to advertise the controls and because of the need to preserve secrecy. Even very supportive residents were not in favour of entering into a Conservation Agreement with NPWS to be registered on their Strata land title.

When dogs destroyed the Little Penguin colony at Eden, Manly's colony became the last breeding colony on the mainland of New South Wales. However, this did not help us to gain planning protection, even though the penguins were living and fishing so close to the harbour's only Aquatic Reserve and North Head is listed on the National Estate. When David Bellamy was taken on a boat tour of the habitat his immediate reaction was to call for the entire Sydney Harbour region to be nominated as a marine reserve.

When a disastrous dog attack killed 8 birds in 1995, we were amazed to discover another part of the colony. The building of a sea wall in 1986 had cut off their access to nest under house foundations and every night they were walking up flights of stairs beside the building and down again to get to their burrows. The NSW Minister for Ports, Carl Scully, has been very supportive and twice visited the site. With the aid of the army and their infrared equipment we were able to show him the penguins coming ashore.

A Little Penguins Steering Committee, to be responsible for preparing a draft Plan of Management was formed from the Penguin Management Committee.

Subsequent to this it was decided to nominate the penguins as a threatened colony under the Threatened Species legislation. The application was prepared by Kim Brebach from the Threatened Species Network and Erna Walraven, Senior Curator at Taronga Zoo.

New residents, who professed no love for the penguins, planned small but expensive additions to their homes. A special set of conditions was prepared for Council, which were included in the development consent. These conditions included many aspects of site management to protect fauna and would be a useful model.

These same residents 'tidied up' by removing vegetation outside their boundary to enhance their view and to provide access to the beach through the nesting site. Because of concerns about instability of the steep site, an adviser on soil conservation from the Department of Land & Water Conservation visited the site and advised on soil stabilisation and planting. Manly Council provided native plants, which a small task force of volunteers replanted in conjunction with local residents.

The Long-Nosed Bandicoot (*Perameles nasuta*)

The long-nosed bandicoot was once extremely common in many parts of Sydney. As late as 1975 they were recorded at Bantry Bay and Burnt Bridge Creek, as well as North Head.

When Lisa Chambers (1991) and Lisa Scott (1994) completed their theses under the supervision of Chris Dickman from Sydney University, bandicoots had disappeared from most areas of urban Sydney and were confined to a small area at Pittwater and the North Head area on publicly and privately owned bushland and adjoining residential areas. Both studies involved a substantial number of trap nights. Towards the end of her survey work Lisa Scott found a significant decrease in numbers of bandicoots. This was attributed to a number of causes including feral animal predation and road kills. NPWS carried out trapping of feral animals in the Sydney Harbour National Park area of North Head and speed humps were installed.

The student's findings confirmed residents' observations of declining bandicoot numbers and appeared to coincide with land disturbance and habitat reduction through "tidying-up". Whilst bandicoots could still be found on private land owned by the Catholic Church on St. Patrick's estate and in adjoining home gardens, the residents felt there had been a significant decrease.

The Catholic Church announced its intention to redevelop the St. Patrick's Estate for 112 houses, a hospice (with a footprint the size of the seminary), aged care and other facilities. A Conservation Plan was prepared for the church and a consultant was employed to assess fauna. The first fauna assessment found only three bandicoots on the estate, which they assured a huge public meeting "could be relocated in the National Park", causing outrage.

NPWS commissioned Sydney University to conduct a study to determine North Head population numbers. Simultaneously, the MEC designed a resident survey, in consultation with NPWS and Sydney University, to gain a better understanding of bandicoot behaviour and gauge resident attitudes to domestic animal controls.

A student from the Southern Cross University and another from the Australian National University devoted much of their summer vacation to interviewing and surveying residents. The normally shy bandicoots were observed regularly within a few blocks of Manly's CBD, running around roundabouts and footpaths (where there was no cover). A sensor garden light coming on in the middle of the night alerted one townhouse resident to a whole family living in his pocket handkerchief courtyard.

The university study and our survey showed a severe decrease in numbers. Our survey showed that most people believed that the major threats were:

- Development
- Removal of vegetation (including weed species like Lantana), and tidying up
- Domestic and feral animals
- Road kills

Most people indicated that they would be happy to comply with controls on domestic animals. There was a number of interesting cases reported of domestic animals being trained to avoid contact with the bandicoots in their own gardens or happily accepting a curfew between dusk and dawn.

With the assistance of Michael Kennedy from Humane Society, MEC drafted an application to list the Manly colony of the Long-nosed Bandicoot as a threatened population.

It is worth mentioning that a number of conservation groups were quite reluctant to get involved by giving a letter of support. They implied that it could be political, and of course it is!

When Tim Flannery received his Eureka Award for the Environment in 1996 he spoke of his concern for the Bandicoots at North Head, ending his address with, "I don't want to live in a Sydney without Long-nosed Bandicoots."

The Impacts of listing

Early in 1997, the Scientific Committee determined that both the Little Penguin (23rd January) and the Long-nosed Bandicoot (28th February) colonies were threatened populations.

The Catholic Church had taken Manly Council to the Land & Environment Court for deemed refusal of their housing development. The listing of the Bandicoots as a threatened population was known by Justice Pearlman before she gave her summing up. She stated that the proposed development would not have any significant adverse impact on flora and fauna. This statement is surprising to say the least, particularly considering that the development she approved (figure 2) coincided with the existing bandicoot habitat mapped by the Church's fauna consultant (figure 1).

The Land & Environment Court judgement neglects many potential impacts of the development on the colony, including construction activities, reduction of vegetation to narrow corridors, increased risk of road kills, etc. Manly Council will appeal the Land & Environment Court decision.

The Manly community cannot accept this total lack of consultation by NPWS when so many structures for good communication and consultation have been in existence for 7 years. These include the two Committees mentioned previously, ongoing opportunities such as recent penguin counts and the continued involvement of MEC.

The recent jet-ski incident, where a number of jet skiers allegedly rounded up and killed about five penguins, elicited tremendous public sympathy and support from all over Sydney. The extensive media coverage also flushed out some attitudes and wildlife expertise which were surprising. Water Police, Waterways Officers and jet skiers showed amazing evidence of multi-skilling in a bid to preserve the rights of jet skiers to enjoy the waterways. "Penguins did not congregate in the water...", "...They were too fast for jet skis..." and "...it just did not happen because we did not have five battered, bloodstained and bruised corpses..." were just some of the comments from police officers, Waterways inspectors and the President of the Jet Skiers Association. When the latter person contacted me, he was at great pains to point out that they were a very powerful and responsible group. I suggested that to protect the reputation of his association, they could educate irresponsible skiers or, if that failed, report the offending Jet Ski number to the Water Police. His response was less than enthusiastic.

In spite of numerous protests to the office of the Minister for the Environment by a multitude of concerned Sydney residents an annual Jet Ski race still started off from Manly only a few weeks later, adjacent to the penguin colony and the North (Sydney) Harbour Aquatic Reserve.

There has been much research published about little penguins in the Little Penguins Supplement (pages 261 to 402) of the Journal of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (1992) and the more recent work of Rogers, Eldershaw and Walraven (1995). According to Walraven (1997), twenty-five years ago penguins were quite common on Sydney beaches, and people actually used to keep them out; subsequently they are no longer there. Prof. Mike Cullen of Monash University has stated that "...Penguins are very conservative in their habits and, once a place has been selected to breed they return there for life." This is obviously the case in Manly where they are now living under houses and in gardens. Never the less this provides an ideal situation where residents are happy to observe and report on penguin behaviour in an urban situation on a day-to-day basis. This situation is in contrast to the St. Kilda (Melbourne) colony where the penguins are nesting in the rocks of an isolated breakwater.

Current penguin research, to my knowledge, is confined to islands or other isolated colonies. With the Manly colony, there is a need to obtain funding to take advantage of the unique opportunity to research the behaviour of urban penguins living in a major international city. This can be achieved by working with the Manly community and the MEC. Where else in the world could you sit on someone's back steps and watch penguins playing in the garden or see, as Minister Scully did, two fat downy fledglings snug in a rock grotto built in a garden by a caring resident? Ask Kim Brebach about the amazing feeling of sitting on a beach topped by towering home unit blocks with three penguins staring at you only metres away!

The long-term plan for the penguins is to re-establish a major colony in the National Park with substantial community involvement.

Community participation has been an inspiration to us with the involvement of commercial and recreational fishermen, surf skiers, deckhands and residents all involved in "Penguin watch". Other people have come forward and offered a variety of skills. Similarly, residents keep us informed about the movements of the bandicoots around their homes, gardens and streets.

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