

News Release

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Penguins and NZ fur seals to both be conserved

Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH) staff will discuss how to best conserve local penguin colonies as well as New Zealand fur seals at a meeting on October 16 with Simon Goldsworthy, from the South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI), and local penguin tour operators.

"The New Zealand fur seal population, which is native to the waters around Kangaroo Island, has been increasing by about 11 per cent a year for quite some time, and it appears that this may be having an impact on the penguin colonies at Kingscote and Penneshaw," said Mark Herrmann, DEH's Regional Conservator for Kangaroo Island.

"New Zealand fur seals are a natural predator of penguins, but the number of fur seals in the vicinity of the penguin colonies at Kingscote and Penneshaw is relatively small," he said.

"Other factors, including reproduction levels, death of chicks due to lack of food or predation by cats and dogs, and interaction with people, may also be playing a part in the apparent decline in penguin numbers.

"Further research is needed to determine the precise effect that the fur seals are having on the local penguins, and how both animals can be best managed and conserved," he said.

"The New Zealand fur seal is a protected species, and of great conservation significance to the Australian and international community, so obviously they cannot be destroyed. It is also very difficult for them to be relocated, due to their large size and the broad area over which they range.

"There may be other ways for us to protect the penguins, and this is what we will be discussing with Simon Goldsworthy and tour operators at the meeting on October 16," Mr Herrmann said.

John Bracken, DEH's District Ranger for the Fleurieu District, is keeping a close eye on the penguin colony at Granite Island near Victor Harbor.

"Anecdotal evidence suggests that the penguin population at Granite Island has been declining since the early 1990s, but scientifically endorsed population counts have only been undertaken for the last two years," he said.

"DEH recently commissioned SARDI to examine the cause of this suggested decline. The researchers showed that a number of factors are likely to be responsible, including predation by New Zealand fur seals, black rats and native water rats, but agreed that further research was necessary to determine the importance of each factor.

"Despite the overall problems being faced by the penguins, the colony at Granite Island has had some recent breeding success.

"Natalie Gilbert from SARDI, who studies the penguin colony on Granite Island, has confirmed that chick survival is substantially up, and the population count in July was greater than the same time last year," Mr Bracken said.

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