

African Penguins: The Cold Truth

by Katy Massey, Corporate Conservation Coordinator, Virginia Safari Park

We have lost 99% of the world's African penguin, *Spheniscus demersus*, population since 1920, an estimated decline of 90 birds per week. African Penguins may become extinct in the next 15 years. In 2010, the IUCN added African penguin to the Endangered Species List, and if the current rate continues as estimated, they will be extinct in the wild by 2030. A variety of threats over time have slowly eroded the once stable penguin population.

The first negative impact on penguin population began with egg collectors. The green-tinged, fish smelling eggs were considered a delicacy up until the 1960's; over 13 million eggs were removed from the wild. (Cott, 1953) The second problem facing penguins was guano collectors. Guano is a nutrient-rich bird dropping, sought after for its use in fertilizer. Guano layers were 13-20 feet thick, and penguins burrowed into the guano layer to form nests. The burrowed nests kept them insulated from heat and cold and protected from predators. The breeding islands are now barren rocks, and the penguins have to nest in shallow pits, exposed to the sun, predators, and occasional flooding.

Current day African penguin population concerns are oil spills, finding food, and pollution. Oil is bad news for penguins; a spot of oil as small as the size of your thumb can cause harm. When you cut a hole in a wetsuit, water seeps



African penguin entwined in fishing line. Dyer Island Conservation Trust

“The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it.”
Robert Swan

in. The same thing happens to the African penguin; they lose their waterproofing, become waterlogged and can drown. If they make it to shore, they try to preen the oil off, ingesting oil, and become ill. (Barham, Underhill, Crawford, Leshoro, 2007) Finding food has be-

come increasingly difficult due to over-fishing of sardines and anchovies, forcing penguins to travel greater distances for food. The birds exert more energy and are exposed to more predators. (Sherley, Underhill, Barham, Barham, Coetzee, Crawford, Dyer, Leshoro, Upfold, 2013) Pollution has been on the rise with an estimated 14 billion pounds of trash dumped into the ocean each year. Trash can float thousands of miles and contaminate pristine areas. The most destructive item found among the debris is monofilament fishing line. Penguins and other wildlife become heavily entangled with the line wrapping around the body, flippers, and feet, preventing the bird from swimming or diving. Animals become exhausted, and if are not rescued, they will drown. (Ryan, 2015)

Saving the African penguin is an aggressive global team effort. Participation is needed from scientists, zoologists and everyday citizens. In the United States, the Zoological Association of America (ZAA) has developed an Animal Management Program (AMP) to save this amazing species. One of these team members is located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains at the Virginia Safari Park. Bird enthusiast and park owner, Eric Mogensen, learned about the plight of African penguins and joined the efforts to save them. In the summer of 2016, the new Virginia Safari Park penguin colony made its public debut.



Installing artificial nests for African penguin, *Spheniscus demersus*. Dyer Island Conservation Trust



African penguins, *Spheniscus demersus*, at Virginia Safari Park. Virginia Safari Park

The large naturalistic exhibit, equipped with a swimming pool, allows the penguins to feel right at home. In February, 2018, hard work paid off when 'Winter,' the first African penguin chick, hatched at the Virginia Safari Park.

General Curator Sarah Friedel oversees the Virginia Safari Park's Penguin Program and says, "The most commonly asked question is about the lack of ice in the exhibit." Most people are surprised to learn that only a few species of penguin live as far south as Antarctica. The penguins seem to be enjoying the Virginia weather and three more penguin chicks have successfully hatched this fall. Animal ambassadors like these help zoos play an important role in instilling a passion for wildlife in future generations who see these aquatic acrobats firsthand.

Not only do these penguins raise awareness, but they also help raise funds to support programs in the wild through the Dyer Island Conservation Trust (DICT), located on the southern tip of Africa. This is a critically important eco-system; home to breeding colonies for a wide range of seabirds, Cape fur seals, Great White Sharks, various dolphin and whale species. The DICT built a world-class rehab facility called the African Penguin and Seabird Sanctuary (APSS.) This facility is able to care for displaced birds and release them back into the wild. The ZAA's African Penguin Management Program supports DICT efforts organizing beach clean-up days, installing over 2,000

artificial nests, supplying fishing line recycle bins, and providing environmental education.

It is a common misconception that you have to have millions of dollars to make a difference in conservation. The reality is, every little bit helps. For example, it only takes \$36 to sponsor a penguin nest. Other ways to help are organizing a local beach clean-up day, recycling and raising awareness.

The Virginia Safari Park, Metro Richmond Zoo, Tanganyika Wildlife Park, LEO ZCC, Hemker Park & Zoo, Wildlife World Zoo and Wildwood Wildlife Park work together to develop sustainable captive penguin populations as an insurance policy for the rapidly declining penguin populations of the wild. Supporting zoos involved with wild programs such as DICT provides guests an educational opportunity and contributes to long-term conservation.

"The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it." -Robert Swan. Every individual makes a difference; together we can change the world. 🐧

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Baby African penguins, *Spheniscus demersus*, hatched at Virginia Safari Park. Virginia Safari Park