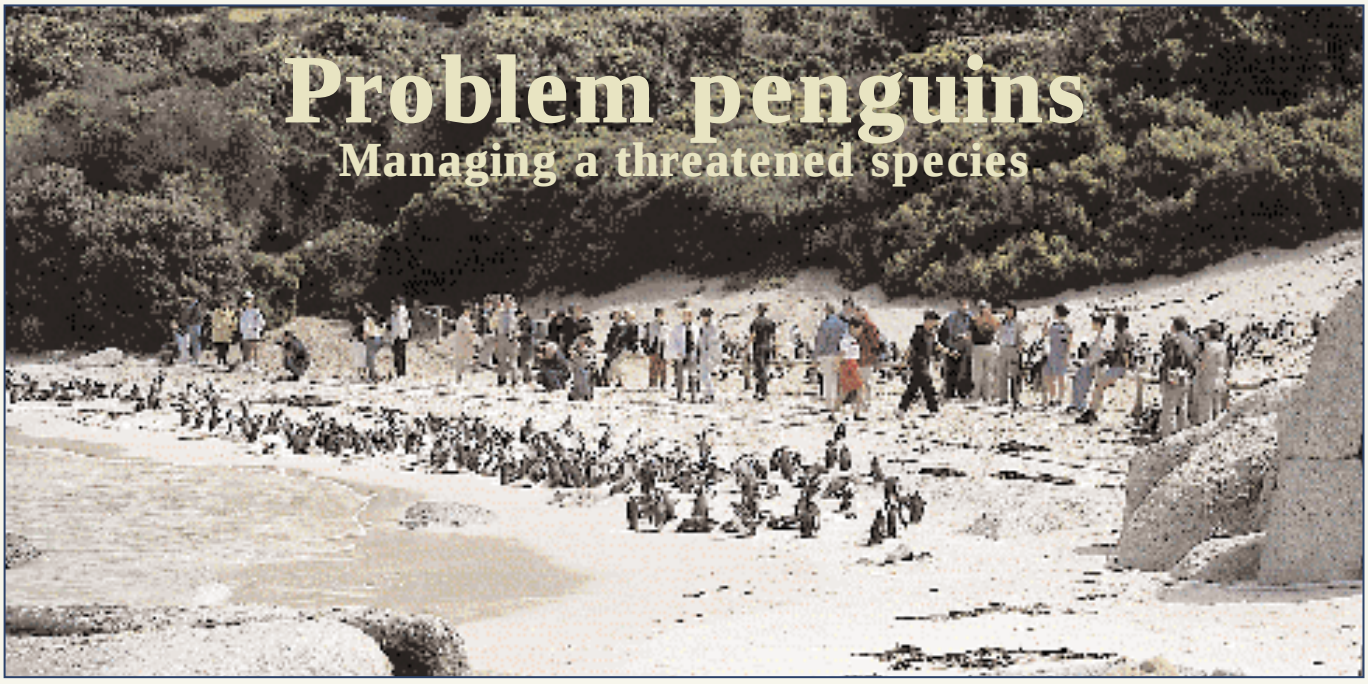
Problem penguins

Managing a threatened species



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The numbers of Jackass Penguins – and the tourists who flock to see them – are growing apace at Boulders Coastal Park.

South African National Parks took control of the Boulders Coastal Park, Simon's Town, on 1 April 1998. This beautiful stretch of coast with its unique population of urban Jackass Penguins *Spheniscus demersus* will be one of the key attractions of the new Cape Peninsula National Park. But it brings with it a suite of management problems which is giving the park's planners and managers more grey hairs than the rest of the park put together.

The crux of the Boulders problem was described in a previous edition of Fitznews (*AB&B*, vol. 2, no. 5). It centres on how to reconcile the ongoing growth of the penguin population with the concerns of some local residents who object to losing access to one of the local beaches, the many tourists who visit the penguins, and the noise and smell of the penguins.

One way to address this conflict is to consider the balance of costs and benefits, and Jane Turpie reported that the economic benefits generated by the penguin colony (some R15-million in 1995) were sufficient to offset local costs. This equation ignores South Africa's international obligations to conserve threatened species. But the cost–benefit analysis doesn't help National Parks managers decide what to do in the short term. They have to assess whether the penguins will remain at Boulders long enough to make it worth investing in a visitor centre and other facilities, while at the same time addressing the concerns of a vocal minority of locals who want to see penguin numbers limited. To help address these issues, National Parks contracted the Fitztitute to review the scientific evidence regarding the Boulders penguins.

An enormous amount of research has taken place on Jackass Penguins, especially over the last 20 years. Combining this knowledge with data from Boulders allows us to understand the dynamics of the colony. For example, counts by Sea Fisheries Research Institute personnel show that penguin numbers are increasing at some 60 per cent each year, much faster than is possible by reproduction alone (at best 10 per cent per year). Immigration thus accounts for most of the growth of the colony, precluding attempts to control the growth of the colony by moving chicks to other colonies. Moving older birds is futile, because they will rapidly return to Boulders.

Perhaps the biggest headache for the park's managers is that there are few realistic management options that will appease the concerns of locals. This is because the likely reasons for the appeal of Boulders to penguins lie offshore, associated with favourable food conditions in False Bay. Unless there is a catastrophic fire, oil spill, outbreak of disease or a predation event, the colony is likely to continue to grow. The inland spread of the colony can be constrained by a penguin-proof wall around the existing colony, but this is unlikely to prevent the alongshore spread of the colony. Perhaps the only solution is to move all birds that come ashore outside the walled area into the colony, and to keep on doing so. Even this would incur substantial manpower costs.

One over-riding question remains: should South African National Parks, as a conservation agency, actively limit the population growth of a threatened species? Jackass Penguins are 'Vulnerable' in terms of the IUCN Red Data categories, their numbers having decreased by more than 90 per cent this century. This dilemma will have to be addressed when the management policy is drafted for Boulders Coastal Park. If the decision is made to limit penguin numbers at Boulders, however, resources generated by the Boulders colony should be used to promote the recovery of other penguin colonies. □

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