

Putting birds on the economic playing field

When the first Jackass Penguins bred at Boulders Beach, Simonstown, in 1985, local residents were excited and protective of their new asset. But, 12 years later, as penguin numbers approach the 1 500 mark, sentiments have changed. Residents complain of penguins destroying their gardens and of their strong smell, and beachgoers have to put up with ever-increasing numbers of tourists, many of whom arrive in large groups to see the penguins.

This all makes for a very unusual conservation conflict: usually such conflicts arise from human encroachment on natural habitats or populations, but in this case the reverse has happened. A small stretch of coast, long used as a rather exclusive beach hide-away, has been adopted by a globally threatened bird.

The conservation needs of the penguins are clear. Their global population has been decreasing for at least 100 years, and continues to decrease. Any thriving colony is therefore valuable, not only directly for conserving the species, but indirectly so that researchers can understand why this particular colony is successful. Nevertheless, there are those who would have the colony restricted, if not removed altogether; many of the residents feel hard done by, and although few in number, they have a strong collective voice. These local-scale issues, however, have to be put in the context of broader costs and benefits, to arrive at the most holistic optimal solution.

The colony has considerable recreational value, not to mention the value that the rest of the world holds for the conservation of biodiversity.



PETE OXFORD

Jackass Penguins at Boulders Beach: how much are they worth to local residents?

Even before entrance fees were raised from R4 to R10, and with minimal marketing and advertising, visitors were spending more than R1-million annually to see the penguins. Their interest in the penguins impacts on the local and regional economy, and as part of the 'package' that attracts tourists to the region, may be worth as much as R15-million a year.

The economic value of birds and birding is not easy to assess and, to date, little attention has been paid to this in South Africa, possibly to the detriment of bird conservation efforts. When conflict arises between development and conservation, the hard financial facts behind the former can rarely

be countered with equivalent information about the latter.

In recent years, Jane Turpie and colleagues at the FitzPatrick Institute have started to tackle the economic values attached to our avifaunal resources in order to give conservation efforts a stronger stand in a world driven by traditional economic concerns. The value of our birds could be phenomenal. Even a single vagrant Red-tailed Tropicbird at Cape Point extricated more than R5 000 from the pockets of birders in less than two weeks!

These are two of the 'ornitho-economic' projects that the FitzPatrick Institute has tackled. In the near future, and with the help of *Africa - Birds & Birding* readers who filled

in the recent questionnaire, we will be tackling an analysis of what birding as a hobby in South Africa is worth in terms of recreational value and to the national economy. If birding activities can be demonstrated to carry substantial economic value, this could provide one of the most convincing arguments for avian conservation efforts in today's material world. □

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