



**THE CHANGING FACE OF**



# PENGUIN ISLAND



**P**enguin Island has long been a favourite destination for those seeking a unique marine-based experience.



Over the decades, the island has seen millions of visitors and undergone dramatic changes. Now, with the construction of *The Penguin Experience—Island Discovery Centre*, the island is showing visitors a new face.

**BY PETER DANS**

**Photos by Michael James**

**P**enguin Island is a unique place. Only 42 kilometres from the centre of Perth, it is home to a diverse array of wildlife, boasts breathtaking marine and coastal scenery, and supports the largest colony of little penguins (*Eudyptula minor*) on the west coast—and probably in Western Australia. The 12.5-hectare island lies 600 metres offshore from the growing regional centre of Rockingham, south of Perth. It has something special for visitors of all ages, whether from the local or metropolitan area, interstate or overseas.

The island may have been used by Aboriginal people, although no evidence of



their presence has been found. However, it is likely that it was visited by sealers or whalers working the west coast in the 1800s. It is difficult to determine when the early settlers first visited Penguin Island. Some accounts refer to fig trees (still visible today) being planted in 1901.

## EARLY RESIDENTS & MANAGEMENT

The earliest recorded resident of Penguin Island was a man of Canadian descent known as Seaforth McKenzie. McKenzie is thought to have camped periodically on the island from 1914, and also spent time on nearby Garden Island. Apparently, he settled permanently on Penguin Island in 1917, with a view to developing it as a holiday destination. McKenzie skilfully fashioned accommodation from the limestone caves on the northern and north-eastern faces of the island, and provided basic facilities and comforts for visitors. He transported visitors to the island in a small wooden row boat, after they signalled from the mainland using a flag system. The island also became a popular holiday destination for yachtsmen under McKenzie's 'rule', with some guests even bestowing the title of King upon McKenzie—a title that remained. He entertained guests with grandiose ceremonies and performances such as poetry readings. One of the caves was called 'The Palace', and the 'King' himself lived in a timber and iron 'Manor House'.

Penguin Island was first declared a 'reserve for native game' in 1918. An annual lease was granted to McKenzie, but when he left the island in 1926, the lease was cancelled. In 1935, the island's administration passed to a board appointed under the Parks and Reserves Act.

During World War II, a searchlight unit was stationed on the island. After the war, in 1945, administration of the island passed to the Rockingham Road Board, and the purpose was changed to



### Previous page

**Main:** The stunning landscape of Penguin Island.

**Top right:** The Department of Conservation and Land Management now manages the island.

**Below right:** The Island's natural contours are reflected in *The Penguin Experience—Island Discovery Centre*.

**Above left:** In 1968, Penguin Island was cluttered with unsightly buildings and the vegetation was denuded.

Photo – George Pettingill

**Left:** This photograph, taken from a similar vantage point in 1996, shows a lushly vegetated island with few buildings.

include recreation. However, the Road Board found it difficult to control the behaviour of weekend visitors, so in 1949, control of the island passed to the State Gardens Board. At this time the purpose of the reserve was changed to *'Recreation, camping, enjoyment by the public for holidays thereon and for purposes ancillary thereto'*.

In the early 1950s, a portion of the island was leased, following a tender process administered by the State Gardens Board, and the first huts were built on the low-lying sandy area on the eastern side of the island. The first concerns about erosion and degradation of vegetation were raised about this time. One of the earliest lessees was Mr Laurence Gill. Gill had grand visions for the island as a holiday camp, and reputedly spent considerable amounts of money on the development of accommodation and facilities, as well as carnival-style attractions. Gill also used former army amphibious vehicles to transport visitors to the island. Recent erosion has exposed the chassis of one of these vehicles on the sand bar next to the jetty, where several were dumped to slow the erosion process.

In March 1957, Penguin Island was vested in the National Parks Board with the purpose remaining unchanged. In 1966, it was granted A-class reserve status.

After Gill, the lease apparently changed hands several times, and in 1963, Mr Bob Carlberg took over. He built more accommodation, upgraded the jetty and established a shop, as well as installing gas power and a sewerage system. In 1969, a consortium of 15 Perth residents, known as Penguin Island Pty Ltd, purchased the lease. Further development took place, and a resident manager was appointed. In the early 1970s, a telephone cable and water pipe from the mainland were laid, and a power plant was set up on the island. In 1974, Penguin Island Pty Ltd renegotiated the lease for a further 21 years, and the island remained a popular holiday destination. The annual lease fee was a paltry four dollars.

The National Parks Authority became part of the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) in 1985, and around that time concern began to be raised about the condition of the island environment. In 1987, CALM acquired the lease from Penguin Island Pty Ltd, which was finding upkeep costs unmanageable.



CALM took full control of the island and began restoring degraded areas and upgrading day visitor facilities.

### THE CALM YEARS

Management of an island such as Penguin Island presents a set of unique problems. It is only 600 metres offshore, but it may as well be 100 kilometres. Only very shallow draft vessels can operate in Shoalwater Bay without disturbing the seagrass beds, so the only way to take materials to and from the island is in a specially designed, flat-bottom barge. Almost all materials going to or from the island must be hand-loaded on to the barge and off-loaded by hand at the other end.

One of CALM's first management tasks was to establish two paths to guide visitors across the island. Decades of unguided access had left the dune vegetation badly degraded, and erosion was severe in some areas. Vegetation recovered quickly after the walkways were established. Major works programs involved removing most of the old

**Top:** An Army Reserve bridging exercise in 1989 sped up the removal of debris from Penguin Island.  
Photo – Leon Griffiths

**Above:** Community volunteers worked hard on island revegetation and rehabilitation.  
Photo – Nic Dunlop

asbestos cement holiday shacks that had been built by the procession of prior lease holders and occupants. This operation, beginning in 1989, was carried out with help from the Army Reserve. They undertook a bridging exercise that allowed large trucks to be transported to the island to speed the removal of debris. This single operation significantly changed the island's appearance and heralded the beginning of a new era. Three of the older buildings were left. One was used to accommodate CALM staff involved in island management, another was set aside for visiting researchers from academic institutions, while the third was used as an information centre.



In 1991 a block of composting toilets was constructed, as the old system had reached capacity, and the unsightly old toilet and shower block was demolished and removed. A raised timber boardwalk, designed to allow wildlife such as penguins to pass beneath, was constructed to guide visitors to the toilet block.

A management plan for Penguin Island was released in October 1992. It recommended that management should focus on promoting visitor awareness, appreciation and understanding of the natural resources, and on promoting passive recreation opportunities. It also recommended developing the island's tourist potential, so long as the natural values that attracted visitors and tourists were protected.

Since the release of the final management plan, significant changes have occurred. A larger picnic area and retaining wall were established in 1993. CALM also began to construct additional boardwalks linking the jetty and toilet block to the picnic area, and paving the way for a complete recovery of degraded vegetation areas on the low sandy area on the island's eastern side. But the biggest changes took place in 1995 and 1996, with the construction of *The Penguin Experience—Island Discovery Centre* and the WMC Research and Management Centre.

## VIEWING THE PENGUINS

Most visitors to Penguin Island expect to see penguins. Unfortunately, this is not always possible as the little penguin is very secretive on land, especially during daylight hours. Enthusiastic visitors, in their efforts to see penguins, were disturbing the birds to the extent that researchers were becoming worried about the long-term viability of the population. The management plan recommended the



**Top left:** Touch tables maintained by CALM volunteers help visitors learn about marine and island plants and animals.

**Centre left:** A large picnic area was established in 1993 to concentrate visitor use and reduce impact on natural areas.

**Left:** Beachcombing is one of the island's attractions.



establishment of a facility that allowed visitors to view penguins without disturbance. CALM investigated several ways to provide such a facility and concluded that the only way to guarantee viewing during the most popular visitor periods was to hold specially selected birds in an enclosure. The viewing facility was considered essential to ensuring effective management of the little penguin population and the island's other animals and plants.

CALM contracted an architect to prepare design concepts for a new penguin viewing and interpretation facility. At the same time, a business

**Above left:** Between 1917 and 1926 an eccentric Canadian lived on the island, enlarging many of the caves to provide accommodation.

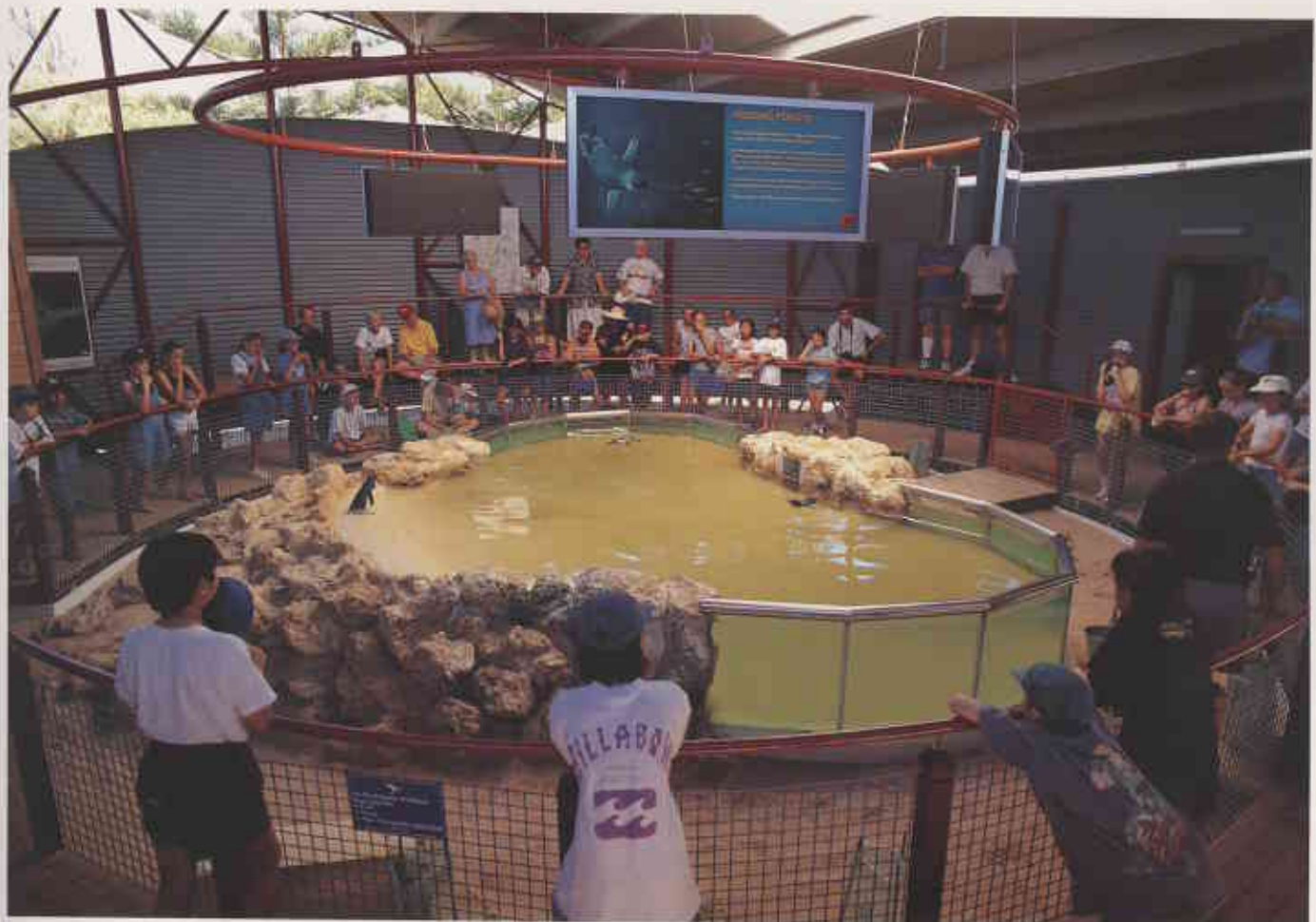
**Above:** Silver gulls are found in high numbers due to feeding by the public and scavenging of food scraps.

**Above right:** Penguins nest beside the walkways that have been built on the island to protect vegetation from trampling.

plan was prepared to ensure that the facility would be cost effective. Funding was boosted by a Commonwealth Department of Tourism Regional Tourism Development Grant that was

**Below:** *The Penguin Experience—Island Discovery Centre* allows people to see little penguins feeding and frolicking in their pool without disturbing the wild population. The birds that live in this facility have either been rejected by their parents as chicks, and raised by wildlife carers, or nursed back to health after injury.

secured by CALM and the City of Rockingham. Tenders were called and negotiated during the latter part of 1994, and construction began early in 1995. The usual problems associated with





transport were amplified by the scale of the building components that had to be transported to the island and, consequently, progress was slow.

*The Penguin Experience—Island Discovery Centre* finally opened in December 1995, receiving a fantastic response from the public. It has a central enclosure, which houses a small colony of penguins. These birds, like many others each year, have been rescued in a sick or injured state and nursed back to health at the WA Native Bird Hospital. Some birds, including those at the centre, are not suitable for release back to the wild.

Two raised viewing platforms around the enclosure can cater for up to 180 visitors at any one time. Five back-lit information panels, describing the biology and behaviour of the little penguin, were produced with the help of Kodak Australasia. A large, open verandah provides visitors with a focal point from which to gather information to plan their day on the island. During holiday periods and weekends, the information counter is attended by CALM's tireless Shoalwater Islands Volunteers. This group maintains the displays and members are happy to help visitors learn about the island's plants and animals. The interpretive displays will be developed further in the future.

CALM also wanted to establish a base to manage the island and undertake important research. A concept plan was prepared and external sponsorship funding sought. In late 1994, CALM announced an innovative sponsorship arrangement with WMC Resources Ltd

**Top left:** Common rock crabs (*Plagusia chabrus*) shelter in crevices on the island's exposed rocky shores and platforms.

**Top right:** Due to abundant food from human sources, Penguin Island's gull population breeds almost year-round.

**Centre left:** The reef platform around Penguin Island is a fascinating area for exploration by snorkel.

**Left:** The WMC Research and Management Centre provides a facility for researchers studying the area's wildlife and landforms.



(formerly Western Mining Corporation). WMC contributed \$120 000, enabling construction of the WMC Research and Management Centre. The centre provides accommodation and facilities for researchers to study the area's wildlife and landforms. It will become a regional base for important marine, island and coastal research and will hopefully enhance the quality and quantity of such research.

## THE FUTURE

The completion of these two facilities paves the way for the final transformation of the island. The two remaining shacks will be removed and their former sites rehabilitated to restore their natural beauty. Future initiatives on Penguin Island will focus on upgrading the two walktrails that cross the island from east to west, and linking the final sections of boardwalk. Other initiatives will focus on the control of feral and exotic plant and animal species, which have become established following the rapid urban expansion in the Rockingham area.

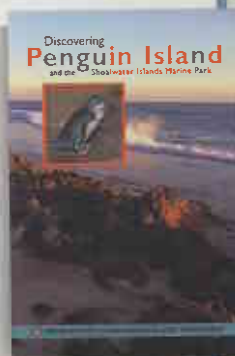
Penguin Island has certainly changed

its face over the years, as people who remember the island in the 1950s, with its carnival-style entertainment, can certainly testify. At the time when CALM assumed management of the island in 1985, it was a place of run-down shacks and degraded vegetation. It has now been given a new look that befits its status as a conservation reserve. The new developments have been designed to reflect the natural contours and colours of the island and enhance its natural beauty, while providing a nature-based experience for the visitors that flock there. People who have visited Penguin Island recently, after having been there in the past, have been astonished by its latest makeover. If you haven't been there yet, there is a whole new experience waiting for you.

Decades of unguided access had badly degraded the vegetation on Penguin Island. CALM established two walkways across the island, which allowed the flora to make a dramatic recovery.

Peter Dans is CALM's Marine Operations Manager for the Swan Region. He has been involved in managing Penguin Island and the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park, and the marine and islands wildlife, for more than seven years. Peter was a driving force in establishing *The Penguin Experience* and WMC Research and Management Centre. He can be contacted at CALM's Fremantle office on (09) 432 5111 or by e-mail at: [peterd@calm.wa.gov.au](mailto:peterd@calm.wa.gov.au)

A colour pocket-sized field guide, *Discovering Penguin Island and the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park*, can be purchased on the island, from CALM offices and other outlets for \$5.95.





# LANDSCOPE

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VOLUME TWELVE NUMBER 2, SUMMER 1996-97



Shannon National Park is the home of the Great Forest Trees Drive, another nature-based tourist attraction for the south-west. Read the story on page 17.



The rugged Kimberley coast was the location of the first maritime LANDSCOPE Expedition. Read all about it on page 10.



A huge volunteer effort has helped with the renewal of the Montebello Islands and the eradication of feral animals. (See page 47.)



Science has long-known the relationship between plants and habitats. Now we are 'Prospecting for Plants' using landforms as a guide. (See page 23.)

One hundred years ago, two members of an expedition to the Great Sandy Desert became lost. Read what happened to them in 'Land of the Lost' on page 36.

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## COVER

The scientific name of the little penguin (*Eudyptula minor*) means 'little diver'. The wings of these flightless seabirds have evolved into flippers for underwater propulsion. The little penguin is the smallest of the 17 penguin species. Penguin Island has the largest colony of little penguins on the west coast. See 'The Changing Face of Penguin Island' on page 28.

Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky



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