



One of the biggest blue penguin colonies in the country is on Motunau Island off the north Canterbury coast.



Blue penguins mainly feed during the day and only come ashore after dark. This nocturnal practice was probably to avoid predators such as skuas and gulls. There are now many more human-introduced predators to worry the penguins.

some waterfront areas, such as Wellington Harbour, trains regularly kill penguins.

Penguins probably spend more time on the surface of the sea than any other type of bird and this makes them particularly vulnerable to entanglement in plastic rubbish and oil slicks. Many blue penguins have been found with beer six-pack rings around their heads or entangled in discarded nylon fishing line.

Large oil spills adjacent to penguin colonies can be disastrous. In 1990, more than 200 blue penguins were oiled off Victoria, Australia, in one slick. However, overall, small scale oil spills may cause just as many blue penguin deaths. Out of 42 freshly dead blue penguins washed up on the New Zealand coast that I have examined in the last ten years, two (almost five percent) have been oiled. From 56 chicks banded by Fred Kinsky on Somes Island, only two were recovered within a year: one dead on a beach and one live but oil-stained and exhausted. Similar problems occur in Australia – for example, an average of one or two oiled blue penguins are reported in Victoria each year.

The incidence of oiled and entangled penguins clearly needs more study, but reported instances are frequent enough to cause concern.

Deliberate acts of violence against such vulnerable birds also occur. In some areas,

blue penguins have been used as bait in rock lobster pots. A spate of shootings occurred at Evans Bay, Wellington Harbour in 1981 – about 20 penguins were found shot or mauled by dogs. Shootings still occur here, one in June 1984, and the latest in August 1991. Some people take exception to the rather noisy, guttural brayings that emanate from penguins' nests near their houses, but it must be remembered that the penguins were here long before people invaded and destroyed their colonies.

THERE ARE big bucks to be made from the little blues. Most New Zealanders live within an hour's drive of places where blue penguins come ashore under the cover of darkness to their nests. Blue penguins are present at colonies during most of the year.

While New Zealand's mainland blue penguin populations are being or have been wiped out, Australia is investing heavily in blue penguin conservation. With nearly 500,000 tourists visiting Victoria's Phillip Island "penguin parade" each year, officials have seen the sense of putting money into penguin protection. Blue penguin watching on Phillip Island adds \$60 million per year to the Victorian

economy. It is said to be Australia's second most popular natural tourist attraction after Uluru (Ayers Rock). All revenue generated is re-invested in the penguin reserve for the benefit of the penguins.

Phillip Island isn't the only blue penguin colony in Australia that has organised tourist visits. There are two mainland sites in Victoria, two island colonies off South Australia and one off New South Wales. Tasmania has one island and one mainland colony where penguin tours are taken. In Western Australia a venture has just started up, with cruises to a colony of 300 pairs on Penguin Island, off Rockingham.

Mainland New Zealand colonies couldn't match Phillip Island for its sheer number of penguins where some 24,000 are present, but to most, the sight of five penguins can be nearly as exciting as seeing 500. The many Australian tourist ventures, some to colonies with less than 100 birds, demonstrate that small colonies can be used successfully for tourism. Yet in most parts of New Zealand, coastal blue penguin colonies are just ignored, despite the growing popularity of Otago's yellow-eyed penguin tourist ventures. One exception is the nature-based tourism venture of Akaroa Harbour Cruises who take people out on the scenic harbour to view Hector's dolphins, fur seals and blue penguins.

In Oamaru authorities are deciding whether or not to form a fenced reserve to protect the 400-strong local blue penguin colony, particularly from dogs. The colony there could become a great tourist drawcard for a region struggling for employment opportunities. Residents, such as Lorraine Adams, and local Department of Conservation staff are working to persuade the Waitaki District Council to form the reserve. The council's Mayor, Mr Reg Denny, considers part of the area occupied by the penguin colony may need to be developed for cement works.

Unfortunately in this era of budget cut-backs, promoting the financial benefits from penguin tourism may be the only way that money is put aside for penguin protection.

FORTUNATELY, the plight of some mainland blue penguin colonies is being taken seriously by locals, but as yet there is no national coordination to systematically protect the colonies.

On Wellington's southern coast, concern over road kills has led to road signs being put up and nest boxes being installed on the seaward side of the road. Wellington Central Rotary Club with