



LAERSKOOL GANSBAAI

REPORT: EXPO ON AFRICAN PENGUIN Tuesday 18 February 2025

Members of the WCC schools' education team presented an expo on African Penguins as part of their environmental education program for Laerskool Gansbaai learners.

A total of 51 Grade 5 and 42 Grade 6 learners came to find out more about African Penguins and why they are critically endangered.



Sheraine van Wyk explained why African Penguin numbers are plummeting, with only 3% of the once flourishing penguin population left. Scientists predict that the African Jackass Penguin could be functionally extinct within the next 10 years!

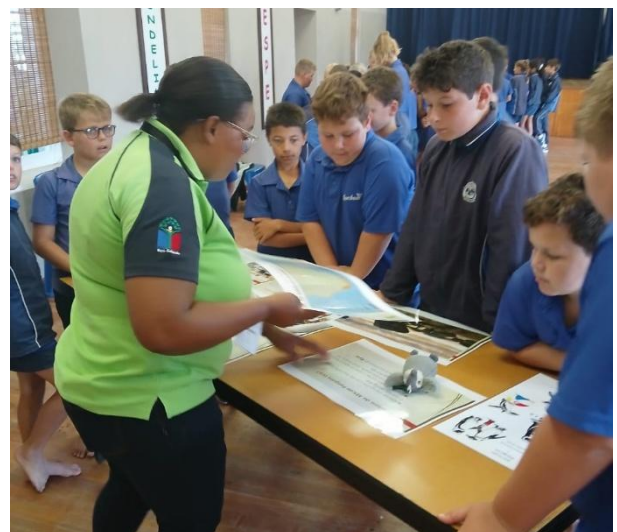
African Penguins primarily feed on sardines and anchovies, which have been heavily exploited by commercial purse-seine fisheries. During the breeding season, penguins can only forage within a 20–40 km range of their colonies, making

localized fish depletion catastrophic. Industrial fishing directly competes with penguins, forcing them to travel farther for food, often leading to starvation.

Climate change has also altered ocean temperatures and currents, shifting fish stocks away from traditional penguin foraging areas. Juvenile penguins are particularly vulnerable, as they are instinctively drawn to historically rich fishing zones that are now depleted, creating an "ecological trap".

Sea levels have risen due to climate change, gradually inundating their island colonies. They have thus been forced to nest on land where they are particularly vulnerable to predation.

Efforts to establish a colony on the de Hoop protected coast has had some success. Scientists and conservators are doing everything they can to stop the penguin's extinction from trying to establish a land-based colony with unnatural protection from predators to court action to enforce meaningful marine protected areas around penguin colonies to ensure that the penguins have food to eat.



Shirley Mgoboza pointed out the distinctive physical features of the African Penguin, compared to Antarctic penguins, so they could spot the African Penguin when seeing them on TV or internet.

They then looked at the southern African map and Shirley pointed out the positions of their colonies, from south-west Namibia all the way up to Mozambique on the eastern side. Shirley pointed out the various local penguin colonies on a map - Boulders Beach, Stony Point, De Hoop and Dyer Island. She explained what we mean by protected areas and why they are important. They then discussed adaptations to their African environment, for example heat regulating through patches of exposed skin near the eyes and feet through which blood circulates and cools; as well as the ability to raise their feathers to allow air flow.

African penguins burrow into the sand to lay their eggs so they are protected from the sun's heat. Historically, these penguins burrowed into guano to nest, but guano scraping by humans left them completely vulnerable to heat and predators on their rocky island homes. Artificial nests have not proved very successful as the early designs did not provide heat protection.



Volunteer Judy MacFarlane discussed feeding and breeding. "There were two groups of learners during the morning, who'd clearly spent some time researching about penguins in general. They were eager to share their knowledge which I

found most refreshing and I used the opportunity to pose questions to allow them to tell the group their answers."

Judy had many colour photos, a penguin eggshell and some downy feathers for them to touch and feel. This created more discussion about how fragile the penguins are during incubation, hatching, and moulting periods. Understanding the life-cycle of a jackass penguin definitely enhanced their understanding about the conservation challenges they face.



Volunteer Kathie Buley highlighted some of the conservation challenges faced by African Penguins.

The learners were surprisingly well informed and curious. They discussed why we want to save penguins, threats to penguins, human impact on penguins and conservation efforts by government and individuals.

The learners were particularly interested in the cleaning of penguins following oil spills, and were horrified at the cost implications to rehabilitate one bird. We all agreed that prevention is better than cure and due care must be taken to prevent oil spills both big and small.

The school is full of principles to aspire to notably "respek", so with the second class we discussed Conservation challenges. When asked what we could do to show we respected penguins, they responded with: don't take all their fish; do beach clean ups, don't take their guano and make sure your boat engine isn't leaking oil.



Volunteer Robbie Hanson, a Senior Hawston Sea Cadet, showed the learners how the bodies of penguins are adapted to an aquatic environment, having to catch fish. Among other adaptations, African Penguins have streamlined submarine-shaped bodies. Like a submarine, the powerful legs and feet (propeller) are near the rear, as is the short tail that serves as a rudder. The flippers are modified front limbs that allow them to "fly" underwater.

Bones are solid and heavy to allow them to stay underwater (acting like a diver's weights).

The beak is strong and equipped with barbs inside the mouth that prevent fish from escaping and facilitate swallowing the fish.

Penguins on land have a comical gait, which the learners could imitate by donning flippers and tying their knees together.

We are most grateful to the AVI Community Trust for sponsoring the schools education programme.

