

MEDIA RELEASE

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Save Rockingham's Little Penguins

Fears centre approval will rubber stamp extinction of little penguin colony

A decision to conditionally approve a new Discovery Centre on Penguin Island by the Western Australian Planning Commission (WAPC) is deeply disappointing and could rubber stamp the extinction of the colony, the **Save Rockingham's Little Penguins** campaign says.

Dawn Jecks, convenor of the campaign, said the environmental conditions imposed on the approval are window dressing in an attempt to make the Discovery Centre more palatable to the community and other stakeholders who want to see it constructed on the mainland instead.

Among the conditions imposed on the approval is a requirement for construction to only take place outside of the little penguins' breeding season, which runs from April to December on Penguin Island. However, construction is slated to start in October/November 2022 and is due to be completed in May 2023. Whether the conditions are imposed or not, the construction period will overlap completely with the little penguins' sensitive moulting period between December and February.

"This entire process has badly let down the colony. The little penguins will be the ultimate losers if the WA environment minister Reece Whitby and local member Premier Mark McGowan do not intervene in this process and stop this deeply flawed development from taking place on the island," said Ms Jecks.

"Even if the conditions are imposed, we fear they will not go far enough for our little penguins.

"There's been a lot of talk across the last few months but so far Minister Whitby and his team at the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) are yet to provide the community with solid solutions that will preserve the colony.

"We're told repeatedly they are coming and they will manage the construction sensitively. But how are we supposed to trust their word on this when they have failed to inform the community and other stakeholders appropriately about this process from the word go? It's a farce. This process should be a case study in how not to engage with stakeholders effectively.

"Unless they are planning to use foam tools, how on earth will they manage to get the new centre built on the island without disturbing the little penguins? It's time these politicians and DBCA got real."

Ms Jecks said the population had declined by around 80% between 2007 and 2019, with fewer than 300 little penguins currently left on the island. She said claims by DBCA that the new centre would create more habitat for little penguins is a distraction because with population levels so low there is currently no shortage of habitat.

She also said DBCA made no attempt to account for tourism impacts in its planning application or in its responses to media on the issue.

"There are a number of issues facing this population and so we need a number of different solutions. It's important to recognise that the decline of this population is not just about climate

change. There is growing evidence that tourism on the island is also playing a role,” she said. “A new tourism attraction on the island is only going to increase the risk for little penguins.

“The impacts of global heating are with us now and we need new, forward-thinking solutions, flexibility and cooperation between communities, governments, business, scientists and activists if iconic WA species like little penguins are going to survive.”

ENDS

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