



Last Call - The African Penguin's Fight for Survival

**In partnership with Marine Dynamics
and the Dyer Island Conservation Trust**

Manar El Kebir

Report 2 of 3



Report 2

Episode 2: Present – A Species threatened to disappear by 2035

Once numbering over one million breeding pairs in the early 1900s, the African penguin (*Spheniscus demersus*) once thrived along the southern African coastline. But this narrative has shifted drastically. Today, African penguin populations have declined by over 99%. As of 2025, they are critically endangered, with just less than 10 000 breeding pairs remaining.

According to Xolani Lawo, head bird rehabilitator at the African Penguin and Seabird Sanctuary (APSS), working with penguins for 19 years, historical human activities laid the foundation for this population collapse. “One of the big problems was egg harvesting,” he explains. “The eggs were collected and sold in the markets. People considered them a delicacy.” This practice persisted for decades, with the penguins often returning to lay new eggs on the same spot, only for them to be stolen again.

Xolani:

“In 2015, we had 18,000 breeding pairs. Today, it’s less than half.”

The threats are multiplying.

1. Habitat Loss and Guano Scraping

At the start of the 20th century, massive quantities of guano—essential for building insulated nests—were scraped off islands and sold as fertilizer.

Wilfred Chivell, APSS Founder:

“When you take the guano away,” explains APSS founder Wilfred Chivell, “penguins are forced to nest on open, exposed rocks.” This shift made eggs and chicks vulnerable to temperature fluctuations and predators.

Historical records show that:

- In 1920, 440,000 eggs were exported to Europe.
- By 1957, only 90,000 eggs were available for export—a clear indicator of population collapse.

Although these events unfolded over a century, the repercussions are felt strongly today.

Wilfred Chivell emphasizes:

“If we had realized the damage earlier, perhaps we could have acted sooner. But now we’re racing against time to prevent a complete collapse.”

2. Overfishing and Predation

Today, overfishing has replaced guano and egg collection as the major threat. Penguins feed primarily on sardines and anchovies—both targeted by industrial fisheries. This forces adults to swim further for food, depleting their energy and lowering chick survival rates.

Xolani:

“Their body mass decreases, they can’t feed chicks efficiently. Seals, desperate due to fish scarcity, now hunt penguins—tearing them open for the fish in their stomachs.”

3. Food Chain Collapse

Orcas have driven great white sharks away, causing a boom in Cape fur seals. With no predators, seals now hunt penguins.

Wilfred:

“Seals wait for penguins to return in the afternoon—then attack.”

If a parent doesn't return in time, the other must abandon the nest to survive—leaving chicks exposed.



Cape fur seals—considered predators contributing to the decline of African penguins—swimming near their colony off Geyser Rock. Photo taken by Manar Elkebir

4. Climate Change & Shifting Species

Rockhopper and macaroni penguins—never before seen locally—are appearing.

Xolani:

“Every year for the past four years, we've seen new species. Is the water getting colder? Or is climate change confusing everyone?”

5. Plastic and Marine Debris

Xolani:

“We've found penguins with up to 20 cm of plastic inside. Birds feeding on plastic lids die because they can't digest them.”

This Darwin Leader project was made possible by:



<https://dict.org.za/>



<https://www.marinedynamics.co.za/>

Thanks to all partners and sponsors that made the DARWIN200 2023-25
Global Voyage Possible.

www.darwin200.com/sponsors



zero
six
zero