

Penguin resilience to climate change investigated

August 2 2016, by Pepita Smyth



Credit: Murdoch University

New research by Murdoch University will investigate the future of Rockingham's beloved Little Penguins colony.

Dr Belinda Cannell, who has been part of a long term study of the birds, will spend the next three years examining their resilience to [coastal waters](#) that have remained warmer than average since late 2010 .

"Little Penguins are essentially the canaries in the coalmine for the Shoalwater Marine Park," she said.

"Understanding the viability of this population of penguins will give us a good understanding of the health of the whole ecosystem."

Dr Cannell will use new information collected over the next three years, along with data she has previously collected, to improve the understanding of how Little Penguins will fare with climate change and coastal development in the Shoalwater Islands Marine Park.

She will continue to track Little Penguins at sea using satellite and GPS technology, attaching special tags to some birds to record the diving depths when travelling and foraging.

"For the first time we will gain a real understanding of the movements and activities of the penguins in the water and show locations where they may be more at risk from watercraft collisions," she said.

Dr Cannell is also hoping to calculate the size of the penguin population and exactly what the penguins are eating.

"We have not done a full population count of the penguins since 2012 but other indicators have not been promising," she said.

"From 2010 to 2015 far fewer penguins were recorded using nest boxes and, not surprisingly, fewer eggs were laid. We believe this was connected to water temperatures being higher than average.

"The birds have been travelling long distances when they are relieved of incubating the eggs, some travelling down to Geographe Bay. Their foraging trips have been incredibly long, 10 days or more. This indicates food resources close to Penguin Island have been scarce."

Dr Cannell said [water temperatures](#) were still warmer than normal in summer this year, but have now dropped back to normal. She is hoping to see a shift in the [penguins'](#) behaviour, indicating the coastal waters near Penguin Island are again supporting healthy baitfish stocks.

Provided by Murdoch University

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