

# Community use of dogs to guard nesting seabirds

**J W Amor<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Coast Action Coastcare Facilitator, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Warrnambool, Victoria

The South West Maremma Dog Project is located at two separate locations and is protecting different species at Warrnambool and Portland in Victoria's South West. The Middle Island section of the Project is located in the heart of Warrnambool's tourist precinct, open to coastal biodiversity corridors to the east and west, and situated at the Merri River estuary. Middle Island is also surrounded by the Merri Marine Sanctuary. The area has significant cultural significance and unique environmental habitats with breeding Little Penguin colonies and other seabirds present. Orange bellied parrots feed on the fringing salt marsh. This colony of penguins on Middle Island represents a small proportion of colonies which breed near urban areas. There is another urban major colony at St Kilda in Melbourne.

The project was initiated by the Warrnambool Landcare Coastcare Group who were concerned that the colony would be lost forever to Warrnambool. The group took on the suggestion of one of their members, A NRM student who worked casually on a free range chicken farm, where the Maremma guardian dogs were being used to protect chickens. This Italian dog breed is hundreds of years old and was bred to protect goats from wolf attack. They have been used to protect chicken and sheep for many decades in Australia. This project essentially took a tried and true agricultural method and adapted it for conservation in what is believed to be world first.

The Project aims to prevent fox predation of the Little Penguin through the use of the dogs. This project initially provided 24hour protection to penguins from foxes. Due to changes to the Cruelty to Animals Act recently, the "virtual fence" technology which was being used to contain the dogs has had to be curtailed. This has forced the project to use daily visits by the dogs instead. It is hoped that the Project can obtain an exemption when the Act is reviewed later this year. The project aim is to allow the colony to breed unhindered and the penguin population to increase from less than 10 in 2005 to a self sustaining level believed to be at 1,000. The project also aims to increase community awareness of fox predation issues on native wildlife and highlight the importance of protecting marine creatures such as Little Penguins in an urban environment. There are at present over 100 penguins using the island and none have been lost to predation since the project began.

12 months after the Middle Island project proved the viability of the method, a Community Committee of Management at Portland, concerned about the lack of breeding success of the Point Danger Australasian Gannet colony, successfully adopted the method with approximately 200 gannets fledging this year. This is the first time a gannet has fledged from this colony since it was established 15 years ago. The short tailed shearwater colony are also making a dramatic recovery after decades of fox predation.

This project is part of a larger initiative to address the ongoing reduction in numbers of little penguin species in the state. Phillip Island Nature Park, south of Melbourne has Victorias' largest penguin colony. Scientific staff from the Island have helped in the development of this project and along with other agencies dealing with predation issues are watching closely as the techniques are refined and the project enters its' 5<sup>th</sup> year of success.

The project enjoys strong community and corporate support and there is the capacity to further adopt this technique to further protect species. Interest in the project is international with the Canadian Discovery channel, Landline, Behind the News amongst others travelling to the South West to film stories on the project.

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