



# African Penguin Conservation Summary



## State of the Species

The African penguin (*Spheniscus demersus*, a.k.a. jackass penguin, black-footed penguin) is endemic to southern Africa and the only breeding penguin species on the African continent. It breeds in southwest Namibia and western and southern South Africa, though non-breeding birds may range more widely. Breeding occurs at 28 colonies rangewide – 24 on islands and four on the mainland.

African penguin populations have undergone a steep decline in the past century. Breeding pairs may have numbered near a million as recently as the early twentieth century, including an estimated 570,000 pairs on a single island. By 1956, this number had fallen to approximately 141,000 pairs. More recent estimates place the rangewide breeding population at less than 25,000 pairs, roughly 75% of which are found in South Africa. The species decreased in number by approximately 60.5% over a 28-year period (three generations) as of 2009.



Source: IUCN 2015

### Status

#### Range Countries

IUCN Endangered

ESA Endangered

CITES Appendix II

#### AZA SSP Population

Penguin TAG Chair Tom Schneider

SSP Coordinators Steve Sarro  
Gayle Sirpenski

AZA Green SSP

AZA Population 926 individuals

## Primary Threats to the Species

Human disturbance and egg-collecting have contributed significantly to the decline of the species. In the 1800's and early 1900's, African penguin eggs were harvested in the millions as a food commodity. Guano collection practices from the recent past have deprived penguins of their natural nest-burrowing sites, causing them to nest

on open ground where they are vulnerable to heat stress, flooding, and predation. Artificial nests have been installed in breeding colonies with varying degrees of success.

Mortality from oil spills is significant. Major oil spills have occurred in South Africa in 1994 and 2000, oiling approximately 10,000 and 19,000 birds, respectively. Thousands of birds died in these events, though the majority survived due to successful rescue and rehabilitation programs. New offshore oil and gas exploration wells are planned in South African waters, increasing the chances for major oil spills.

African penguin prey populations have declined and shifted eastward in South Africa. This is possibly as a result of commercial fishing pressure, though a link to climate change has been suggested. This causes birds to forage farther from breeding colonies to meet their nutritional needs and feed their chicks, and may cause a number of additional problems for the species. The lack of sufficient prey is thought to be the primary threat to African penguins.

Hundreds of penguins need to be rescued, rehabilitated and reintroduced annually. With less than 2% of the population remaining in the wild today, it is vitally important to save these birds and monitor reintroduction success.

## AZA Conservation Support

Between 2010 and 2014, more than 30 AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums took part in or supported field conservation projects benefitting African penguins. Over those five years, the AZA community invested almost a half million dollars in African penguin conservation. Financial support and expertise are provided to field conservation partners, such as the South African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB). Supported projects often focus on providing rescue/rehabilitation and veterinary services to African penguins and other seabirds, as well as raising awareness about endangered seabirds through conservation education programs and research projects.



#### References:

1. BirdLife International. 2015. *Spheniscus demersus*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2015: e.T22697810A84636189. Downloaded on 05 April 2016.
2. IUCN. 2015. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. <http://www.iucnredlist.org>. Downloaded on 08 May 2015.
3. South African Department of Environmental Affairs. 2013. African Penguin Biodiversity Management Plan.