

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Lost at Sea Project: Protecting Seal Rocks' Cultural and Environmental Heritage

Phillip Island, Victoria, [September 2024] – The Lost at Sea Project, a groundbreaking partnership between Monash University, Phillip Island Nature Parks, and the Bunurong Land Council (Aboriginal Corporation), is set to embark on an ambitious journey to study Seal Rocks, the largest Australian fur seal colony.

Seal Rocks, covering 8 hectares, is home to approximately 19,000 Australian Fur Seals. This key breeding area, located 2-5 meters above sea level, has been increasingly inundated by rising sea levels during major storms. The area has also experienced significant erosion, endangering the seals' breeding grounds. Led by Dr Rebecca McIntosh, Senior Scientist at the Nature Parks, the project aims to address the rapid impacts of climate change on this critical habitat and its rich Bunurong Cultural Values.

“This is an exciting project for the teams involved, especially those taking the voyage to Seal Rocks to complete the assessment. Phillip Island is known by its Traditional Owners, the Bunurong (community), as Millowl. It is part of Victoria’s Kulin Nation and is steeped in a cultural history dating back tens of thousands of years,” said Dr McIntosh.

The Bunurong Land Council (Aboriginal Corporation), the Traditional Custodians of Millowl (Phillip Island) and Seal Rocks, have identified this volcanic sea landscape as culturally significant. Their invaluable knowledge and deep connection to Bunurong Sea Country make their participation in the project crucial. Rising sea levels and increasing erosion necessitate an urgent Cultural Values Assessment to capture critical information before it is lost forever. This project will mark the first stage of a three-year effort to document and protect the cultural values and environmental treasures of Seal Rock.

The project will employ cutting-edge technologies to gather detailed data on climate change impacts at Seal Rocks. The team, including Associate Professor Dr Ruth Reef from Monash University's Coastal Research Group, will examine the links between these impacts and fur seal pup mortality rates. Additionally, the project aims to identify future refuge sites in the Bass Strait region for fur seals displaced by climate change.

A dedicated website will be launched to share project updates, accessible via a QR code promoted across the Nature Parks, Wildlife Coast Cruises' eco-boat, and various online platforms. Wildlife Coast Cruises, a partner in this initiative, will help raise awareness among its many visitors through in-person updates and promotional materials.

Telematics Trust will fund the first year of the three-year project. The Trust supports public education and training in Victoria by promoting the development and delivery of courses via telematic means and leveraging new information technologies for distance learning outside traditional educational institutions. It provides grants, equity, and debt investments to projects that advance technology-based education and training in the state.

The Penguin Foundation has committed \$40,000 in funding for the second and third years of the project, supporting wildlife and conservation programs on Millowl. The Phillip Island Conservation Society will also be key in publicising the project through its website and social media channels.

To our knowledge, this is Australia's first project to examine climate change's impacts on Bunurong Sea Country's natural marine life. The findings will not only enhance understanding of the challenges faced by Australia's largest Australian fur seal located on Bunurong Sea Country about their breeding site but also inform necessary preparations to protect alternative refuge sites in other locations on Bunurong Sea Country and Australian coastal waters. The project will also shed light on the effects of climate change on Bunurong cultural values at Seal Rocks, contributing valuable insights to the broader conservation and Bunurong cultural values and marine biodiversity management efforts.

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About Phillip Island Nature Parks:

Phillip Island Nature Parks was created by the State Government of Victoria in 1996 and comprises over 1,980 hectares of Crown Land set aside under the Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978 "for the conservation of areas of natural interest or beauty or of scientific, historic or archaeological interest.

Habitat within the Nature Parks supports significant populations of little penguins, hooded plovers, short-tailed shearwaters and other international migratory bird species, and mammals such as koalas, Australian fur seals, bats, and Eastern barred bandicoots. Also under the protection of the Nature Parks is a range of plant communities including more than 330 native species.

Phillip Island Nature Parks is a self-funded organisation. Revenue generated through ecotourism activities is invested in vital conservation, research, and education programs.

About the Penguin Foundation:

The Penguin Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation that raises funds to protect and enhance Phillip Island's natural environment through research, conservation and education programs carried out by Phillip Island Nature Parks. By adopting a penguin or donating to the Penguin Foundation you are directly contributing to important research, conservation, and education programs as well as wildlife rescue and rehabilitation.

About Bunurong Land Council (Aboriginal Corporation):

The Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation represents the Traditional Custodians of the sky, lands and waters of the Mornington Peninsula, Westernport Bay, and part of South Gippsland. Bunurong Sea Country extends between the Werribee River to the Tarwin River. The corporation is a Registered Aboriginal Party and an incorporated association representing the Bunurong people of the South-Eastern Kulin Nation in Victoria, Australia.

The Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation works to protect and preserve cultural heritage, cultural values and biodiversity values that are recognised of high significance to the Bunurong community. The Bunurong land Council Aboriginal Corporation is the voice and respond to all matters related to the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006 on Bunurong Biik.

About Monash University:

Monash University is one of Australia's leading universities, renowned for its research excellence. Monash's Coastal Research Group is based at the School of Earth, Atmosphere, and Environment. It seeks to understand how marine and coastal vegetated habitat's function and how natural disturbances, anthropogenic impacts, and climate change affect them. The group's research themes include coastal dynamics, ecology, and biogeography, using a combination of field studies, remote sensing, laboratory analyses, and numerical modelling. The insights gained from this research provide essential guidance for the effective management of these habitats in the future.