

Office of the Environmental Monitor

Fact Sheet: Little Penguins Monitoring Program

About Little Penguins

The Little Penguin, also known as the Fairy Penguin, is the smallest of the world's penguins, measuring about one third of a metre in height and weighing approximately one kilogram. They feed on small fish such as anchovies.



Photo: Little Penguins at Phillip Island

There are two large colonies of Little Penguins in Victoria: a population of more than 26,000 birds at Phillip Island that breed on Summerland Peninsula and a population of approximately 35,000 birds at Gabo Island in eastern Victoria. The Phillip Island colony forages for fish in Bass Strait and Port Phillip Bay (the Bay), with about 40 to 60 per cent of the birds using the Bay as a feeding ground during winter. A smaller colony of approximately 1000 birds breeds at the St Kilda breakwater and also feeds in the Bay.

The health of Little Penguins largely depends on their ability to find prey and on the distance they have to travel while searching. Their health is reflected partly in their body weight, which varies seasonally, as well as during events such as moulting (between February and April) and breeding (between August and May).

Little Penguins Monitoring Program

The Channel Deepening Project (the Project) has a rule book, the Environmental Management Plan, which sets standards and controls to avoid and minimise environmental effects that could impact Little Penguins, such as changes in their food source and water clarity across foraging sites.

The rule book includes the Little Penguin Monitoring Program, which is one of nine Baywide Monitoring Programs. The program's objective is to detect changes in Little Penguin body mass or weight (an indicator of health) outside expected variability.

The body condition of Little Penguins at the Phillip Island Nature Park (PINP) has been monitored since 2001, providing a substantial amount of historical data. The mean daily weight of Little Penguins at the PINP is measured as they walk over a weighbridge located on a pathway the birds use to enter and exit the colony. The weighbridge weighs each Little Penguin and a sensor records the identity of a small group of birds that have been micro-chipped.



Photo: The weighbridge and data recording device

Data collected during the Project will be compared with historical dataset so that changes in the mean daily weight can be detected.

How the Port of Melbourne Corporation will use the data

The Port of Melbourne Corporation (PoMC) will use results from the Little Penguin Monitoring Program to detect changes in Little Penguin body mass outside expected variability during the Project and until 2012. Where changes outside of expected variability are detected, a risk review will be undertaken. This will determine if the changes are significant to the ecosystem of the Bay and of any action that may be required.

The role of the Office of the Environmental Monitor

The Office of the Environmental Monitor (the Office) will scrutinise the Project's effects on Little Penguins to judge the environmental performance of the Project. The Little Penguin monitoring data will be used to judge if dredging affects the health of Little Penguins.

The Office will also monitor all data relating to PoMC's compliance with the management actions specified in the Environmental Management Plan that have been designed to minimise effects on Little Penguins.

These include Environmental Controls relating to when, where and how dredging can take place and have been designed to minimise the location and duration of the suspended sediment that could affect both the food source (anchovy) and the Little Penguin's ability to find it.

The combination of these monitoring results will provide the Office with an understanding of any changes to the body weight of Little Penguins. The Office will use the results to judge the environmental performance of the Channel Deepening Project.

For more information on the nine Baywide Monitoring Programs visit www.oem.vic.gov.au/Monitoringprogramsandresults.

For more information on Little Penguins at the Phillip Island Nature Park visit www.penguins.org.au.