

Only 46 left

Granite Island Little Penguins

Sign the petition to save them from extinction

More information here

Scan for more information

Encounter Bay Little Penguins

Briefing and Penguin Centre Proposal

Prepared by John Nicholls · Updated November 2026

Why Encounter Bay’s last little penguins are disappearing — and what still works

1. The question

Is the likely local extinction of little penguins in Encounter Bay caused by a lack of fish, or by the recovery of long-nosed fur seals (LNFS) to around 100,000–120,000 animals in South Australia? Those are two different problems. The crash of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the failure to recover since, do not have the same primary cause.

2. The crash was food

Granite Island fell from about 1,500–1,800 adults in the late 1990s to a remnant in a short window. That speed fits a prey crash, not a slow rise in seals. The published agent is pilchard herpesvirus (PHV) on Australian sardine / pilchard. Outbreaks in 1995 and 1998–99 killed large numbers of adult sardines/pilchards, a key part of the nearshore food web that little penguins use. Statewide sardine stocks have since recovered, but the Encounter Bay colony has not.

3. Statewide sardines have rebuilt. The colony has not.

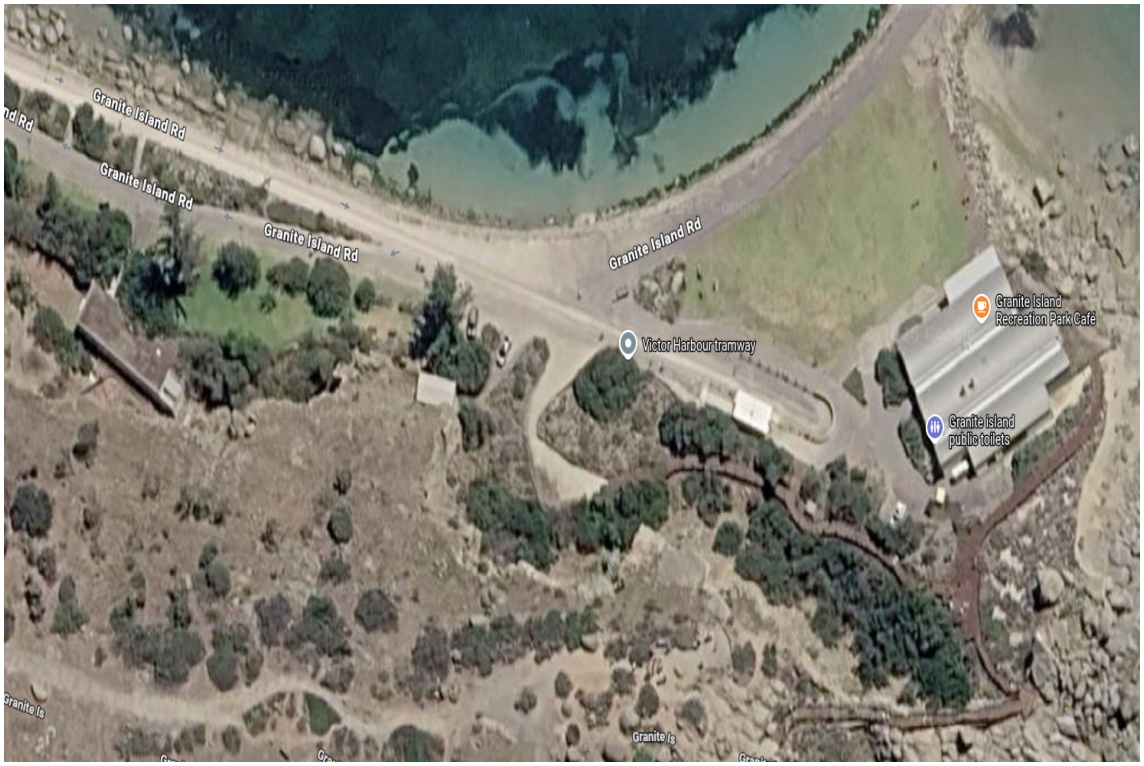
The 2025 egg survey put sardine spawning biomass at about 557,000 t. The fishery is classed sustainable. The October 2026 census recorded 46 adults on Granite Island. Wright Island is gone. West Island is a handful. From a base of this size, with long-nosed fur seals present and very low juvenile return rates (~2 %), natural recovery is not occurring.

4. Seal predation data — Encounter Bay is a hotspot

Long-nosed fur seals take adults and reduce chick survival around Granite Island. The combination of a small starting population, low juvenile return, and ongoing predation keeps the colony from rebuilding even though the main prey stocks have recovered.

Phase 1 – Artificial Burrows Trial

Artificial burrows have been highly successful at Phillip Island in Victoria. On Granite Island, 10–20 are proposed in the sheltered northern treeline and under the boardwalk near the café. This location provides natural cover and reduced visitor disturbance. The burrows create the release sites needed for any head-started birds and can proceed independently at modest cost ($6,000–$12,000).



Proposed location for Phase 1 artificial burrows — northern treeline and under the boardwalk

Phase 2 – Low-Cost Head-Starting Pilot in the Abandoned Penguin Centre

While the full café-based Penguin Centre is pursued, a small-scale head-starting pilot can begin immediately in a portion of the existing abandoned Penguin Centre building. This building is already under DEW control and is currently unused.

Eggs would be collected under permit from the large Emu Bay colony on Kangaroo Island (the largest little penguin colony in South Australia). This keeps the program entirely within the state.

Key elements of the pilot:

- Automatic egg incubators (low-cost commercial cabinet units).
- Hand-feeding of chicks by existing DEW staff from the Victor Harbor office.
- Remote monitoring via 4G/5G network cameras.
- Small temporary pool with simple seawater exchange pump.
- Small outdoor holding area on the cliff side before release to Phase 1 burrows.
- Small scale (10–20 eggs first season).

Costs are modest ($8,000–$15,000 Year 1; $4,000–$7,000 ongoing). The pilot generates data that supports the larger project.



Concept: automatic incubator setup for the Phase 2 pilot



Hand-feeding of chicks — existing DEW staff can perform this

Phase 3 – Full Penguin Centre in the Existing Café Building

Adapt the existing café building into a little penguin centre with underwater viewing and head-starting capacity. The building is substantially larger than currently used and already has the required structure. Head-starting operations would transfer here once complete.



Exterior concept — adaptive reuse of the existing café building



Pool section with underwater viewing windows



View from the café/entrance area toward the pool



Head-starting room concept for the full centre

Indicative costs

- Phase 1 (15 artificial burrows): $6,000–$12,000
- Phase 2 head-starting pilot (Year 1): $8,000–$15,000
- Phase 2 ongoing annual: $4,000–$7,000
- Phase 3 full café adaptive reuse: $2.5–$4.0 million (separate capital project)

Phases 1 and 2 can proceed immediately while Phase 3 funding is sought. The alternative — waiting while the remnant continues to face low juvenile survival and seal predation — has already been tested. Wright Island is gone. Granite Island is at 46 adults.

Prepared for government, local stakeholders and the community — November 2026
John Nicholls · Victor Harbor
Sign the petition: https://www.change.org/p/revitalise-granite-island-penguin-centre-save-our-last-colony