

SEABIRD GUANO

THE story of guano harvesting in southwestern Africa began in 1828 when Benjamin Morrel, an American ship captain, encountered vast colonies of seabirds and their accumulated excreta on Namibia's thirteen offshore islands. Ichaboe Island in particular was mentioned in his four volume travelogues. Morrel wrote enthusiastically that "the surface of this island is covered with birds' manure to the depth of 25 feet".

To the uninitiated, seabird guano is an unlikely money spinner, yet it is this strong-smelling, yellowish powder that 19th century entrepreneurs aptly called "white gold".

A valuable natural resource, guano is rich in nitrates and yields one of the purest forms of phosphate. It is highly prized as an agricultural fertiliser, replenishing depleted soil and thus enhancing crop growth in monoculture. Although the value of guano has dropped since the advent of cheap artificial fertilisers in the 1950s, it is still sought after as a valuable natural commodity.

Morrel's discovery, from which he himself did not benefit, was followed by rapacious over-exploitation. During the guano rush of the 1840s, hundreds of British and USA vessels carrying avaricious guano merchants arrived offshore of the islands. It took less

than 18 months to strip the centuries-old guano deposits, which, in some places, lay as thick as 15 metres. After this initial plunder, some enlightened entrepreneurs realised that to sustain guano as a lucrative resource, the seabird population would have to be protected. By the early 1980s only Ichaboe was still harvested annually. In 1987 all thirteen islands were declared nature reserves due to the seabird population they support. Plans for these islands include using them to generate money through eco-tourism.

During the late 1940s South African companies began collecting Cape Cormorant guano off mud banks in the Sandwich Harbour lagoon. The area is a highly dynamic coastal wetland that is subject to regular geomorphological fluctuations. This source of guano became threatened when the mud islands merged with the mainland, allowing opportunistic predators easy access to roosting birds. This resulted in a dramatic drop in the cormorant population and a corresponding decrease in guano that could be collected at these sites.

In an attempt to revive guano production, four wooden platforms were built by local entrepreneurs along the coast between Cape Cross and Walvis Bay. These provided ideal



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Cape Gannets and other seabirds roost and nest in their thousands on Ichaboe Island north of Lüderitz. The seabird droppings once harvested from this and other islands became known as "white gold" during the guano boom.



Peter Tarr

The Cape Cormorant is a guano factory on wings.

breeding sites and roosts for the birds. Most seabirds are colonial breeders that seek nesting sites which offer some degree of inaccessibility. The artificial guano platforms made the collection of guano easier and offered seabirds excellent refuge from human disturbance and attack by jackals, hyaenas and other predators.

Moreover, guano deposited on these platforms is purer than that scraped off the ground, ensuring a good price and constant demand from the international market. The annual guano harvest takes place only after most of the birds have bred. To reduce noise and excessive disturbance, labour intensive methods are used rather than machines. The two northernmost platforms alone yield more than 1 500 tons a year. Most of the guano is exported to Europe where intensive flower and vegetable cultivation in Belgium, Holland and France demands constant soil enrichment.

Conservation spin-offs from this platform-based industry have been dramatic. Ornithologists estimate that the four platforms support 40 percent of the coastal population of White-breasted Cormorants, one of two coastal colonies of White Pelicans and vast flocks of Kelp Gulls. The Pantherbak platform alone is believed to support 200,000 breeding pairs of Cape Cormorants.

The history of natural resource use has shown similar patterns worldwide. Invari-

ably human greed has resulted in over-exploitation and the subsequent loss of the resource as a viable and sustainable economic commodity. As the 21st century approaches, environmentalists are grateful to note that many countries are adopting policies that ensure some degree of long-term environmental planning. Many industries are attempting to walk in step with nature, thus accepting their role as both custodians and consumers of the resources.

In spite of its inauspicious beginnings and avaricious pioneers, Namibia's guano enterprise has evolved into a flourishing eco-industry - showing that economic development and environmental conservation can be successfully integrated.

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Wooden platforms over flooded salt pans provide artificial islands for the birds. Once a year, seabird guano is scraped from platforms such as this one near Cape Cross.

Guano yields from the four platforms on the Namibian west coast
(in metric tonnes)

<i>Guano platform</i>	1992	1993
Pantherbak	1,077	2,451
Cape Cross (1)	0	1,019
Cape Cross (2)	264	90
Bird Rock	<u>513</u>	<u>642</u>
Total	1,854	4,202



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