Banks Peninsula – a marine wonderland

Canterbury

Banks Peninsula, formed from the remains of two extinct volcanoes, is a very special place. Island-like, it is surrounded by sea on three sides, joined to the South Island’s east coast at Christchurch by a crater rim of rolling hills.

The entrances to Banks Peninsula’s two great harbours – Lyttelton and Akaroa – are guarded by magnificent cliffs that rear out of the restless sea. The sea-eroded edge of the peninsula forms many bays and natural harbours which are home to some unique threatened marine mammals, birds, fish and unique underwater communities.

Peninsula’s marine wildlife

The charismatic hector’s dolphin / upokohue lives in the waters around Banks Peninsula. Other marine mammals that visit often include tohora/southern right whales, hakura/beaked whales and kekeno/fur seals. Hoiho/yellow-eyed penguins and korora/white-flippered penguins come ashore and nest here, while great white sharks are summer visitors.

Hector’s dolphin / upokohue – One of the smallest marine dolphins in the world, South Island Hector’s dolphins grow no more than 1.5 m in length. Only found in New Zealand’s waters, they are easily recognised by their grey bodies with black and white markings and round dorsal fin. They are naturally inquisitive and friendly to people. Small groups will bow-ride and play in the wake of boats.

Hector’s dolphins feed close to shore, preferring shallow, often murky water, to catch a range of species including yellow-eyed mullet/aua, red cod/hoka and squid/wheke. Unfortunately for the dolphin this is also the ideal place to place set-nets for fish and also means they often cross paths with boats.

Southern right whale / tohora – these whales can come very close to shore. Up to 15 metres long, they are mostly black in colour and are easily identified by their lack of a dorsal fin, a V-shaped blowhole and white growths on their heads called callosities.

Kekeno / fur seals – The most common seals in New Zealand waters, kekeno are very good swimmers and can cover large distances. Fur seals are usually found on rocky shores in places that have some protection from heavy seas. Their coat is a dark grey-brown on the back, and lighter below.
Pohatu Marine Reserve

Pohatu Marine Reserve covers 215 ha in Flea Bay, just east of the entrance to Akaroa Harbour. Established in 1999, the reserve protects a piece of the peninsula’s characteristic rocky coast, with boulders, rock stacks, kelp forests and cold temperate reef fish. The reserve is home to lots of species of seabirds including the endangered yellow-eyed penguin (hoiho), white flippered penguin (korora) and New Zealand fur seal (kekeno).

A proposal for a second marine reserve for Banks Peninsula is currently before the Minister of Conservation to consider. The proposal is for a reserve covering 530 hectares within Akaroa Harbour, near Dan Rogers Bluffs. The Minister is expected to make a decision by the end of 2006.

Akaroa Harbour taiapure

A taiapure (local fishery) was established in Akaroa Harbour in March 2006. It covers approximately 92% of the waters within Akaroa Harbour, Haylocks and Damons Bay. The taiapure recognises the rangatiratanga of local Māori (in particular the runaka of Ōnuku, Wairewa and Koukourārāta) over these waters as a source of food for spiritual or cultural reasons. Under the Fisheries Act 1996, a management committee will be set up to administer the taiapure and any conditions of use.

How can you help?

- Contact the Banks Peninsula Conservation Trust and get involved in a volunteer project on the peninsula.
- Plastic bags and other rubbish are often accidentally eaten by wildlife and can cause death. Take rubbish home with you and pick up any plastic that you see floating at sea or on the beach.
- Be careful if using nets to fish and stay with your net while it is set. If you see dolphins in the area, please remove your nets from the water.
- Please don’t swim with the dolphins except with authorised tourist operators.
- If in a boat use a ‘no wake’ speed within 300 m of dolphins. Should you need to outdistance them, you may increase your speed gradually to a maximum of 10 knots.
- If you find a stranded marine mammal, contact your nearest DOC office or police station as soon as possible. DOC has a 24 hour emergency call out number 0800 DOCHOT line, 0800 36 24 68.

If alive:

- Keep the animal wet, but don’t pour water down its blowhole
- Keep the animal upright
- Keep the animal shaded from the sun

Further information

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Mahaanui Area,
Private Bag 4715,
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www.doc.govt.nz

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White-flippered penguin / korora – Canterbury’s own sub-species of the blue penguin, the white-flippered penguin has a broad white band at the front of its flippers and it is slightly larger than a standard blue.

The blue penguin is the smallest penguin in the world, standing just 25 cm tall and weighing a little over 1 kg.

Yellow-eyed penguin / hoiho – unique to New Zealand, hoiho is one of the world’s rarest penguins. Its name comes from its distinctive yellow iris and adults also have a distinctive yellow headband. Its māori name hoiho means ‘noise shouter’ and refers to their shrill call.

All marine mammals are fully protected in New Zealand waters under the Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978. If you see marine mammals stranded or in distress, please contact your nearest DOC office immediately.

To help safeguard wildlife, part of the waters around the peninsula have been given special protected status, a marine mammal sanctuary, a marine reserve and a taiapure.

Marine Mammal Sanctuary

The Banks Peninsula marine mammal sanctuary extends from Sumner Head to the Rakaia River, and out to a distance of four nautical miles – an area of 1140 square kilometres. New Zealand’s first marine mammal sanctuary, it was created in 1988 to protect Hector’s dolphins from by-catch in set-nets.

All set-netting is banned from November to the end of February, the four months of the year that Hector’s dolphin comes close inshore to breed. The ban also helps reduce the risk of entanglement of other marine species, such as the endangered yellow-eyed penguin (hoiho), white flippered penguin (korora) and New Zealand fur seal (kekeno).

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