

National Parks Association of the ACT Inc

General meeting minutes

Thursday 16 July 2020 (by Zoom)

1. Welcome, apologies, new members

President Esther Gallant welcomed members to the meeting and paid respects to the traditional custodians of the land and their elders, past and present. It was very pleasing to see that approximately 45-50 members had joined the online meeting.

2. Recent NPA activities

Esther reported that the NPA walk program and working parties have both commenced again, and are following Covid safe practices.

ACT Parks and Conservation has allowed access to Naas Valley in Namadgi National Park so that survey work to map termite mounds can continue, as part of the scientific research on the Rosenberg's Monitor project.

3. Presentation

NPA Life Member Kevin McCue presented on his and Sonja Lenz's recent travels to the Antarctic.

Kevin and Sonja followed the route taken during Shackleton's 1914–1916 voyage including the South Shetland Islands, Antarctic Peninsula, South Georgia Island and Elephant Island.

Wildlife was a huge part of the adventure, and there were many species of seals, penguins, albatross and other sea birds. The blue and white of the tabular ice sheet was spectacular as were the numerous icebergs.

Abandoned whaling stations were a grim reminder of the huge number of whales which were caught and processed in the past. At just the South Georgia whaling stations alone, 175,250 whales were killed between 1904 and 1965 when whaling finished. Whale numbers are now apparently recovering though Kevin and Sonja did not see many.

The number of fur seals killed is appalling. During the summer season of 1820–21, two vessels alone took an extraordinary 60,000 fur-seal skins. An incredible 91 sealing ships operated in the South Shetlands during that season, most of them British or American. The predictable result: the fur seals were almost completely gone by the end of 1821 — in 2 years!

It was half a century before sealers visited the islands again in great numbers. From 1871–74 a handful of American sealing ships returned to kill anew, taking another 33,000 fur seals from the slowly recovering populations. By 1888–89 the American sealer Sarah W Hunt reported taking just 39 skins. It is fantastic that the area is now a wildlife refuge and seal numbers are growing.

Kevin noted that harvesting of Antarctic krill for various human purposes is increasing, and poses a threat as much of the wildlife ultimately depends on krill.

While Kevin and Sonja did not want to focus on the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on their trip, it added extensively to their time away from Canberra. Their ship was anchored off Montevideo (Uruguay) for 10 days while liaison occurred between the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and other relevant countries regarding their return to Australia and they were quarantined for 17 days in a Sydney hotel, before they were allowed to return to Canberra.

Esther thanked Kevin for the presentation.

The meeting closed at 9.10 pm.

Next general meeting – Thursday 20 August 2020.

Chair: Date: