REWARD ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

MONTAGUE ISLAND'S CONSERVATION PROGRAM A MUST

Cilla Cole

"SO, HOW long have you kids been doing this type of volunteer work?" asks Boyd Hastings, a National Parks field officer and our guide for the morning, as he hands out gardening gloves, safety vests and digging tools.

Our kids respond with a blank look.

I realise it is time to come clean, both to Boyd and the kids.

"They actually didn't know they were going to be doing this," I admit.

My friend Jane and I had booked our families into the three-day Montague Island Naturewise Conservation Program run by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and while we had talked a lot about seals and penguins, about lighthouses and whale watching, we had thought it was better to stay quiet about the "regeneration" part of the program.

Eight kilometres offshore from Narooma on the NSW South Coast, Montague Island is a natural haven for migratory seabirds, fur seals and Little Penguins.

It also has the dubious claim to fame of hosting just about every species of weed in Australia.

Although great progress has been made in weed eradication since NPWS took over the management of the island in 1987, much work remains and Jane and I have volunteered our children to help out.

As 15-year-old Harry looks down at the gloves and trowel in his hands, it suddenly dawns on him what "regeneration" means.

"Gardening?" he exclaims. "I hate gardening."

It is not long however before Boyd's passion for the project, grown from 24 years' involvement, rubs off on us all.

The weeds pull out easily and are replaced with tube stock of lomandra, a hardy grass that doubles as an excellent penguin nesting site.

After a short time, we stand back and admire our small transformed patch with satisfaction.

Ian Andreassen, another resident field officer, comes to admire our handiwork and leads us to our next activity of penguin monitoring. On the way we pause to appreciate the views of sparkling turquoise seas framed by orange lichen-covered boulders and the stark white light house.

"All we need now is a whale," I note flippantly.

With that a humpback breaches high out of the water, right in our line of vision. Ian turns back to us with a wry smile: "That's one I prepared earlier."

We come to an enclave of numbered boxes and as Ian hands out maps, record sheets and identification charts, he instructs us on checking each box for inhabitants, recording the number of eggs or chicks plus noting any general observations.

Fur seals and cubs frolic on Montague Island, off Narooma, on the South Coast.

Picture: NSW PARKS AND WILDLIFE

We start slowly and diligently, debating the age of the chicks and making detailed notes about the adults such as "appeared cranky" or "looked anxious".

"I don't think you need to go through the emotional state of each bird," comments Ian dryly.

We speed up the process and by box 15 are experts, discarding the guide sheets and quickly identifying the age and health of each chick.

It is not long before we have two sheets filled and Ian announces we have earned a break.

We return to our island home, the former assistant lighthouse keeper's cottage for a cup of tea.

> **"Over the two days, we wander the graveyard, tour the lighthouse, snorkel with seals and watch the penguins at dusk as they waddle back to their hungry partners**

Together with the five-bedroom head lighthouse keeper's house next door, our three-bedroom residence has been faithfully restored by the National Trust and made available as guest accommodation.

With our "hard" work out of the way, we are now free to roam and explore what has already become "our island". Over two days, we wander the graveyard, tour the lighthouse, snorkel with seals and watch the penguins at dusk as they waddle back to hungry partners.

We resent the day-trippers and feel superior when they file back onto the boat to the mainland.

We have only been on the island for two days but already I feel very possessive.

I mention this to Ian and he agrees ardently: "That's the 'islanditus'. You get real protective."

When we reluctantly leave, the kids say they want to return to Montague Island, every year, for a whole week.

"Even if you have to do gardening?" I ask. "Of course," they reply.

They seem surprised that I even need to ask.

TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE: Narooma is 340km south of Sydney. Narooma National Park offers tours including boat transport from Narooma to Montague Island. See narooma.org.au. Regional Express flies from Sydney (from $155 o/w) to Moruya, 40km north of Narooma. See rex.com.au.

STAYING THERE: The two keepers' houses (sleeping 8 and 12) can be rented for self-catering stays, from $3600 a house for 2 nights. Montague Island 3 Day Naturewise Conservation Program: from $595 an adult and $300 a child (aged 7-13). Includes 2 nights' accomm, return boat transfers from Narooma, all meals on the island, National Parks guide, evening wildlife viewing, island and lighthouse tour. See conservation volunteers.com.au.

WHEN TO GO: Sept to Jan is best to see sea birds, seals and penguins. Sep to Nov is peak whale watching season

DETAILS: montagueisland.com.au

The lighthouse which has been active since 1881.

ASN TRANSFERS
Modern airconditioned buses
Shared and private transfers
Group charters also available
RTA approved child seats supplied
Call us directly on 02 9997 7767
For online bookings and further information
24 hours a day 7 days a week www.asntransfers.com

myShuttle.com.au
NORTHERN BEACHES & LOWER NORTH SHORE
DAILY AIRPORT SHUTTLE
8407 9443 7 DAYS
info@myShuttle.com.au
Weddings | Corporate | Festivals | Events | Local
24hr Online Booking & Payment
www.myShuttle.com.au
Secure Online Payment Facility – Powered by SAASASKI
GPS monitoring of our Fleet
3 Waratah St, Mona Vale

From your door to the Airport
Return Bookings Available Until 11pm Flights
Prices quoted are for one way only, children under 2 years, Free. (conditions apply)
Any additional passenger $10 extra per booking. Eftpos or credit cards attracts a 5% surcharge.
Allambie Heights $38; Artarmon East $36; Artarmon $36; Asquith $75; Avalon $62; Balgowlah $34; Balgowlah Heights $60; Balmoral $62; Bayview $60; Beacon Hill $38; Belrose $42; Berowra $79; Bilgola Plateau $62; Brookvale $38; Cammeray $34; Castle Cove $36; Castle Crag $36; Chatswood East $36; Chatswood $36; Church Point $60; Clareville $55; Clontarf $34; Collaroy $39; Collaroy Plateau $39; Cremorne $34; Cromer $38; Crows Nest $34; Curl Curl $38; Davidson $40; Dee Why $38; Duffys Forest $62; Elanora Heights $45; Fairlight $34; Forestville $38; Frenchs Forest $39; Gladesville $55; Gordon $49; Greenwich $34; Harbord $34; Hornsby $70; Ingleside $60; Killara $45; Killara East $45; Kirribilli $34; Killarney Heights $40; Lane Cove $39; Linfield $44; Linfield East $44; Longueville $39; Manly $34; Manly Vale $34; Middle Cove $39; Mona Vale $54; Mosman $34; Mt Colah $74; Mt Kuringgai $80; Naremburn $34; Narrabeen $43; Narraweena $39; Neutral Bay $34; Newport $58; Normanhurst $67; North Curl Curl $38; Northbridge $34; North Sydney $34; North Wahroonga $60; Northwood $39; Palm Beach $74; Pymble $49; Queens Cliff $34; Ryde $55; Roseville East $39; Seaforth $34; St Ives $54; St Leonards $34; Terry Hills $56; Thornleigh $69; Turramurra $59; Waitara $64; Wahroonga $59; Warrawee $59; Warriewood $44; Westleigh $67; Waverton $34; Whale Beach $73; Wheeler Heights $38; Willoughby $34; Wollstonecraft $34;
Wharf: Circular Quay, White Bay, Rozelle
Stations: Central train and Eddy Avenue
AVAILABLE FOR SPECIAL CHARTERS
North Shore Shuttle Express
TEL: 1300 882 443 • 9319 3302 • 0415 867 414 • 0409 995 890
EMAIL: bookings@nsse.com.au
$6 airport parking fee applicable from airport pickups + $2 Toll Surcharge