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Isobel Bennett: Marine Biologist

Marine scientist, Isobel Bennett, surveyed the Macquarie Island foreshore in 1959, 1960, 1965 and 1968. She and three colleagues had to overcome a strong prejudice against women expeditioners before ANARE allowed them to travel to Macquarie Island on their first trip in 1959.

Researching the foreshores



Photo courtesy Isobel Bennett.

Soon after the end of World War II, Professor W.J. Dakin, from Sydney University, realised that there was practically nothing known about the animals and plants of rock platforms along the coast or the mudflats of Australian estuaries (or river mouths). He commenced an extensive ecological survey. Isobel Bennett was one of his research assistants. She used to go down to rock platforms and estuaries and make up a list of all the common animals and plants she could find from the top of the tide line down to the low tide levels.

As the researchers went south they found that some animals disappeared and others replaced them. As they went north, some animals dropped out and tropical species appeared.

It became obvious that the factor working here was sea temperature.

Isobel Bennett and her colleagues also surveyed the coasts of Victoria and Tasmania. Travel was difficult in those days and they had to get permission to travel on the lighthouse ship to the remote, rocky shores round the coasts.



Isobel Bennett with an Osprey. Photo courtesy Isobel Bennett.

The researchers were particularly interested in comparing the types of foreshore plants and animals found in

warmer temperate climates with those found on colder shores. Macquarie Island seemed to be ideal for this research. It was not an easy matter in those days, however, to persuade the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition (ANARE) to send them there. As Dr Bennett says, 'this was a man's world'.

Eventually, ANARE allowed Dr Bennett and her colleagues to go. According to Dr Bennett:

'After quite a lot of trouble we managed to get permission and in December 1959 we made our first trip on an ANARE supply vessel, a Danish Polar ship to the island.

There were four of us. Hope McPherson, who had helped me along the Victorian coast, was my assistant on this occasion. Two other women also came because there were four berth cabins and four women were allowed to go....

The men going who were going for the year had quite a lot of general direction and training. We had a general briefing and then the four women were called into the director's office and he (Phil Law) spoke to us again and he finally said that on our behaviour depended the future of women in the Antarctic. We were rather unhappy about that because we thought it was a quite an unnecessary remark'.



Isobel Bennett and her colleagues aboard the Magga Dan en route to Macquarie Island in 1959.

'We had hoped to go down and be treated just as scientists doing a job of work.'

The women were permitted to go to Macquarie Island for the changeover of personnel and supplies. The length of the resupply trip varied from 5 to 15 days, depending on the weather. They were unable to complete the work on their first visit, so Isobel Bennet asked for permission to go down again in 1960. She did a further two trips in 1965 and 1968. She made her first trip on the *Thala Dan*, her second on the *Magga Dan* and the last two trips on the *Nella Dan*.

Isobel Bennett recounted her first impressions of Macquarie Island:

'It was eerie because we arrived just on dusk and the whole island was completely covered in mist and we could only hear the crying of sea birds and voices. We were anchored probably half a kilometre off shore and the ship's boat was lowered and took in mail because ... the personnel hadn't had any letters for a year...

The mode of transport in those days was an army landing craft called a 'DUKW' manned by men of the Australian army, a great huge 7 ton vehicle was lowered over the side and watching that happen was quite an exercise I can assure you, especially in those seas, and all supplies and personnel were taken ashore by that means...

The first year the leader of the expedition for the trip down took us ashore. Unfortunately the first day the ship was supposed to be going to the south end of the island to collect equipment from the previous year which was an international geophysical year and we had to stay on board all day feeling very frustrated knowing we had very little time, but we

were able to watch the penguins and all the seabirds and we learned quite a bit about which was which during that time.

But the next day fortunately we went ashore and we were taken by the leader of the expedition to a tin hut which was known as the biological hut. It was really almost just 4 bunks. He apologised profusely but we were very happy just to be there and it didn't affect us in any way.'

Working conditions for the researchers varied with the weather. They were lucky that there was a lot of sun on their first expedition. They chose a place that was fairly close to the station huts so they didn't have to carry cameras and collecting gear too far. Their biggest trouble was finding a place on the shore to work as all the rocks were completely covered by great giant kelp which had fronds about 50 feet long and with every wash of the waves they kept on coming back over the shore.



Macquarie Island kelp.
Photo Isobel Bennett.

Nobody had told Isobel Bennett and her colleagues that ANARE had a

store where they could find suitable clothes. In the first year they took all their own clothing and socks. Isobel wore only sandals, while working in the subantarctic inter-tidal zone.

Since the ANARE station was set up in 1948, there had been little biological research and no publications in the area. Isobel Bennett and her colleagues were conscious that the work they were doing was groundbreaking. They collected every species they could and brought it back to Melbourne to check its identification.

Work on the Macquarie Island shores was difficult and dangerous. According to Dr Bennett:

'We found we had to chop quite a number of the holdfasts of the seaweed - the seaweeds have no roots - they cling with a giant holdfast - they're about the size of dinner plates we'd clear an area of rocks so we could find out what was on the rocks and the cracks and the crevices and holes underneath- and we were absolutely amazed by the richness and the colour that was there. Unfortunately every now and again another wave would come and completely cover it so it was rather hard to do the work and also the rocks were very very slippery and you had to be very careful.'

She remembers Macquarie Island as a magnificent place, although at midday, almost every day, the mist came down and completely covered the island. She would like people today to know that Macquarie Island is:

'...a complete sanctuary today, really thanks to the late Sir Douglas Mawson -because there'd been horrible

depredation. All the fur seals had been killed, and the elephant seals - and even throwing in penguins into the boilers for the oil. It is now a complete sanctuary under the jurisdiction of Tasmania and it's probably one of the best wildlife sanctuaries in the world. Because there has been a station there since 1948, there is much more known about it both, biologically, geologically, physically than almost any other place in the Southern Ocean except on the Atlantic Coast.'

Dr Bennett's fondest memories of Macquarie Island are:



O those wonderful penguins! You walk ashore and see a beach completely covered with not hundred but thousands of these delightful little creatures. And the wonderful thing is that they are not afraid of you. You can walk right up to them, in fact, they will walk up and inspect your feet and if they don't like the smell of them they walk away. ...

We were very fortunate on two occasions to have beautiful sunshine and the men there said don't you dare go back and show slides because they'll think this is typical Macquarie Island weather, which is very much not the case. Practically every day it rains and every day it is completely shrouded in mist, but it's a magic place, absolutely magic!



***R*eferences**

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Interview with Dr Bennett, July 1999 by Louise Maher, research brief by Annie Rushton.

***F*urther *R*eadings**

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