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The Kent Group

The remote beauty of six windswept islands and islets in Bass Strait

IT WASN'T THE usual blustery Bass Strait evening. The air was dry and still and far below me a calm sea gurgled around fiery orange cliffs. I lay on my belly on a slab of rough rock and absorbed the residual warmth as I watched the sun sink into a molten western horizon. I was on Deal Island, one granitic bump in a remarkable archipelago that forms Tasmania's newest national park – the Kent Group. Along with rangers, managers, biologists and a botanist, I was on reconnaissance to discover exactly what was here and begin a study that would be the blueprint for the islands' sustainable future.

"It's a huge task," Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) manager David Barker told me. "Above all, there's the remoteness." The islands sit about halfway between Tasmania's Flinders Island and Wilsons Promontory in Victoria. "Then there's the fact that not much scientific study of the flora or fauna has been done." Add to that rich human history, including intriguing archaeological sites and Australia's highest lighthouse, and there's a great deal – human and natural – to research and protect.

These, I knew, were the basic facts: the Kent Group is comprised of six islands and several smaller wave-washed rocks. In prehistory, they'd been mountain tops, dominating the wind-swept Bassian Plain – a land bridge between Tasmania and the mainland. They'd first seen human habitation around 13,000 years ago. When sea levels rose at the end of the last Ice Age the islands were slowly surrounded by water yet continued to support a human population

The setting sun lights up the granite cliffs of Squally Cove on Deal Island (left). Deal is the largest island in the Kent Group, rising 300 m out of Bass Strait. It's uninhabited except by volunteer caretakers and visitors, such as biologist Rosemary Gear (below), here being led by ranger Steve Cronin in search of a trapping site for a wildlife survey.



for another 5000 years. Matthew Flinders sighted and named the islands in 1798 and sealers became the first European inhabitants in the early 1800s. In 1847, a lighthouse was built on Deal and operated until its decommissioning in 1992. Fishermen and sailors have been the islands' most frequent visitors for the past 150 years.

Location, ecology, vegetation

THE KENT GROUP lies on the convergence of the Leeuwin and East Australian oceanic currents which accounts for a rich marine ecosystem and vegetation mix. "Islands are like botanical life rafts," botanist Stephen Harris said as we

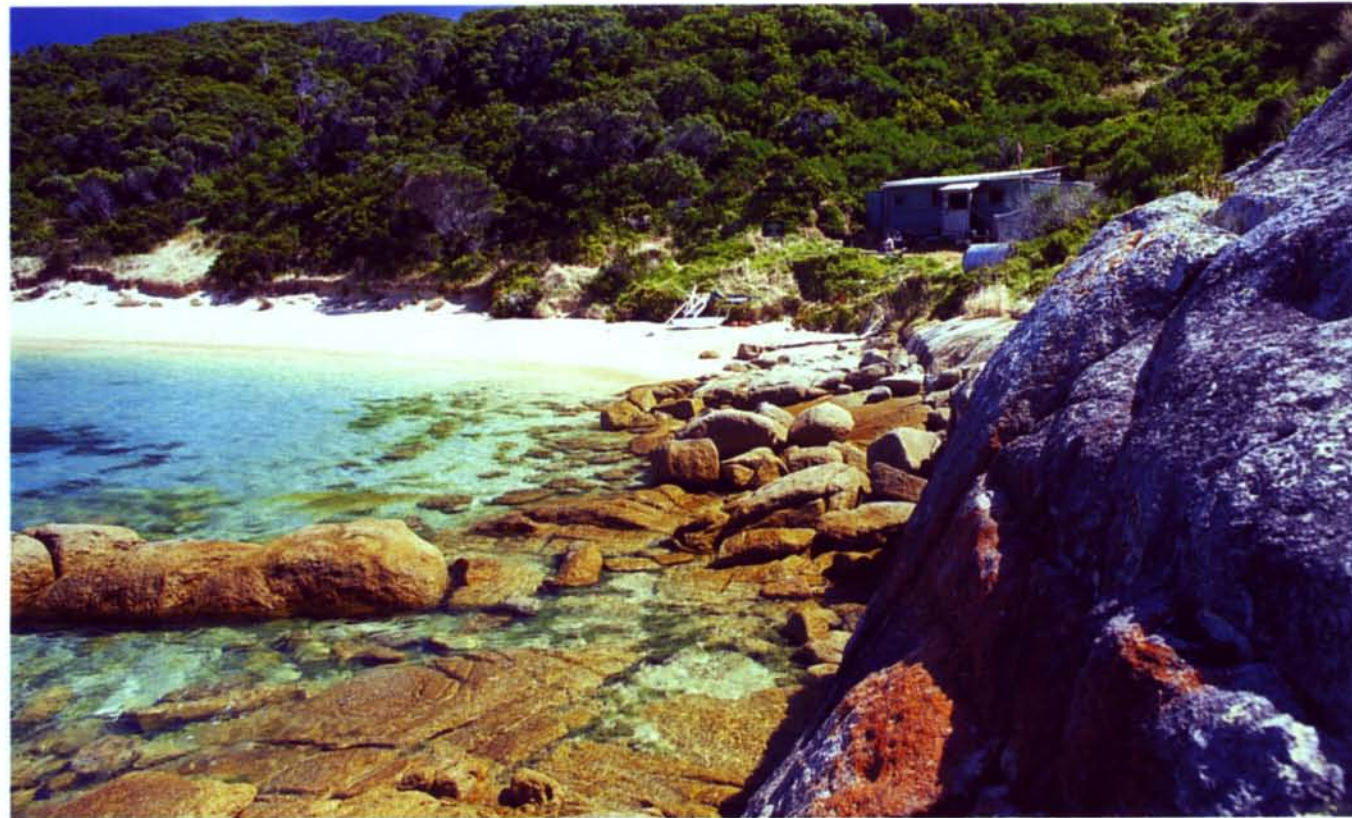


discussed the islands' plants. There are species from before Bass Strait's inundation, as well as more recent colonisers brought by birds and the sea. Poa tussock grass, Smithton peppermint – the group's only eucalypt – and groves of she-oak make up the bulk of vegetation on Deal and Erith, and there are also endemic species, including the daisy *Ixiolaena supina*, one of Australia's rarer plants. Similarly, Dover Island's old-growth she-oak forest is a botanical rarity.

The islands' animal life may be as diverse but, although species such as bandicoots, possums and potoroos have been documented, there has never been a comprehensive inventory. On our first day in the islands, I set out with biologists Rosemary Gales and Sally Bryant hoping to find a few. First stop was the Great Cave of Erith, a deep fissure on a near-vertical slope 50 m above the sea. Some 9000 years ago, it had been used for shelter and archaeologists have discovered campfire remains containing wombat and wallaby bones. There'd been reports of unidentified small mammal tracks on the cave's ochre floor and Rosemary and Sally were keen to investigate. We baited several traps with peanut butter and birdseed and placed them around the cave, with the expectation the mystery creature would be tempted. Sadly, it wasn't.

Our next stop was Garden Cove in Deal Island's north,

The Kent Group has long been a refuge for runaways and dreamers. This neat hut on Erith Island (below) was once home to an eloping couple for four years. Erith's most regular visitors now are the Erith Mob – a group from Melbourne, whose summer pilgrimage originated with historian Stephen Murray-Smith in the 1960s. The Erith Mob maintains the lighthouse keeper's cottage on Deal Island, with its wallpaper of century-old newspapers (left).



once home to a sealer community. The Cove's fine blond sand and ice-blue water belie the horror of the industry once based there. In the first 30 years of the 1800s, an estimated 100,000 elephant seals, sea lions and New Zealand and Australian fur seals were slaughtered in Bass Strait. Today, only Australian fur seals remain in the Kent Group, with a breeding colony of about 2000 on the craggy Judgment Rocks 10 km south-west of Deal.

From the cove we walked through giant golden poa grass to our next trapping site. Selecting a clearing in an avenue of trees, the biologists set up a harp trap of near-invisible threads strung taut from a metal frame, hoping to collect bats in the funnel-like sack below. They also set more baited traps for swamp antechinus, pygmy possums and the threatened New Holland mouse.

As we walked, Sally pointed out firetails and flame robins and stopped occasionally to record calls that might expand her bird inventory, which already included fairy prions, diving petrels, sooty oystercatchers and short-tailed shearwaters. That night, in post-sunset silence, we heard distant calls of little penguins returning from a day's fishing.

Emotional attachment

AT THE END of another spectacular January day, I found myself atop Deal's lighthouse, its whitewashed walls tinted delicate pink by the rays of the retiring sun. Perched high, on 300 m granite cliffs and standing 22 m tall, the structure was built by convicts using material hauled by bullocks up the steep 3 km track from East Cove. The lighthouse was a failure because it was too high, its beam obscured in cloud four nights out of 10.

From my vantage point I could make out Flinders Island to the south and the dark shadow of Wilsons Promontory on the north-west horizon. Around me in a silvery sea was the irregular bulk of Deal; as well as Dover, North East and South West islands and Judgment Rocks.

Across the tide-rippled waters of Murray Pass lay Erith, where we'd been earlier that day learning more of that island's story from those who know it best. At a neat bush camp under a sizzling sun, I met the 'Erith Mob', a group of Victorians making their annual pilgrimage to Erith for weeks of splendid isolation. Cleve Charles, daughter of late writer and historian Stephen Murray-Smith, told me her father had become so enamoured of Erith in 1962 that from then on, together with family and friends, he came to the island every summer until his death in 1988. Three generations of the original Mob still visit and speak of their deep attachment to this special place. Cleve explained: "Every year you're overwhelmed by beauty."

Before Erith had captivated the Murray-Smiths, Melbourne couple Jack and Gladys Lierich eloped in 1958 to the island and spent four years living there. We lunched in the tiny, neat hut they'd built from driftwood and lined with sailcloth, and which the Erith Mob maintains as a museum. They've also set up a museum in the lighthouse superintendent's house, and I spent hours one afternoon browsing through their displays of lives lived and lost on the islands.



Visitors and management

TOWARDS THE END of our stay on Deal, I returned to Garden Cove with PWS's David Barker, Garry Willmott and Steve Summers. Earlier in the trip, they'd visited the steep-sided Winter Cove, on the island's east coast, with the view to establishing a low-key ecotourism development, while Garden Cove was shaping up as a likely site for a sea-kayakers' camp.

Steve explained the islands' increasing popularity with sailors, anglers and Bass Strait kayakers is making management a priority. Confining camping to limited locations will restrict visitor impact. While the declaration of these remote islands as a national park is unlikely to ignite an explosion in visitor numbers, it's agreed that on this, now federally protected land, environmental management standards will have to be raised. Already, most of the islands have endured past damage from human impact: Deal and Erith have suffered from fire and cattle and the introduction of non-native cats, rats and plants, the seeds of which may have come from as far as Europe in supply ships' ballast water.

As Tasmania's first complete island-group national park, the difficult-to-access Kent Group is a new and exciting prospect for visitors and those who'll manage it. As Steve Summers says: "We're standing on new territory here, and new rules will apply." Whatever those rules, they'll no doubt be on the terms of these remote, granitic islands in their tempestuous Bass Strait refuge. **AG**

For more information and how to get to the Kent Group see page 114.

Gabi Mocatta and AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC thank Tourism Tasmania, the Tasmanian PWS, the Erith Mob, as well as all those featured in this story.