



# Treasure island

**A Hostile Beauty:  
 Life on Macquarie Island**  
 by Alistair Dermer and Danielle Wood  
 Miegunyah Press, \$69.99

**M**ACQUARIE Island is coming in from the cold. After being ravaged, polluted and despoiled in the name of greed, the remote outpost is attracting a new breed of visitor.

This time they are armed with cameras, not nailed-studded clubs to slaughter seals and penguins. They want to take something away with them, not to make a quick buck but to show the world that this precious, albeit hostile, place deserves protection.

One such visitor was Alistair Dermer, who spent six months on the sub-Antarctic island over the summer of 2001 and 2002.

A decade on he is realising his dream of bringing the photographs he took to the world. Dermer has teamed up with Tasmanian author Danielle Wood to produce *A Hostile Beauty: Life on Macquarie Island*.

Like the fragile Macquarie landscape of shifting beach and ocean, the book is a careful balance between Wood's finely crafted words and Dermer's striking photographs that show not just the island's bird and animal life but its plants and panoramas. It's a wildlife found only on Macquarie Island – a land mass that is, in fact, a vast mountain sticking out from the Southern Ocean – and the pictures themselves are a record of what we stand to lose if measures to protect this unique environment should fail.

As Dermer explains, he had held an ambition to visit Macquarie Island since childhood.

"I remember repeatedly looking at a book that featured Macquarie Island. Other wonderful places like the Galapagos Islands and Antarctica dominated the pages, but it was Macquarie island that inspired me. I would turn the pages and lose myself in the images, and feel somehow stirred, trying to image if such a place really existed and if people could ever visit."

Dermer made several attempts to get to the island and finally made it through a friend from university who was studying seabirds. Dermer

would be his friend's assistant.

Dermer seized the opportunity not just to visit Macquarie Island but to photograph it. He says he borrowed money and sold whatever he could to buy extra photographic equipment and film.

His first intention was to return with about 50 pictures and select the best for a small exhibition but this idea developed into a book.

We are lucky the exhibition project was shelved. Dermer's pictures deserve a bigger audience. The text is also from person with a knowledge of and passion for Macquarie Island. Wood visited while working as a media officer for the Parks and Wildlife Service in 1998.

In many pictures, Dermer concentrates on close-ups: a dozing seal, a single feather adorned with droplets of mist, a king penguin standing to attention. There are also pictures, though, of tightly packed flocks of penguins to indicate just how prolific wildlife is on the island, and detritus of human occupation including rusting oil and water tanks and machinery.

The first visitors brought with them not only a thirst for money, but damaging fire, foreign seeds and feral animals. Eradication programs are now in place with the aim of reversing the situation.

As Dermer says: "We have much to learn and experience as a species, as we continue to expand our own global population. Evidence about climate change is now black and white; it is what we do as a global community with this knowledge, awareness and hope that will be the difference between retaining jewels like Macquarie Island and modifying all landscapes and ecosystems to such a degree that we remove all pure places of sanity."

**DON KNOWLER**

● **Australian Greens senator Bob Brown will launch *A Hostile Beauty: Life on Macquarie Island* at Fullers at 2pm today.**





**SENTINELS:** A flock of rockhopper penguins on Macquarie Island in the sub-Antarctic.

Picture: ALISTAIR DERMER