

S H I P W R E C K S & S A F E H A V E N S

# Sea Elephant Bay

“The whole of this bay, when we landed, was covered with sea elephants.”

FRANÇOIS PÉRON *Zoologist aboard Le Géographe*

Péron was travelling with a French scientific expedition that spent two weeks ashore at what they named Sea Elephant Bay in 1802.

It was a scientist's paradise: “Monsieur Lesueur and I collected there a mass of species unknown in Europe, amongst which were two elegant dasyures, two kangaroos, that singular animal that the inhabitants of New Holland know by the name of wombat, and the even more extraordinary quadruped which I have described by the name of silky ant-eater.”

The scientific methods they employed were somewhat different from what we are used to—amongst Péron's notes we find that “the kangaroos of King Island have a tenderer and more savoury flesh than those of the animals of the same species on the neighbouring continent”.

Péron was fascinated by the massive sea elephants, whose bodies, “in all their

movements, appear to tremble like an enormous bladder full of jelly, so thick is the layer of oily fat that envelops them”.

He wrote extensive notes on their life cycle, including what he, as a Frenchman, referred to as “the imperious call of love”. The males fight furiously while the placid females look on, “apparently indifferent to the passions that they have aroused”.

Apart from his own observations, much of Péron's information came from a party of English sealers who had been camped there for over 12 months, engaged in the grisly task of killing and skinning the huge animals, and boiling down their fat for oil. Gentle in nature, and unafraid of man, the elephant seals were easy to kill.

Disturbed by the wholesale slaughter taking place in what was once a safe

haven for these animals, Péron wrote, “The English have invaded these hide-outs which have for so long protected them. They have everywhere there organised massacres which cannot fail soon to cause a real and irreparable lessening of the numbers of these animals.”

As you can tell by looking around you, he was right. Not a single animal was left by 1805—just three years later.

“It is especially in molluscs, in worms and in zoophytes that King Island offers to the observer, treasures so to speak, inexhaustible: indeed, despite the violent storms that were prevalent in these localities during our stay there, I managed to procure there more than 180 unknown species of these three classes of the animal kingdom ...

...sponges, Antipaths, Gordons, Cellepores, Retepores, etc, several Actines, some strange Ascidians, ten or twelve Halothurians, beautiful Doris, elegant Annelides, many Planaires, etc, etc.”

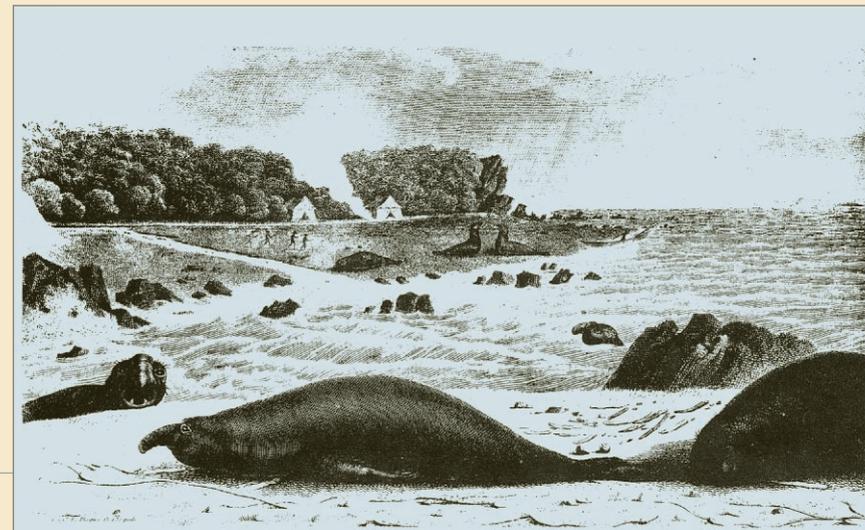
## Molluscs at every step

The French expedition was not a jolly one. Disliking Captain Baudin's style of command, twenty scientists and officers had left the ships in Mauritius. Baudin resented the time the scientists took in collecting specimens.

There were an astonishing number of these: some 40,000 animals, a huge botanical collection including 100,000 dried specimens,

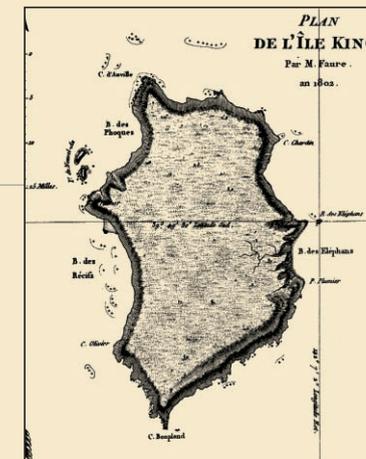
as well as live emus, wombats, parakeets, kangaroos and black swans.

Chafing to continue his surveying work, Baudin recorded on one occasion that “all returned about nine o'clock except for Mr Péron who, seeing nothing but molluscs at every step, had amused himself by missing the first boat”.



Left: An engraving from Péron's publication shows the enormous sea elephants, which he estimated at 25 to 30 feet in length. The background shows the French scientists' camp, the English sealing gang armed with their harpoons, and the sealers' boat at the edge of the surf.

—VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY TO THE SOUTHERN LANDS, 1811



“No port nor even a deep inlet is to be found in the whole of the circumference of the island.” The French conducted a survey of King Island while the scientists were at work on shore, bestowing such names as Baie des Éléphants (Bay of Sea Elephants), Baie des Phoques (Bay of Seals), and the prophetically named Baie des Récifs (Bay of Reefs).

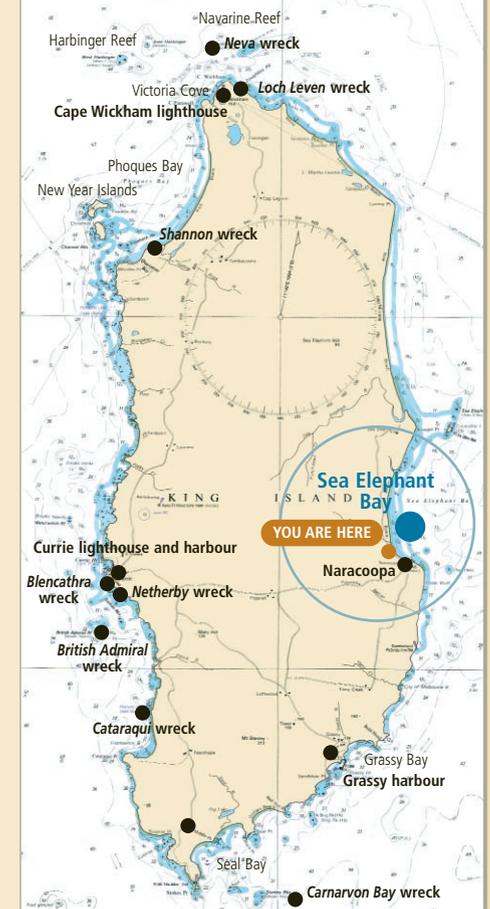
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## Raising the ensign

England and France were at war when Baudin set sail for Australia. However in recognition of its scientific purpose, his expedition was guaranteed a safe passage. On arrival in Sydney they were well received by Governor King, but after their departure King had second thoughts. His fear was that the French might claim King Island—named for him just the year before.

In haste he despatched the *Cumberland* to take possession before they could. The English party arrived four days after Baudin, and here at Sea Elephant Bay they fired a salute (having first borrowed dry gunpowder from the amused French) and raised the British ensign (upside down and “not at all majestic”, Baudin caustically observed).

The formalities out of the way, Péron noted that the English then “obligingly agreed to share our frugal lunch”.



KING ISLAND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION