



George Negus Tonight :: history :: Transcripts :: Lacapede Islands

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Lacapede Islands

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Each year thousands of birds come to the Lacapede Islands to nest and to breed, an event which in the past led to an attempt by America to claim the island for its huge guano deposits (bird droppings) used to produce fertilizer. The islands are also infamous as a place where many Aboriginal people were held against their will before they were dragooned into working as pearl divers and processors. Today the islands have been returned to the birds and its human visitors are now only armed with binoculars and cameras.

GEORGE NEGUS: Tonight, one of the last great wilderness areas of the world. The exotic history of the famous Kimberley coast.

G'day and welcome to another bunch of 6:30 to 7:00 programs looking at this country's society, its culture and its characters. Tonight we're off to the remote north-west of the continent to the Kimberley Region, one of the last great wilderness areas in the world. It's an almost pristine environment that supports a whole range of plants and animals, especially birds. Each year, thousands of our migratory feathered friends move into the area to nest and breed. Historically, though, this annual migration led to an attempt by one very unlikely foreign power to actually try to take over Australian soil.

DAVID BATTY: Halfway up the Dampier Peninsula, north of Broome, lay three small spits of land that make up the Lacapede Islands. Lonely and

deserted today, it is hard to imagine how these tiny atolls could have played such a pivotal and dramatic role in the development of the North-West. In 1885, sailing vessels roaming the rugged Kimberley coastline discovered a rich source of guano, or phosphate, on the islands. Guano is made entirely of bird droppings and was highly sought after as a fertiliser. The guano deposit was extensive because the islands are home to thousands of seabirds who have been nesting and raising their young here for centuries. Soon the mining of guano was in full swing and the islands attracted scores of trading ships from as far away as the Americas who were out to profit from the islands' lucrative resource. But trouble was brewing, and when some shipowners started to get a little greedy for guano, the Lacepedes became the focus of a heated international incident. Dr Cathie Clements is one of Western Australia's most eminent historians and an expert on the history of the North-West.

DR CATHIE CLEMENTS: One incident that people remember best for the Lacepede Islands was the raising of the American flag there and the claiming that it was an American possession.

DAVID BATTY: The 'American incident', as it became known, was short-lived. But it drove the Western Australian Government to station a representative at the lonely outpost and reclaim it for Australia.

DR CATHIE CLEMENTS: The whole guano industry, because it was based on islands and coastal areas, was a very risky business because a ship had to be anchored for weeks while the guano was loaded. There was no way, other than intuition and knowledge, for a boat captain to tell whether a cyclone was likely to come in. So, if a boat was at anchor when a cyclone blew in, it was very likely that the ship would be driven ashore. Um, so there were numerous shipwrecks.

DAVID BATTY: In February 1877, 10 large sailing vessels anchored at the Lacapedes were destroyed in one of the most devastating cyclones on record. By the time the guano began to run out pearling luggers from further down the coast started to arrive in search of pearl shell and Aboriginal labour. Their often cruel and unscrupulous quest for Aboriginal divers and deckhands became known as 'blackbirding'.

DR CATHIE CLEMENTS: Blackbirding took place in the Kimberley in the 1870s and 1880s. They hunted down the Aboriginal people, chained them, took them to the coast, and in some instances are said to have put them on the Lacapede Islands and held them there until they could take them to have them signed officially as labour for a particular pearling boat.

DAVID BATTY: Aboriginal women were especially sought after as they were better divers and able to stay underwater longer. But they were often abused and cruelly treated by their harsh bosses. Today, any reminders of the islands' tumultuous past have blown away, rusted into dust or disappeared into the ether of eternal oblivion. The island has returned to its rightful owners, the frigates, boobies and terns who rely on its remoteness to safeguard their rookery from egg-stealing predators. And the tides and seasons and cycles continue in a natural wonderworld far removed from the greed, cruelty and polluted sands of time.

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