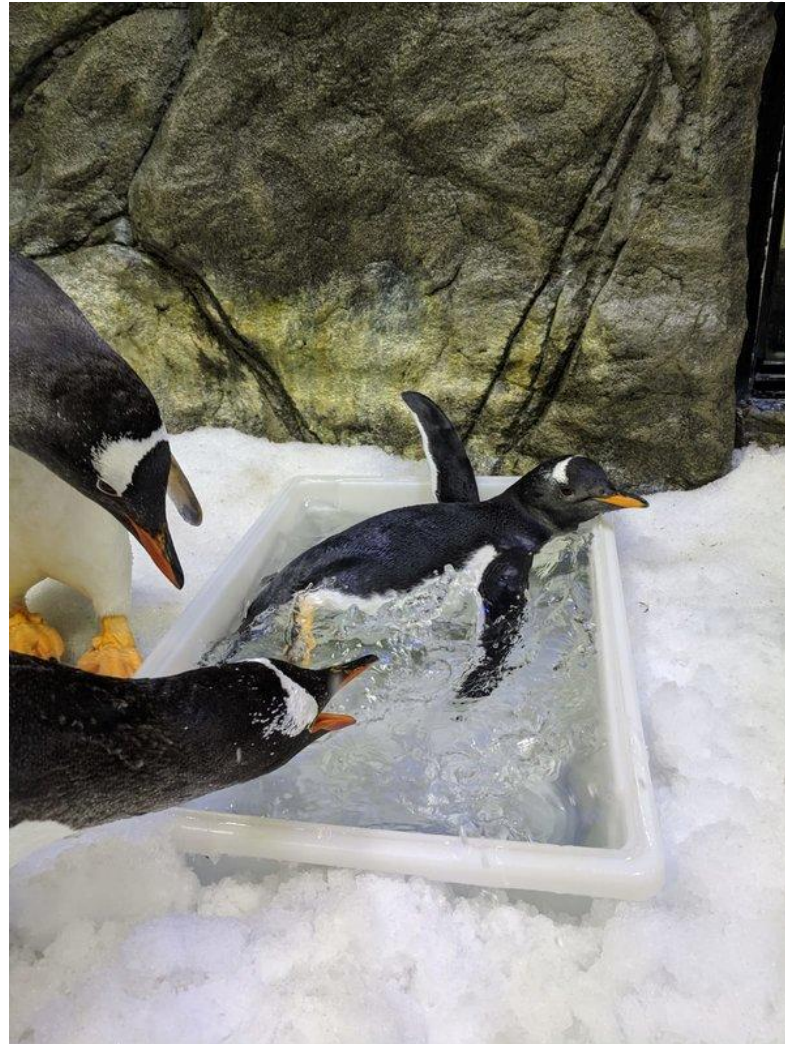


# The Gay Penguins of Australia

Two male penguins are raising a baby whose gender is unknown.

Sphen, Magic and Sphengic. Credit: Sea Life Sydney Aquarium

By Nellie Bowles



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SYDNEY, Australia — It was a young penguin colony, and all but one of the couples were pretty bad parents.

They would get distracted from their nests, go for a swim or play, and so neglected eggs were getting cold, likely never to hatch. This was normal for inexperienced penguins, and the aquarium managers didn't worry. Next mating season would be better.

One couple, though, was extraordinary. Not because they were the colony's only gay penguins, though they were, but because Sphen and Magic looked like they would make great, diligent, careful egg-warming parents. They made the biggest nest, and they sat on it constantly.

Curious, the aquarium managers gave the two males a dummy egg. They

took to it. And so then, when a particularly negligent heterosexual penguin couple looked to be leaving an egg exposed (females lay two, but usually only one survives), the aquarium workers figured they would give it to Sphen and Magic.

In October, that egg hatched. Now the chick of a gay penguin union is waddling around an ice enclosure by the touristy docks in Sydney.

When Sphen and Magic became a couple, Australia [had just gone through a bitter battle](#) about whether gay marriage should be legal. The human gay marriage debate had brought out thorny personal and religious tensions. These two diligent Gentoos, unaware of the political heat around their courtship, became a larger symbol for the country. If a penguin colony could figure this out, a human nation certainly could.

Australia is famous for having many dangerous creatures on land and in water: some of the most dangerous snakes and spiders in the world, kangaroos that look like bodybuilders, great white sharks patrolling surfers. Suddenly, though, Australia's biggest animal celebrities were two gay penguins, which their keepers noticed with pleasure.

"Everyone likes penguins," said Tish Hannan, the head of penguin supervision at the aquarium. "They're so cheeky."

"They're not like sharks," said the senior penguin keeper Amy Lawrie, her second in command. "No one's had a bad experience with a penguin."

**Penguin keepers cannot** say exactly why one penguin chooses another, especially two penguins as different as Magic and Sphen.

Magic, a 3-year-old Gentoo born at the Sea Life Melbourne Aquarium, is excitable and playful. He chases after toys and anything that shines. He greets visitors.

Sphen, who is 6 and from SeaWorld, is taller and has a bigger beak. He's quieter, more serious and less interested in toys and humans.

But it was clear early on what Sphen and Magic were doing when they met one summer day at Sea Life Sydney Aquarium.

First, as is the Gentoo way, they began to bow to each other.

They brought each other carefully selected pebbles for the nest they hoped to build together. If either had not been interested he would have rejected the pebble, pushing it away with a beak. But each admired the pebbles he was brought.

Ms. Lawrie described it as "consent."

Then they started to sing. Standing close together, they sang to each other until they had learned each other's voices.

"You would see Magic standing in his spot looking for Sphen, and he would call and Sphen would come running over and give Magic a little bow and sing as well," Ms. Hannan said. "They've chosen each other. That's it. They're bonded now."

Others in the colony of 33 penguins were still flirting. Younger birds tend to take a little while to choose their partners.

"They were recognizing multiple different bird calls and bowing to different individuals," Ms. Hannan said. "We saw none of that behavior from either Sphen or Magic. They weren't interested in other birds in the colony."

And so it was no surprise that the two began preparing for an egg.

“We knew they would start picking up stones,” Ms. Hannan said. “And we knew they would build the best nest.”

When the egg came, Spheh and Magic each took turns sitting on it for 28 days.

**The penguin keepers** had a discussion.

“We made the decision within the penguin team, and no one was against it,” Ms. Lawrie said. “Any pairs that want to pair up, it’s great.”

They alerted aquarium leadership that there were going to be two male penguin parents. The aquarium executives embraced it.

Video

<https://nyti.ms/2RQEUXV>

## 1:00 Gay Penguin Couple Foster Egg in Australia

Spheh and Magic, two male penguins at the Sea Life Sydney Aquarium, looked after an egg when a heterosexual penguin couple wasn’t up to the task. The 3-month-old chick will be called Sphehagic until it gets a permanent name.

CreditCreditSea Life Sydney Aquarium

The aquarium put out a video of the pair singing to each other. There is a [video of them making their pebble nest](#).

Visitors now come just to see the new gay parents, and ask tour guides which were the gay penguins.

There were those who objected to use of the word “gay.”

“The word ‘unnatural’ was used a lot,” said Samantha Antoun, the aquarium’s public relations manager. “People said we shouldn’t call them gay because maybe they’re just friends.”

The penguin keepers said they would bring no politics onto the ice.

“We’re not going to discourage any companionship for our penguins,” Ms. Lawrie said. “Love is love.”

**The first sign** of a good Gentoo parent is that they’re able to recognize an egg has hatched and that the chick is slowly breaking its way out. This can take days. Spheh and Magic noticed straight away.

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“When it’s got its face out, it can start talking to its parents, and Magic and Sphen recognized this and started singing to the egg before it even hatched,” Ms. Hannan said.

Their chick — for now called Sphengic — was born on a Friday and weighed 91 grams. It was the only chick to have hatched of all the eggs in the colony.

For the first few months of a chick’s life, it stays close to its parents. Sphen and Magic feed and sing to the chick. They tuck it into bed at night. The chick needs to have its head faced toward the parents when it sleeps under them, so parents use their beaks to keep it in proper position.

Like any couple, Sphen and Magic did face challenges, mostly related to their age difference.

“Magic is the younger one, and he would try to pawn off the parental duties in the first couple days,” Ms. Hannan said. “Sometimes he would be like, ‘You feed the chick today and hop off and go swimming.’”

But slowly he learned to co-parent. When Magic would feed the chick, Sphen would come over and sing to them.

“He was singing to encourage him,” Ms. Hannan said. “So Magic would know he was doing the right thing.”



SphengicCreditSea Life Sydney Aquarium

Now the 3-month-old chick is almost fully grown. He, or she, does not have a permanent name yet. Nor does the penguin have a gender. A penguin’s reproductive organs are internal, so sex can only be determined by a blood test at maturity. Orientation and identity are not Sphengic’s most pressing challenges.

One recent morning, Magic was playing with the other members of the colony, and Sphen was minding Sphengic, who is set aside from the colony in a crèche. Another penguin, Rita, came a little too close. Sphen flapped his wings and lightly jabbed at her with his beak. Sphengic, whose personality has yet to develop,

was busy eating ice.

Lunch that day would be pilchards and squid.

The penguin keepers said they do not think much about the politics of Sphengic. But they do see that he is inspiring visitors.

“Penguins are born with the ability to raise chicks from start to finish whether they’re male or female, and that’s quite an interesting thought to keep in mind,” Ms. Hannan said. “We’re the same.”

Many of the other penguins are searching for new pairs for another mating season. But Sphen and Magic remain together. Recently, Sphengic began learning to swim. Sphen and Magic padded nearby, ready to dive in.

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