

‘What do we do if the beach isn’t there anymore? It’ll all go to custard.’

‘We’ll just have to sort it out when we see it!’

Planning for contingencies

Going to Heard Island must surely be like travelling to another planet. The sheer dynamic nature of the physical environment means that where there was once beach, cliffs now loom against crashing surf, glaciers become lagoons and previously walkable beaches are cut by racing streams. Nothing is certain and everything can change.

Plan too rigidly for operations on Heard Island and you will undoubtedly end up planning it all again and again, as the island and weather unfolds. In fact, the key to the success of the 2003–04 expedition to Heard was our detailed contingency planning. Luckily, we could draw on the expertise of seasoned Heard Island expeditioners and some innovative minds, in both the planning and operational teams.

Before we left we spent hours poring over aerial and satellite images looking for suitable camp sites, water sources, landing beaches and, most importantly, study sites for the array of research projects we were to undertake. We quizzed those with local knowledge, although in the intervening years we knew much could have changed.

The coast of Heard Island is where the glaciers meet the sea. Often the glaciers end in wide lagoons that are separated from the ocean by a spit of land that can be traversed by foot. But this is not always the case. As the lagoons fill with melt water or rain they tend to break out and the ensuing torrent or large gap in the spit makes foot travel impossible. We evolved two contingencies to meet this potential challenge.

The first was to learn how to safely cross rivers flowing from the lagoons. To do this we undertook a day of river crossing training in Tasmania. We learnt how to assess river flows, to ‘buddy up’ when crossing and to rescue each other with throw bags of floating rope if things didn’t work out. This training enabled expeditioners to travel to their study sites safely.

For the bigger and more difficult crossings our second idea came into play – using zodiac inflatable boats to cross the lagoons. On the southern side of the island we took small boats that we could carry into position, if a beach landing was impossible at the desired site. These nine-foot boats with eight-horsepower motors proved effective in getting people across Winston Lagoon to the macaroni penguin study camp at Capsize Beach, or in venturing further to Long Beach.



We used 18 foot boats on the northern side, to establish camps at Stephenson Lagoon and along the north-east coast. Trips were even made to Brown and Compton Lagoons for bathymetry work for the glaciologists. The bigger boats were also used by a reconnaissance and beach-marking team to help land our amphibious LARCS on unknown beaches and get expeditioners from the *Southern Supporter* ashore.

We had worked hard to ensure the boats would operate safely, meet our needs and survive the conditions. They held up well despite being used as a lounge suite by the elephant seals and the propensity for rocks to find the propellers from time to time.

We had also put a lot of thought into our shelter needs – a critical part of any expedition. We took converted water tanks to use as laboratories and living accommodation along with heavyweight and lightweight tents. We also hoped to use existing huts if they had survived the three years since the last visit; the very condition and existence of these huts was another unknown.

Our heavyweight polar pyramid tents had been redesigned for the wet and windy subantarctic (see Expedition Kit page 14). The final result was fantastic and with ongoing design, as a result of our experience, things will only get better.

LEFT: The nine foot zodiacs proved popular with the elephant seals.
 RIGHT: River crossing techniques.
 BELOW: The ever changing Heard Island landscape.



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Lightweight tents were used around the island as overflow accommodation at camps and backup shelter for parties travelling further afield. The apple hut that had been at Paddock Valley three years earlier was now widely scattered debris, so a cache of lightweight dome tents was carried over for use by scientists throughout the summer. When travelling as far afield as Long Beach – an 11 hour walk from Capsize Beach – the lightweight tents provided shelter enroute if rivers were not crossable or an emergency occurred. Importantly, they acted as backup should the Long Beach apple have disappeared in the ‘freight train’ of wind that wraps around the island. To our relief, the apple was intact, warm and comfortable.

As well as transport and accommodation on the island, we needed a flexible source of power for the radios, computers and array of scientific equipment. The engineering team came up with a field camp power system that used solar panels, wind generators and small petrol generators to provide more than enough power for our needs in a variety of environmental conditions.

Our clothing had also been selected to provide flexibility while affording protection from the elements. We took mostly new clothing and used no velcro, to minimise the chance of

introducing alien species to the island. Heard Island is rare in being a relatively pristine environment and we wanted to do all we could to maintain this.

Even our food was ‘environmentally friendly’ with nothing that could escape and grow, or introduce disease into plant or animal colonies. This meant no eggs, fresh fruit and vegetables or seeds that could take root and propagate. Even so we enjoyed many options with our food. From lightweight freeze-dried and dehydrated meals for those travelling long distances, to flour, pasta, cheeses and meats for camp-bound cooking. No-one went hungry.

Our ‘flexible toolbox’ of transport, accommodation, power generation, clothing and food allowed us to meet the challenges of operating on Heard Island with confidence. Getting ashore, completing our work and returning home with minimal environmental impact was a credit to the planners and expeditioners alike. In the end not too much ‘went to custard’ and when it did we sorted it out.

—ROBB CLIFTON

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