UKOTCF

Southern Oceans Working Group (SOWG) e-Newsletter

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Contact Information -
sbarnsley@ukotcf.org

Happy New Year to all of our readers! 2016 was certainly an eventful year globally and no less so for the Overseas Territories. From new Marine Protected Area designations, to an improved conservation status for the St Helena plover (see article on page 2), there have been many conservation success stories for the South Atlantic Territories. The last year also saw situations that remind us how urgently changes still need to be made in terms of mitigating human impacts on the environment and wildlife. St Helena's *The Sentinel* reported in November that red-billed tropicbirds had a poor breeding season, due to disturbance from dogs and cats (see article on page 4).

However, we must not forget the incredible work of the hundreds of individuals working to address these challenges and the subsequent progress being made. The last few months of 2016 saw construction commence on *Sir David Attenborough*, the new polar research vessel that will replace current research ships *RRS James Clark Ross* and *RRS Ernest Shackleton*. Research conducted from the ship will enable scientists to search for answers to questions related to issues such as climate change and the effects of a changing environment on marine biodiversity. 2016 also heralded the 25th anniversary of the *Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty* – a reminder that it is possible for people from around the world to work together and make positive change for nature.

Despite being only a few months in to the new year, UKOTCF itself has already been busy. On January 10th, UKOTCF Forum Manager Catherine Wensink, provided oral evidence on Marine Protected Areas to the Environmental Audit Committee of the House of Commons. There are other exciting upcoming events, such as the 2nd meeting of UKOT/CD Environment Ministers and equivalents. This will be held in Alderney in April and will be looking to further develop areas of collaboration between Territories as regards the environment, and particularly in relation to discussions with UK Government.

I wish you all the best for 2017 and look forward to all the conservation success stories that the year may bring.

Sarah Barnsley (SOWG Secretary)

Screen grab of Catherine Wensink providing evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee (Image: parliamentlive.tv)

Cross-Territory

Change in Status for UKOT Birds

Tristan albatross (Photo: BritishBirds website)

The most recent update of the *IUCN Red List*, saw the conservation status of the St Helena plover, also known as the 'wirebird', change from Critically Endangered to Vulnerable. The St Helena plover was joined by the Montserrat oriole, whose improved conservation status is also now Vulnerable. The new Red List was released on 7th December 2016.

The only surviving of several endemic bird species to the Island, the population of the St Helena plover consisted of 208 individuals in 2006. The development of St Helena's new airport posed a further threat, as construction took place on one of the species' key nesting areas. With support from the RSPB, and funded by UK Government, conservation work provided new habitats for the species. This, in addition to an invasive species control programme by the St Helena National Trust, led to an increase in the St Helena plover population size. Adult wirebirds were found to number greater than 500 in 2016, subsequently leading to the change in the Red List classification of the species.

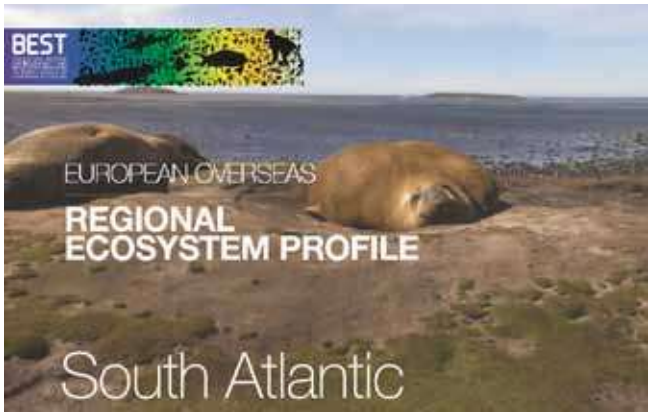
The improvement in status of two of the world's most endangered birds, leaves only two UK bird species in the IUCN's Critically Endangered category – the Gough bunting and Tristan albatross. Both species are found on Gough Island, Tristan da Cunha. However, there is still exciting news for these two species as UK Government has allocated £1.75 million of funding towards a mouse-eradication programme on Gough Island. A collaborative programme between the RSPB and the Tristan Government, the eradication operation is due to take place in 2019.

An estimated 600,000 seabird chicks are killed by introduced house mice on Gough Island each year. The eradication of mice could go a long way in reversing the population decline of the Tristan albatross and the Gough bunting – as well as other species in the unique assemblage on Gough.

More information can be found via the following link:

https://britishbirds.co.uk/article/critically-endangered-no-good-news-uks-rarest-birds/

South Atlantic Ecosystem Profile Available Online



Section of the cover for the South Atlantic Ecosystem Profile (Image: Regional Ecosystem Profile – South Atlantic Region, Maria Taylor, Tara Pelembe & Paul Brickle)

The BEST Ecosystem Profile for the South Atlantic Region is now available on the website of the European Commission. BEST stands for "voluntary scheme for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in Territories of European Overseas" and looks to provide support for biodiversity conservation and sustainable ecosystem service use in these areas.

The ecosystem profiles were developed by each regional BEST hub, using the model developed by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF). They are intended to allow needs to be prioritised, as well as the identification of areas requiring financing.

UKOTCF commented on the South Atlantic Ecosystem Profile as well as others, including those for the Polar and Subpolar Regions, although the latter two are not yet available for download.

The Ecosystem Profiles can be found via the following link, as can further information on BEST:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/best/regions/index_en.htm#.

More information about CEPF can be found at

http://www.cepf.net/resources/publications/Pages/ecosystem_profiles.aspx.

Falkland Islands

Falkland Conservation's Sei Whale Project

Sei whale (Photo: Baldur Thorvaldsson)

During October, Falklands Conservation commenced a research project investigating the occurrence of the sei whale in the Berkeley Sound region of East Falkland. A dedicated Sei Whale Project Officer, Dr Caroline Weir, arrived in Stanley to manage the project, which is financed by the BEST 2.0 Programme of the European Union. Sei whales are classified as Endangered by the IUCN, following decades of commercial exploitation in the 1900s. Collecting data on the species' biology and ecology are important for monitoring current status.

Despite having a widespread occurrence throughout most of the world's oceans, sei whales are one of the least-studied baleen whale species. This is predominantly because they inhabit pelagic offshore waters in most of their geographic range, making field studies costly and logistically-challenging. However, the Falkland Islands are one location where the species frequently inhabits coastal areas that are much more accessible to scientists. Berkeley Sound appears to represent a 'hotspot' of sei whale occurrence, making it an ideal site to carry out the pilot study.

The sei whale project will investigate the spatial distribution and abundance of whales in Berkeley Sound and the potential for interaction with human users of the Sound. This will be achieved through a combination of shore-based, boat and aerial survey work. The project will also trial a research technique called photo-identification which uses scars and nicks on the dorsal fin of whales to identify individual animals, providing information on movements. Fieldwork was scheduled to begin in January, when the whales start to arrive in Falkland waters, and will continue until May.

For more information about the project, please call Falklands Conservation on +500 22247 during office hours, or send an email to SWPO@conservation.org.fk.

Dr Caroline Weir, Falklands Conservation

Tristan da Cunha

Pristine Seas Expedition

An expedition as part of the National Geographic's Pristine Seas project is currently underway. This 5-week expedition, to Tristan da Cunha, is being carried out in collaboration with the Tristan Government and RSPB. The Pristine Seas project was established by in-house National Geographic explorer, Dr Enric Sala, in order to discover, survey and contribute towards the protection of the remaining areas of ocean wilderness.

The expedition aims to survey the Tristan archipelago's marine environment, for which few data are currently

available. Surveys of shallow fauna and flora will be conducted, as will research focusing on pelagic species, deep-sea habitats, and satellite-tagging of predatory species such as sharks and tunas.

Other activities will concentrate on marine invasives, penguin and albatross tagging, and lobster fisheries. A documentary will be created as part of the project, to outline the incredible uniqueness of Tristan's marine environment and the people responsible for looking after it.

Tristan expedition leader, Paul Rose, has been posting regular updates in the Pristine Seas blog. This can be accessed via:

http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/blog/pristine-seas/.

More information about the National Geographic Pristine Seas project can be found at:

http://www.nationalgeographic.org/projects/pristine-seas/.

St Helena

Poor Breeding Season for Red-billed Tropic Birds

St Helena's red-billed tropic birds (also known as trophy birds) have had a poor breeding season. This was noticed by the Marine Section of the Environment and Natural Resources Directorate, who have been monitoring the colony for the past three years. The colony is found on Ladder Hill and at the old Firing Range.

The main culprits are cats, which are human-introduced predators of the tropic birds. However, domestic dogs have also been seen to cause damage to the breeding population. In response to this issue, the trapping of feral cats has been carried out. St Helena Government also issued a reminder on their website, that dogs must be kept on a lead and that, "Under the Dog & Cat Ordinance 2011, the owner or keeper of a dog can be fined up to £500 for allowing their dog to wander unsupervised or uncontrolled in any public place." The neutering of pet cats and dogs is also being encouraged to limit strays.

For more information, visit **http://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/category/news/**.

Scott Kelby Worldwide Photowalk

October 2016 saw St Helena participate in the Scott Kelby Worldwide Photowalk. This was the third time that the territory participated. The most recent walk commenced at Fairyland, Blue Hill, and ended at Peak Dale. 37 participants came along and had the opportunity to photograph the beautiful natural heritage of St Helena.

The Scott Kelby Worldwide Photowalk involves participants from all over the globe, who walk on the same day, taking photos along the way to share the beauty of our world and the people who inhabit it. Participants also have the opportunity to donate, with funds going towards The Springs of Hope Kenya Orphanage.

Some of the photos taken by participants on St Helena can be seen here:

Photos: St Helena Tourism

Find out more about the Worldwide Photowalk here:

http://worldwidephotowalk.com/

St Helena Nature Conservation Group Peak Dale Restoration

The St Helena Nature Conservation Group (SNCG) regularly carries out restoration work at Peak Dale. This is the only remaining fragment of St Helena gumwood forest in the world. With the gumwood categorised as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List, it is great to see individuals getting involved with volunteer days.

Volunteer day at Peak Dale (Photo: SNCG Peak Dale Restoration Facebook page)

Volunteer helping out at Peak Dale, St Helena (Photo: SNCG Peak Dale Restoration Facebook page)

For further updates regarding SNCG Peak Dale restoration, visit:

https://www.facebook.com/SNCGPeakDale/?hc_ref=PAGES_TIMELINE

Ascension Island

Cycle Ride Raises £138,000 for Marine Conservation

September 2016 saw 50 individuals cycle a distance of greater than 1500km to raise money for Ascension's ocean conservation. The cycle ride commenced at Tower Bridge in London and ended in Monaco, where participants were greeted by Prince Albert II of Monaco.

The event, which was organised by Blue Marine Foundation in collaboration with Winch Design, raised nearly £250,000. £138,000 of this total sum went to Ascension Island, delivered in person by Blue Marine Foundation's Executive Director, Mr Charles Clover, and Miss Clare Lennard. Five members of Blue's staff and trustees also participated in various parts of the cycle ride itself.

The remainder of the funds will go towards a reserve in the waters surrounding the Aeolian Islands in the Mediterranean. Ascension's portion of the donation has been used for various conservation and education resources, including shark tags, flights and a stipend for turtle interns, and reusable canvas bags to replace plastic ones.

We congratulate everyone involved with this incredible achievement!

Latest Shark Tracking News

In 2016, the Ascension Island Government Conservation Department commenced shark tagging as part of a Darwin Initiative funded project, and in collaboration with ZSL Marine and Freshwater Conservation.

The project is entitled *Tracking marine megafauna at Ascension Island: towards evidence-based 'blue belts'*. As indicated on the Darwin Initiative website, it aims to track "the movements of taxa potentially at risk from fisheries by-catch", thereby contributing "spatial data urgently needed to inform decisions concerning the management of Ascension's maritime zone".

In June 2016, a female tiger shark *Galeocerdo cuvier* was released tagged with a SPOT tag, a device which

transmits location data via a satellite. This is exactly what has been happening since her release. For the most part, the female tiger shark remained close to Ascension Island, but this changed around Christmas. She then headed into the Atlantic on a north-west bearing, and on 15th January was estimated to be approximately 1000 miles away from Ascension.

We look forward to hearing further updates about her journey! You can find the latest updates on the Ascension Island Conservation Facebook page:

https://en-gb.facebook.com/AscensionIslandConservation/

Shark release and location data (Image: Ascension Island Conservation Facebook page)

Ascension Hydroponics

A hydroponics site has been opened by the Ascension Island Government (AIG), in order to allow the production of vegetable and salad crops for the people of the island. AIG's Hydroponics Consultant, Stephen Herron, was involved with the development of the site, which saw more than 150 visitors during an open weekend in June 2016. The site was then declared open on Monday 27th June.

The site will guarantee fresh vegetables and salad, without islanders having to worry about the arrival of the next supply from South Africa. Since the launch in June, the site has been handed over to Site Manager Regan Tourond, who has had growing experience globally, e.g. in South-East Asia.

Hydroponics works by providing plants with the nutrients they need, without using soil. It is hoped that, in the future, the site will convert to the use of harvested rainwater, rather than relying on mains supplies.

For more information, see the Ascension Hydroponic Services Facebook page:

https://www.facebook.com/Ascension-Hydroponic-Services-839985156141286/

Hydroponics system (Image: Ascension Hydroponic Services Facebook page)

British Indian Ocean Territory

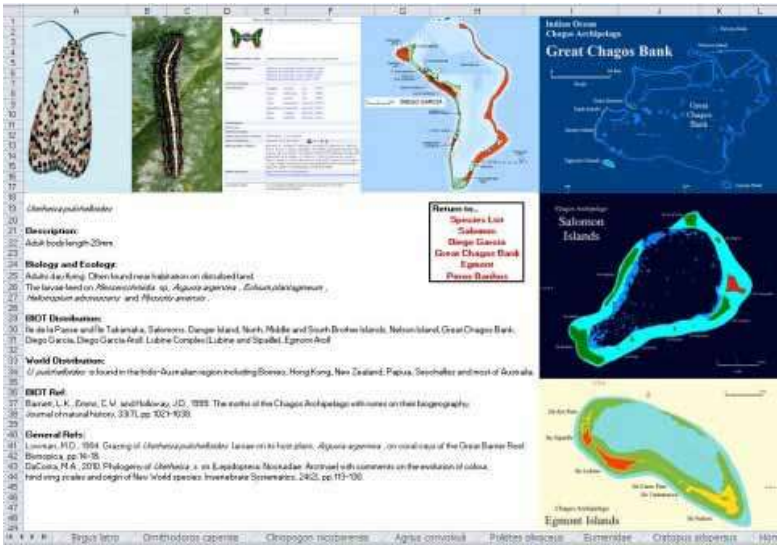
Terrestrial Invertebrate Species List

Data are being incorporated into a species list for the terrestrial invertebrates of the Chagos Archipelago. Various information sources have been used to do this, including, for example, the Natural History Museum collection.

Data gathered by scientists currently working in the British Indian Ocean Territory have also been included.

A total of 444 species of terrestrial invertebrate have been identified in the archipelago so far, including: 378 insects, 23 snail species, a centipede and 13 arachnids.

In 2017, an expedition being held as part of the Chagos Conservation Trust's Darwin Plus Fund project, *Creating a Terrestrial Action Plan for the Chagos Archipelago*, will also include an invertebrate survey.



Terrestrial invertebrate species list (Image: Chagos Conservation Trust website)

More information about the project can be found via

http://www.chagos-trust.org/news/pinning-down-terrestrial-invertebrates-biot, as well as in the 9th edition of the SOWG e-newsletter:

http://www.ukotcf.org/SOWG/SOWG_9_May2016.pdf.

Pitcairn

Endemic Species Fact File: Yellow Fatu

Yellow fatu (Photo: Noeleen Smyth)

The Critically Endangered yellow fatu *Abutilon pitcairnense* is a shrub endemic to Pitcairn. In fact, its natural habitat is in *Homalium taypau* forest, a species also endemic to the island. Unfortunately, this forest type is threatened by invasive species such as roseapple *Syzygium jambos*. The last remaining yellow fatu to be found in its natural habitat was actually destroyed by a landslide in 2005.

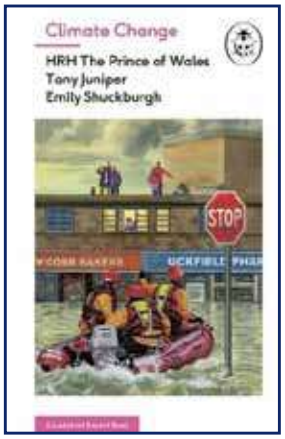
Some yellow fatu specimens have since been propagated. The *Abutilon pitcairnense* recovery project was a partnership between the Pitcairn Island Government and National Botanic Gardens of Dublin. Experiments for chemically controlling invasive species, such as roseapple, followed by the restoration of native vegetation were carried out between 2003 and 2006. These were successful.

To find out more about the fauna and flora of Pitcairn, have a look at the BEST ecosystem profile for the island:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/best/pdf/best-ecosystem_profile_pitcairn_2016.pdf

British Antarctic Territory

Climate Change Book Co-authored with HRH Prince of Wales and Tony Juniper



Dr Emily Shuckburgh OBE, a British Antarctic Survey climate scientist, has recently co-authored a book in the Ladybird Expert series with HRH Prince of Wales and Tony Juniper. The book focuses upon climate change and has been peer-reviewed by members of the environment community. Publication date was 26th January.

Dr Shuckburgh is deputy-head of the British Antarctic Survey's Polar Oceans Team, which aims to gain a better understanding of polar oceans and their role within the global climate system. Dr Shuckburgh received the Rosenstiel Award in 2014, in recognition of her work.

If you would like further information about the book or about the Ladybird Expert series, contact details can be found via the following link:

https://www.bas.ac.uk/media-post/polar-oceanographer-co-authors-climate-change-ladybird-book-with-hrh-prince-of-wales-and-tony-juniper/

Disturbance to Carbon-fixing Shallow-water Ecosystems

A diver in Ryder Bay
(Photo: Ashley Cordingley, British Antarctic Survey website)

With shallow-water ecosystems acting as a carbon sink, these important seafloor ecosystems could play a part in offsetting carbon dioxide emissions, thereby mitigating the subsequent impact on climate change. Seafloors have this carbon-sequestration ability, thanks to the numerous species living there, which rely on carbon for building their shells and other tissues. As these animals die and are buried over time, the carbon becomes part of the sediment layers.

However, one issue potentially preventing the sequestration of carbon in seafloor ecosystems, is the disturbance of seafloors by increasing numbers of icebergs. This is an issue around the Antarctic Peninsula. As reported by British Antarctic Survey (BAS) marine ecologist Dr David Barnes in *Global Change Biology,* climate change, and therefore the fact that the sea-surface is less frozen in winter, has led to a significantly greater chance of iceberg-seabed collisions.

A BAS study has involved the monitoring, since 2003, of the seafloor of Ryder Bay, located near Rothera Research Station. Since the commencement of the study, nearly one third of monitored locations experienced seafloor-iceberg collisions each year. Only 7% of study locations were entirely free of collisions for the duration of the research.

The full paper *Iceberg killing fields limit huge potential for benthic blue carbon in Antarctic shallows*, by Dr Barnes, can be found via the following link: **http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gcb.13523/full**

More information can also be found on the BAS website at

https://www.bas.ac.uk/media-post/featured-paper-icebergs-and-blue-carbon/ and

https://www.bas.ac.uk/media-post/iceberg-scouring-disturbs-carbon-fixing-seafloor-ecosystems/.

South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands

Conservation Plans for the Albatross

In order to protect the black-browed, grey-headed and wandering albatrosses, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI) have launched new Conservation Action Plans. With their development having been supported by UK Government and other bodies such as the British Antarctic Survey and RSPB, these new Action Plans outline the necessary actions for improving albatross conservation status.

While the aforementioned albatross species have long been protected and monitored in South Georgia, populations have still declined. The main reason is fisheries-related mortalities linked to operations outside the territory's maritime zone.

The need for additional conservation effort has been reinforced by the recent publication in the journal *Polar Biology*, of a study recording albatross population decline at South Georgia. Under the *Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels* (ACAP), these albatross populations have therefore been designated as 'Priority Populations'.

The Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI) has been working with fisheries for the protection of albatrosses in South Georgia's waters but, due to the wide-ranging nature of these species, they meet fisheries outside this area. However, in collaboration with the RSPB, GSGSSI will be carrying out an initial study to determine where and when these albatross species are at risk, in order to start addressing threats to these iconic species.

Find out more about the albatross conservation efforts and Action Plans on the GSGSSI website:

http://www.gov.gs/albatross-action-plans/.

Front cover of the Conservation Action Plan for Wandering Albatrosses (Image: Conservation Action Plan, Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands)

Survey of Former Whaling Stations

Specialising in oil-related environmental services, UK company Adler & Allan Ltd will be carrying out a survey of the former South Georgia whaling stations. The survey will provide data regarding the amount, type and condition of oil waste. Based on this, Adler & Allan will suggest recommendations and estimated costs as to the best oil-waste management and environmental protection options for the Government of South Georgia & SSI.

For more information about this particular project and the whaling station history, click here:

http://www.gov.gs/nov-16-newsletter

Former South Georgia whaling station
(Photo: website of Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands)

Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding any of the articles in this Newsletter, or about any of the UK's Overseas Territories more generally, please contact SOWG Secretary Sarah Barnsley at: sbarnsley@ukotcf.org