

## UKOTCF

## Southern Oceans Working Group (SOWG) e-Newsletter

September 2020

Number 15

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**Welcome** everyone to the September edition of the SOWG e-Newsletter. Though the ongoing Covid19 pandemic has delayed and disrupted conservation work across the globe, there have still been some interesting things happening in the territories. I hope you enjoy reading these updates and are staying safe.

If you have any queries or suggestions for the next edition, please do send them to [cporter@ukotcf.org](mailto:cporter@ukotcf.org).

**Catriona Porter & the UKOTCF Team**



Photo: UKOTCF archive / Seabird Restoration Project

**Male frigatebird *Fregatidae* with inflated pouch plus female on Ascension Island**

**Cross-Territory News**

- The 6<sup>th</sup> International Marine Conservation Congress (IMCC6) recently took place over 24<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> August, 2020. It included a Blue Belt session and had speakers from many of the UKOTs, who presented virtually due to the ongoing Covid19 situation. The congress and the Blue Belt Session sparked a good deal of

engagement online, with participants using the hashtags ‘#IMCC6’ and ‘#IMCC2020’ to follow updates on the talks and engage with others about topics presented.

- UN representatives were supposed to meet in March 2020 to finalise negotiations on a new high seas treaty, which would help to meet the ‘30 by 30’ goal of protecting 30% of the world’s oceans by 2030 by establishing a network of MPAs in the open ocean. Due to the Covid19 pandemic, these negotiations have been temporarily postponed and, although online meetings have taken place, official meetings are still to happen. It looks likely that talks will now resume in 2021. If successful, this unprecedented move would greatly enhance ocean conservation and open a conservation focused dialogue between numerous organisations and governmental bodies.

You can view a useful timeline of the UN high seas treaty progression here: <http://www.highseasalliance.org/high-seas-alliance-timeline/>

- A short (one minute long) promotional video by ‘Great Britain Campaign’ showcases biodiversity in the UKOTs, featuring the Falklands and St Helena among other territories. This has been shared by numerous people on social media, helping to publicise the biodiversity hosted within the UKOTs and engage the wider public with conservation ideals.

Watch: <https://twitter.com/GREATBritain/status/1301430838790369280>

## Ascension Island

### Youth Engagement: John Muir Award



Photo: Ascension Island Conservation  
The Explorers learning to pot on two of Ascension’s native ferns; *Nephrolepis hirsutula* and *Ophioglossum sp.*

This year the island is participating in the John Muir Award to boost youth engagement in conservation. The ‘Explorers’ (a youth outreach initiative run by Ascension Island Government Conservation & Fisheries Directorate, AIGCFD) have been partaking in the Discovery level of the award scheme, and have completed several excursions to learn about Ascension’s habitats and wildlife. The youth group walked 1,000 steps to uncover a range of habitats, in honour of the award namesake John Muir’s 1,000 mile walk in 1867 from Indiana to Florida. Muir (the Scots immigrant to US who became a pioneer for conservation and national parks)

famously underwent this journey to learn about and experience the variety of nature. The ‘Explorers’ hiked to Hummock Point where they conducted seabird surveys, before playing games on the beach to learn about Green Turtles, and collecting stones as part of exploring the island’s geology. Another excursion involved marine learning, where the ‘Explorers’ discovered food webs and ecosystem balance

regarding the island, as well as another fun component of crafting and painting various marine species. The group also got the chance to participate in live-action drone videos on the beach, depicting balanced and unbalanced ecosystems by dramatizing fish, plankton, waves, crabs, sharks and a commercial fishing boat. The final excursion took place at Green Mountain, where the kids learnt about Ascension's endemic and native flora in the shade houses, and the importance of keeping a living seed bank, source of material for habitat restoration and a stock of endemic plants. The children have recently achieved their John Muir Discovery Award.

You can purchase a copy of John Muir's book, 'A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf', from many online retailers including Amazon: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Thousand-Mile-Walk-Gulf-John-Muir/dp/1230256385>.

## **British Antarctic Territory**

### **Emperor Penguin Colonies Discovered**

Eight new colonies of emperor penguins *Aptenodytes forsteri* have been discovered in Antarctica and three previously identified but unconfirmed breeding sites have been rediscovered. The find comes via research conducted by a team from BAS, led by Dr Peter Fretwell, and brings the global census to 61 colonies in the entire continent. The study, published 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020 in the journal *Remote Sensing in Ecology and Conservation*, used images from the European Commission's Copernicus Sentinel-2 satellite to locate the birds. This is an important discovery which will help to monitor environmental impacts on the population of emperor penguins. The newly discovered sites are described by co-author Dr Phil Trathan as being in locations where recent model projections suggest emperors will decline. He warns that these colonies will probably be the 'canaries in the coalmine' – and so we should watch carefully how climate change will impact these areas.



Photo: BAS

Emperor penguins *Aptenodytes forsteri* near the BAS Halley Research Station

### **New Antarctica Podcast Released**

UK Antarctic Heritage Trust (UKAHT) have released a much anticipated podcast about Antarctica, hosted by journalist Alok Jha. The podcast was created by UKAHT to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first sighting of Antarctica, and includes conversations with leading scientists, conservationists, explorers and artists. The podcast series aired its first episode on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2020, and the second episode, 'Professor Dame Jane Francis: Clues to the Climate Crisis', has recently been released.

You can listen to the 30 minute episodes for free here: <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/a-voyage-to-antarctica/id1528585224#episodeGuid=5f4961c74f15433d7800ec9d>

## British Indian Ocean Territory

### Rat Eradication Impacts Seabird Distributions at Sea

A seabird study from the Chagos Archipelago has found climate oscillation and rat invasion can shift the oceanic distribution of species like the white tern *Gygis alba*, red-footed booby *Sula sula*, and brown noddy *Anous stolidus*. The research quantified effects of rat-free and rat-invaded islands on seabird distribution at sea as well as identifying breaking point distribution thresholds. It predicted seabird distribution after successful invasive species eradications, and detected areas of increased seabird



Photo: Anne Sheppard / Chagos Conservation Trust Website  
Red Footed Booby *Sula sula* on Middle Brother Island

abundance at sea under a scenario where previously invaded nearby islands were eradicated from rats and recolonised by seabirds. After rat eradication, abundance at sea of red-footed booby, brown noddy and white terns increased by 14%, 17% and 3% respectively. The study also included wedge-tailed shearwaters *Ardena pacifica*, but found no important increase for this species.

Overall, the study could have some implications for island restoration and seabird conservation, and the authors believe the results add to a mounting body of research on considerations for rat-eradication priorities in BIOT, as well as on a global scale.

The paper is open access and was published in the journal *Ecology and Evolution* on 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2020. You can read the full thing here: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ece3.6621>

### Diego Garcia Green Turtle Migration Study

A research team have used GPS tracking devices to follow migrating green turtles *Chelonia mydas* from nesting grounds in Diego Garcia to foraging grounds off the coasts of small isolated islands in the Indian Ocean. The study followed 35 female turtles and evaluated their navigation skills: finding that they travelled several hundred kilometres off course, but were able to reorient in the open ocean and eventually reached their destination. Green turtles especially are known to stay loyal to particular foraging grounds as well as habitually returning to nesting grounds, and turtle navigation in general remains a source of intrigue for researchers. The study shows that the turtles often made mistakes: instead of homing to the islands with pinpoint accuracy, they sometimes overshot their target or missed it altogether,



Photo: Dr Sam Weber / UKOTCF website: Green turtle *Chelonia mydas* covering its eggs, Ascension Island

before eventually locating their destination. The results suggest that turtles do not reorient at fine scales, and may have a coarse map sense.

Paper DOI: [https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822\(20\)30773-9#articleInformation](https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822(20)30773-9#articleInformation)

## Falkland Islands

### **Unregulated Fishing Beside Falkland Islands Outer Conservation Zone**

Unregulated longline fishing immediately adjacent to the Falkland Islands Outer Conservation Zone (FOCZ) could be undermining fisheries management and marine conservation efforts. A recent study published in the journal *ICES Journal of Marine Science* has found that unregulated bottom-set longline fishing for Patagonian Toothfish *Dissostichus eleginoides* just outside the FOCZ could be having significant impacts on vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs). These impacts are much greater than the licensed fisheries within Falkland waters; the study predicted VME taxa distributions, and compared these to fishing footprints of licenced fleets and areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ) – results found the ABNJ footprint was almost twice as high as in licenced waters. The study found that

important VME habitats “straddle” across management regimes, and shows a potential for ABNJ fishing to undermine domestic VME fishing management efforts. The authors highlight a gap in knowledge regarding the effects of discontinuous management of VMEs across these spatial contexts, and believe



Photo: SAERI Website

Patagonian Toothfish *Dissostichus eleginoides*

establishing a multilateral agreement in the style of RFMO/A (regional fisheries management organisations or arrangements) could greatly help improve knowledge and understanding.

Source: <https://academic.oup.com/icesjms/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/icesjms/fsaa106/5875731?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

## Pitcairn Islands

### **Henderson Island Inspires Plastic Focused Art Exhibition**

Henderson Island among other places has been a source of inspiration for an art exhibition by international award-winning photographer, Mandy Barker. The artist visited the island in 2019, accompanying a multidisciplinary team of scientists, filmmakers, journalists, divers and clean-up crew on the Henderson Island Plastic Pollution Expedition. Her recent exhibition ‘Our Plastic Ocean’ was available to view for free online through a virtual tour spanning the 14<sup>th</sup> March to the 12<sup>th</sup> September

2020, after premiering at Impressions Gallery in Bradford. The exhibition spanned decades of her work, and Barker summarised the purpose of her art in saying: “For the past decade, I have researched and documented the impact of oceanic waste, combining art and science to raise awareness. I hope to inspire positive action in tackling this increasing environmental challenge which is of global concern”. She also released several other projects in June 2020, exactly one year since visiting Henderson: ‘LUNASEA’, ‘CROWN 2.5L’ and ‘SHELF-LIFE’.



Photo: Mandy Baker / 2021 Visual Arts  
A piece by Mandy Baker titled ‘Penalty’

Sources: <https://www.mandy-baker.com/work>  
<http://www.2021visualartscentre.co.uk/exhibitions/mandy-baker-our-plastic-ocean/>

## St Helena

### **New App and Festival Plans**

The marine team at Saint Helena National Trust (SHNT) have announced that they are in the process of developing a whale shark app which will help with communication and outreach, as well as aiding whale shark identification. They have encouraged everyone to keep an eye out for its launch, and announced that they are also preparing for their third annual bone shark festival on the island. This festival will hopefully take place in February 2021, and aims to engage the community with



Photo: Saint Helena National Trust  
Whale shark *Rhincodon typus*, known locally as a ‘bone shark’

whale sharks *Rhincodon typus*, locally referred to as ‘bone sharks’. The festival will also help to highlight the importance of the MPA around St Helena.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=715080835887259&extid=ozQWqfIRAtfsgMag>

## South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands

### **New Film Narrated by Sir David Attenborough**

An exciting new short film narrated by Sir David Attenborough was launched on 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2020 by the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands. 'South Georgia – A Visitor's Guide' is roughly 18 minutes long and promotes two key messages: firstly, it encourages visitors to respect and protect the island in sustainable visits, and secondly, it shows that nature can recover if we give it the chance. The film features lovely footage of some of South Georgia's iconic wildlife, such as elephant and fur seals, macaroni and king penguins and albatross, as well as impressive landscape shots. It touches on

topics of commercial whaling and fishing, Antarctic exploration, sustainable tourism and conservation work, and is a very inspiring watch.

You can see the film here, on the GSGSSI website: [http://www.gov.gs/south-georgia-a-visitors-guide/?fbclid=IwAR0EUBVVqO2n6RInvOB-tSKwI4XDvgo2seeFK\\_FDaWZTLajpPkcNxJyO\\_y0](http://www.gov.gs/south-georgia-a-visitors-guide/?fbclid=IwAR0EUBVVqO2n6RInvOB-tSKwI4XDvgo2seeFK_FDaWZTLajpPkcNxJyO_y0)

### **'From the Air' Stamps**

A set of 'From the Air' stamps have been released in order to share some of the views collected through various outreach and media projects utilising UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles). Use of these UAVs are restricted to government sanctioned projects, and have gained popularity in recent years: early application involved using UAVs to conduct wildlife surveys without causing any disturbance by approaching on land or by sea. This non-invasive method of collecting information has meant researchers are able to track how wildlife on SG changes through the seasons, and also create detailed maps of the coastline including the amount and type of vegetation cover.

You can purchase the stamps here: <https://www.falklandstamps.com/>

Source: <http://www.gov.gs/july-20/#News-2>

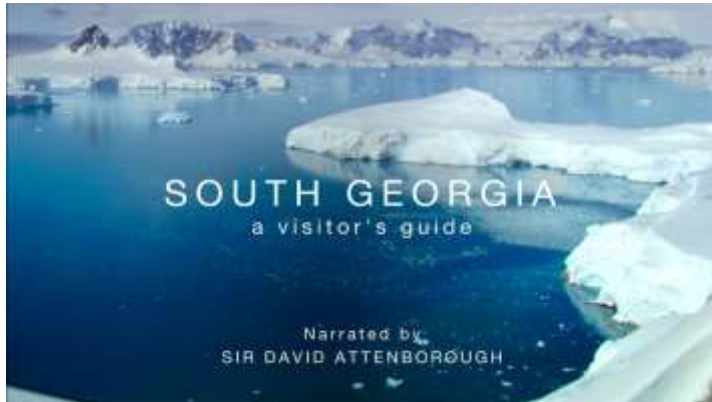


Photo: GSGSSI  
New short film 'South Georgia: A Visitor's Guide'



Photo: GSGSSI  
'From the Air' Stamps

## Tristan da Cunha

### **Elephant Seals Disappearing from Gough Island**

A 2019 survey on the small breeding population of elephant seals *Mirounga leonine* on Gough Island found a continued decline in numbers from previous surveys, and the findings have recently been published this year in the journal *Polar Biology*. The research was conducted in keeping with past survey methods, and took place during the breeding season in October along the north-east coast. It recorded just two pups, one harem (two females and one male), and two other lone male elephant seals. These figures contrast with past survey numbers; in the 1970s birth numbers were between 27 – 38



Photo: Christopher Jones / RSPB Community  
Researcher Michelle Risi with a female elephant seal *Mirounga leonine* and her pup

and in the 1990s between 11 – 23, making the 2019 birth number of 2 the lowest yet. The authors speculate reasons for the decline in elephant seal numbers on Gough Island could be linked to ‘foraging habitat and ecosystem changes mediated by shifts in oceanic temperatures and circulation patterns affected by climate change’, and relay that their data suggests the current population of elephant seals at Gough Island is likely to become extinct at some point in the next 20 years.

You can source the paper DOI link here: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341476966\\_Local\\_extinction\\_imminent\\_for\\_southern\\_elephant\\_seals\\_Mirounga\\_leonina\\_at\\_their\\_northernmost\\_breeding\\_site\\_Gough\\_Island-South\\_Atlantic\\_Ocean](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341476966_Local_extinction_imminent_for_southern_elephant_seals_Mirounga_leonina_at_their_northernmost_breeding_site_Gough_Island-South_Atlantic_Ocean)

And read the lead author’s blog post on the findings here: <https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/biodiversity/posts/southern-elephant-seals-almost-completely-gone-from-gough-island>



Photo: Dr. Mike Pienkowski  
Southern rockhopper penguin *Eudyptes chrysocome* on New Island



Photo: Chagos Conservation Trust  
Green turtle *Chelonia mydas* in British Indian Ocean Territory

To find out more about the UK Overseas Territories, research and work being done by various organisations to protect the unique biodiversity of these special places, and the role UKOTCF plays, please visit our website: [www.ukotcf.org.uk](http://www.ukotcf.org.uk).

For more information about the SOWG, comments, or contributions to the newsletter, please contact Voluntary Secretary / Voluntary Conservation Officer, Catriona Porter: [cporter@ukotcf.org](mailto:cporter@ukotcf.org)