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The SCAR Group of Experts on Birds: support for the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels

The SCAR Group of Experts on Birds: support for the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels

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SUMMARY

The SCAR Group of Experts on Birds already undertakes a wide variety of tasks, including data collection and analysis, on species included within the remit of the ACAP. These activities are described and suggestions made on how future activities of the Group could assist the scientific discussions of the ACAP Parties.

INTRODUCTION

The Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research

The Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR; www.scar.org) is an interdisciplinary scientific committee of the non-governmental International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU; www.icsu.org). SCAR was established in 1958, and currently has 28 member nations, including all those countries that have ratified or signed the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP). SCAR is charged by ICSU with the initiation, promotion and co-ordination of scientific research in Antarctica, with a view to framing scientific programmes of circumpolar scope and significance. A main purpose of SCAR is to provide a forum for scientists of all countries with research activities in Antarctica to discuss their field activities and to promote collaboration between them. It also provides independent scientific advice to a number of international agreements which provide protection for the ecology and environment of Antarctica, most especially the Antarctic Treaty System and its Protocol on Environmental Protection (the 'Madrid Protocol'), and the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR).

The SCAR area of interest covers the Antarctic Continent and includes those sub-Antarctic and maritime Antarctic islands and island groups south of the Antarctic Polar Front (APF). In addition, sub-Antarctic and some cool-temperate oceanic islands lying to the north of the APF are expressly included. These islands are Tristan da Cunha and Gough (UK), the Prince Edward Islands (South Africa), Iles Amsterdam, Crozet, Kerguelen and St Paul (France) and Macquarie (Australia). Not formally listed as falling within SCAR's area of interest are the cool-temperate islands in the vicinity of southern South America (Islas Diego de Almagro, Ildefonso, Diego Ramirez and de los Estados, and the Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas) and the islands south of New Zealand (Antipodes, Aucklands, Bounty, Campbell and Snares) even though these island groups are farther south (and some are closer to the APF) than are the Tristan-Gough Islands. However bird species on these other island groups have been considered by SCAR-GEB.

SCAR is run by an Executive Committee, elected by meetings of the SCAR Delegates, which are normally held biennially in member countries. An Executive Director, currently Dr Colin Summerhayes, heads the SCAR Secretariat, based in Cambridge, UK. The current structure of SCAR consists of a number of Standing Scientific Groups (SSGs) to which SCAR nations may appoint members. One of these SSGs is the Life Sciences Standing Scientific Group (LSSSG),

currently chaired by Dr Ad Huiskes (Netherlands). At the 27th meeting of SCAR, held in Shanghai, China in July 2002, the LSSSG appointed several expert groups to advise it, one of these being the Group of Experts on Birds (SCAR-GEB).

SCAR Group of Experts on Birds

Co-ordination of ornithological research by SCAR has a long history, stretching back to 1964. Under a variety of names and terms of reference (SCAR Sub-Committee on Bird-Banding, SCAR Subcommittee on Bird Biology, BIOMASS Working Party on Bird Ecology, SCAR Bird Biology Subcommittee and now SCAR-Group of Experts on Birds) details of its work have been published in turn in the *Polar Record* and the *SCAR Bulletin*, *Cormorant* and currently in *Marine Ornithology*. A full list of the groups' publications from 1965 to 1993 is given in *Marine Ornithology* 21: 103-104 (1993).

Its present Terms of Reference are :

1. Encourage, coordinate and support pure and applied research on Antarctic and sub-Antarctic birds, including by fostering the entry of young scientists to these research efforts.
2. Undertake the on-going compilations and syntheses of existing long-term and broad-scale data on the distribution and abundance of Antarctic and sub-Antarctic birds.
3. Contribute to the conservation and management of Antarctic and sub-Antarctic birds through the appropriate utilization and interpretation of all available scientific data.
4. Provide scientific advice, information and recommendations to SCAR and other fora, including Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings, its Committee on Environmental Protection, and CCAMLR, in relation to all aspects of Antarctic and sub-Antarctic ornithological matters.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES OF THE SCAR-GEB RELEVANT TO ACAP

1. Literature compilations

From 1984, the SCAR-GEB and its predecessors have published, firstly in *Cormorant* and then in *Marine Ornithology*, annual lists of publications and theses dealing with Antarctic and sub-Antarctic birds. The most recent list published is that for 2000 (*Marine Ornithology* 30: 71-76, 2002). The compilation for 2001 is in press. A combined list from 1984, searchable by author, title or key words, is online at www.aad.gov.au. Future annual lists will be compiled for consideration at future meetings of the SCAR-GEB, subsequently published and available online.

The listed publications, *inter alia*, cover most of the ACAP species, including of studies conducted outside the SCAR area of interest of species whose centre of occurrence lies within the SCAR area. ACAP species not covered include the Waved Albatross *Phoebastria irrorata*. SCAR-GEB, if so requested by ACAP, could consider expanding its future literature compilations to include all the ACAP species

It is considered that the SCAR-GEB literature compilations will materially aid the ACAP Advisory Committee in its efforts to collate information (Sub-section 5.1 of the ACAP Action Plan).

2. Compilations of distribution and population sizes of selected Antarctic and sub-Antarctic birds

Since 1976, the SCAR-GEB and its predecessors have been active in producing compilations of the distribution and abundance of Antarctic and sub-Antarctic seabirds, drawing on its membership to collate and synthesize the available published and unavailable information. The group has to date produced publications on eight species of penguins (1993), the Snow Petrel *Pagodroma nivea* (1995) and the Antarctic Petrel *Thalassoica antarctica* (1999). A completed compilation for both giant petrels *Macronectes* spp. (ACAP species) awaits imminent publication. Compilations for other groups of sub-Antarctic and Antarctic birds are in various stages of production.

Because of the extensive reviews of albatross distribution and population sizes carried out as part of the First International Conference on the Biology and Conservation of Albatrosses, held in Hobart, Australia in September 1995 and published in book form in 1998 (Robertson, G. & Gales, R. (Eds) *Albatross biology and conservation*. Chipping Norton: Surrey Beatty & Sons), the SCAR-GEB has not as yet initiated a compilation for this group of ACAP species. Additionally, it has not tackled similar compilations for any of the five burrowing *Procellaria* species, all listed within ACAP, considering that there remains inadequate quantitative information on populations sizes at most breeding localities to warrant such reviews.

Assessments and reviews of the status and populations of albatrosses and petrels form an important part of the intended work of the ACAP Advisory Committee (Action Plan 5.1.a). It is considered that the SCAR-GEB is well-suited to contribute to such a task, being able to draw on its extensive network of collaborators, as well more formally via its structures to SCAR National Delegates.

3. Reviews of population status and trends of sub-Antarctic and Antarctic seabirds

To date, the SCAR-GEB and its predecessors have undertaken and published five reviews of the status and trends of sub-Antarctic and Antarctic seabirds. These have usually been undertaken at four-year intervals, commencing in 1998. The reviews have been largely undertaken at the request and on behalf of the Scientific Committee of CCAMLR (SC-CAMLR) which considers the findings as part of its Ecosystem Monitoring Programme (CEMP), as described in ACAP/MOP1/Inf.1.

The first three reviews were largely qualitative, but the fourth, held over five days in May 1999 at a dedicated workshop in Bozeman, USA, included detailed statistical assessments (Woehler, E.J. *et al.* 2001. *A statistical assessment of the status and trends of Antarctic and Subantarctic seabirds*. SCAR; available at www.scar.org) which was considered by CCAMLR in 2001.

The fifth review was undertaken at a two-day workshop immediately prior to the meeting of the SCAR-GEB in 2004. This workshop assessed data on population sizes and trends for more than 40 species of seabirds that breed in Antarctica and on sub-Antarctic islands throughout the Southern Ocean. In some cases, data sets spanned more than 50 years and provide long-term signals on seabird populations.

The SCAR-GEB intends to continue undertaking these reviews on behalf of CCAMLR at four-yearly intervals. At the final meeting of the SCAR-BBS, held in Tokyo, Japan in 2000, it was agreed that detailed statistical assessments should be held at eight-yearly intervals, alternating with non-statistical reviews. Currently the SCAR-GEB intends to follow this proposal, and the next such review will be undertaken in 2008.

Based on the need for the ACAP Advisory Committee to review population trends (Action Plan 5.1.a), it would seem that the SCAR-GEB population status and trends reviews will be of particular interest. It is suggested that the ACAP Advisory Committee, once it is constituted, discusses how it might take advantage of the planned 2008 statistical review, both by considering what types of analyses and syntheses for the ACAP species would best suit its requirements, and by participating in the SCAR-GEB workshop that would undertake the required data analyses.

4. Inventories of Important Bird Areas of Antarctica and the islands of the Southern Ocean

At its 1998 meeting, held in Concepcion, Chile in 1998, the SCAR-BBS adopted a proposal made to it by BirdLife International to co-sponsor the production of an inventory of Important Bird Areas (IBAs) for the Antarctic Continent. This was seen as contributing to a global coverage of IBA inventories being produced by BirdLife International and its national partners. Additionally, it could aid the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) in providing some objective criteria that could be used in considering the usefulness of present Antarctic Specially Protected Areas (ASPAs) and the need to create new one.

Although progress has been slow, due primarily to a lack of capacity and sufficient funding, two workshops have been held (in 2002 and 2004) by the group to further the inventory. The workshop held in 2004 re-examined the preliminary list of 119 candidate IBAs identified at the 2002 workshop, and finalized the list of sites for each of which texts and maps would be prepared. The majority of these candidate IBAs are not currently protected as ASPAs by the ATS. It is intended that production of site accounts will commence in 2005, with the aim of preparing a book for co-publication by SCAR and BirdLife International.

The Antarctic IBA inventory is restricted to the Antarctic Treaty area, and thus includes within its treatment only one species listed within ACAP: the Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus*. Although the SCAR-GEB and its predecessors have considered undertaking a similar project for the islands of the Southern Ocean, no decision to proceed has as yet been undertaken, the group noting that some islands at least have been covered in existing regional IBA inventories.

It is suggested that the ACAP Advisory Committee considers the value of the IBA inventory approach to help in identifying internationally important breeding sites (ACAP Action Plan, 5.1.b). The SCAR-GEB would be willing to contribute its expertise in this regard.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above summaries of some of the ongoing activities of the SCAR Group of Experts on Birds, it is considered that it is in a position to help the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels realize several of the objectives of its Action Plan. The SCAR-GEB looks forward to enjoying a close working relationship with ACAP in this regard.

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