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Establishment of Criteria for Urgent Conservation Measures

Background

Article VIII (paragraph 11e) of the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels, states that at its first session, the Meeting of the Parties shall:

“adopt criteria to define emergency situations that require urgent conservation measures and determine the modalities for assigning responsibility for action to be taken.”

The Interim Secretariat has prepared provisional criteria (Annex 1) for discussion and adoption at MOP1. The criteria are substantially based on those of the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) - http://www.unep-aewa.org/eng/Meeting%20of%20Parties/MOP1docs/1_8.pdf. They identify many of the possible emergency situations that may arise, and outline procedures for establishing early warning systems and tackling these situations at a national level. The Interim Secretariat has selected the AEWA criteria as a model for both the content and style of ACAP's Interim Criteria for Urgent Conservation Measures because we are aware that at least three ACAP Parties are also Parties to AEWA. Therefore, these Parties were most likely associated with its development and are familiar with this model.

An emergency situation is that where a population or populations of albatrosses and petrels are suddenly subject to much higher levels of mortality than normal. These emergency situations can arise as a result of natural phenomena, such as disease outbreaks, or as a result of human-induced disasters, such as major oil spills. International co-operation may be required to address these situations without delay.

Action Required

The Meeting of the Parties is invited to consider and adopt the criteria for emergency situations in Annex 1.

Because these criteria are being proposed in advance of the establishment of the formal Advisory Committee to the Agreement on Albatrosses and Petrels (Article IX), it is suggested that the Meeting of the Parties adopt them as interim criteria, pending consideration by the Advisory Committee at its first meeting. The Advisory Committee could be asked to formulate draft recommendations and resolutions relating to the further development, content and implementation of the criteria for consideration by Parties at MOP2.

Annex 1: Provisional guidelines on identifying and tackling emergency situations for albatross and petrel species

Summary

To identify and tackle emergency situations affecting albatross and petrel species, it is recommended that each country should take the following steps:

Step 1

Identify lead agencies, and divide tasks both nationally and internationally.

Step 2

Produce a list of possible emergency situations involving albatross and petrel species.

Step 3

Conduct a risk analysis and rank albatross and petrel species and their breeding sites and marine foraging areas according to their conservation importance and susceptibility to emergency situations.

Step 4

Identify potential risks and negotiate safety measures with appropriate industries located near, or operating in the vicinity of such sites.

Step 5

Establish a national Emergency Response Notification System.

Step 6

Identify and adopt appropriate measures to deal with emergency situations

Step 7

Adapt legislation where appropriate.

Step 8

Raise public awareness.

Identifying Emergency Situations

An emergency situation for albatross and petrel species is a situation where a sudden, unusual change takes place (or is likely to take place) in the occurrence or mortality rate of such species, or in the extent or condition of the habitats on which they depend.

It is very important to react as rapidly and publicly as possible to address and draw attention to the situation. Public awareness is of extreme importance, especially in the case of human-induced catastrophic events, because it may help to prevent similar events from happening in the future.

Emergency situations can be recognised when:

- populations of albatrosses and petrels show sudden changes in size, distribution or mortality rate;
- conditions occur which by experience are known to lead to such changes.

It is important to be able to recognise the conditions which may lead to an emergency situation as early as possible, because by the time population changes are apparent, it may be too late to take effective action.

Development of national criteria within the ACAP framework should be based specifically on the effects of an event on albatrosses and petrels. For these species, it is suggested that an event can always be classified as an emergency situation when:

- individuals of a globally threatened species are involved (these species are listed in BirdLife International's list of Globally Threatened Birds, the official Red Listing Authority for birds for the IUCN Red List).
- more than 10% of the population of a species with an unfavourable conservation status is threatened.

Step 1: Identify lead agencies, and divide tasks both nationally and internationally

Emergency situations are, by definition, unexpected, and very often call for rapid input of resources for relatively short periods of time. The respective roles of all agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, that might be involved in tackling emergency situations should be clearly defined. It is recommended that

a lead agency and/or national co-ordinator for emergency situations concerning albatross and petrel species are identified. Provisions should be put in place to ensure rapid access to the resources required to tackle situations.

Emergency situations affecting albatross and petrel species often have international dimensions. It is recommended that the national co-ordinators of countries involved in a particular emergency situation should liaise with each other and with the ACAP Secretariat. International co-ordination of measures taken in the case of an international emergency situation should rest with the ACAP Secretariat, acting on the advice of the ACAP Advisory Committee.

Step 2: Produce a list of possible emergency situations involving albatross and petrel species

Emergency situations for albatross and petrel species can be caused by human actions or by natural causes, although the distinction is not always clear.

Possible causes of emergency situations are:

- Introduction of alien species
- Human disturbance
- Avian parasites and diseases
- Fire
- Oil spills
- Chemical pollution
- Nuclear accidents
- War

The majority of these relate to factors acting on albatrosses and petrels at breeding colonies. Each factor is discussed briefly below.

Introduction of alien species

The main types of alien species that may threaten albatrosses and petrels to the point of an emergency situation are:

- alien predators (e.g. feral cats and rats); and
- alien mammals that may destroy breeding habitat (e.g. goats, rabbits).

Once an alien species has become widely established, eradication may prove to be impossible. Public awareness of the potential problems of alien species and prevention of further introductions are therefore the key issues. No alien species

should be deliberately introduced without detailed assessment of the possible consequences.

Human disturbance

At breeding areas, the presence of humans too close to nests can cause breeding failure as stressed adult birds may abandon or inadvertently crush eggs or small chicks. Tourists and researchers have the potential to create such disturbance, including through the use of vehicles such as boats and aircraft. It is recommended that guidelines on minimising or eliminating disturbance should be developed for researchers and tourists working at / visiting breeding colonies of albatrosses and petrels.

Avian parasites and diseases

Infectious diseases, such as avian pox virus and avian cholera, transmitted by fleas and ticks, can be a major cause of chick mortality. This is particularly evident in breeding colonies of Shy Albatrosses at Albatross Island (Australia), and Indian Yellow-nosed Albatrosses, and possibly the critically endangered Amsterdam Albatross, on Amsterdam Island (France). These diseases mainly affect young chicks, although some adults can be affected as well.

Fire

Fire can pose a threat to albatross and petrel habitats through destruction of appropriate nesting habitat and/or death of birds should they be nesting at the time the fire occurs.

Oil spills

The most common causes of major oil spills are accidents with ships, illegal emissions from ships, and accidents or leakages at oil plants or pipelines. Oil contamination may kill large numbers of seabirds by affecting the waterproofing of the feathers; poisoning through ingestion when preening; and affecting food resources.

Prevention of spills from ships is difficult. Legal measures, which often require international agreements, include:

- restrictions on the use of inshore shipping lanes by oil tankers;
- mandatory safety procedures;
- bans on dumping.

In the case of coastal spills, the use of detergents is often presented as a solution, but the side effects on marine food webs may be as serious as the effects of the oil spill.

Mechanical removal of oil is preferable, but this requires great human resources and may be costly, particularly on remote islands where albatrosses and petrels breed. Involvement of volunteers is important. The removal of oil involves:

- cleaning coastlines manually (e.g. with shovels);
- use of high-pressure water hoses (especially on rocky shores);
- containing inshore floating oil in inflatable devices;
- sucking up floating oil from ships (in combination with floaters).

The rehabilitation of individual oiled birds is difficult and costly, and often has poor results. Even if successful, the impact on population levels is likely to be minimal. However, such operations have good media value for raising public awareness.

Chemical pollution

Major sources of chemical pollution that may affect albatross and petrel populations are incidents and accidents (spills), situations comparable to oil spills.

Nuclear accidents

Radiation following nuclear accidents is a serious health risk for individual birds, but nothing is known about its effects at population level.

War

Where albatross and petrel sites are threatened or destroyed in war situations, records should be kept of the changes that occur, for use in possible future restoration projects.

Step 3: Rank albatross and petrel species and sites according to their susceptibility to emergency situations

Conduct a risk analysis and rank albatross and petrel species and their breeding sites and marine foraging areas according to their conservation importance and susceptibility to emergency situations.

The seriousness of an emergency situation will increase with the rarity of the species affected and the number of birds affected. It is recommended therefore that each Country prepares a national inventory of albatross and petrel species subject to ACAP, and the sites where they occur.

It is suggested that albatross and petrel sites are ranked according to their importance, taking into account factors such as the national and international status of the species present, the numbers of each species, and the total number of birds present (subject to the availability of data). Sites harbouring globally threatened species or other species or populations qualifying for single species Action/Recovery Plans should be given the highest ranking. Ranking is important if resources are insufficient to carry out risk assessments at all sites, or to include all sites in an early warning system (Step 5).

Step 4: Identify potential risks and negotiate safety measures with industries located near albatross and petrel sites

If a national site inventory has been completed, albatross and petrel sites in the vicinity of industrial or vessel activity should be identified and listed. Otherwise, local experts should be consulted for each site.

For each combination of listed site and industrial activity (e.g. oil drilling platform, major vessel traffic areas), a full analysis should be made of all possible accidents, spills, explosions, leaks etc. The relevant industries should be involved in this process.

Special attention should be given to the relative positions of the seabird site and the activity, especially with respect to direction of flow of contaminated water, as this information will be required in the design of safety measures.

Safety measures include:

- proper technical control and regular maintenance;
- guarding of sensitive areas;
- timing of activities (e.g. avoiding breeding seasons);
- construction of dikes or ditches to contain the oil or chemicals in the case of a disaster,

- careful routing of transportation routes for hazardous substances (e.g. shipping lanes for oil tankers) away from sensitive areas;
- clear definition of responsibilities for safety procedures within the industrial organisation.

Step 5: Establish a National Emergency Response Notification System

Several countries have established a central organisational structure where all oil or chemical incidents are reported, and where remedial measures are co-ordinated. It is important that all relevant information on incidents is entered into an easily accessible database for future reference and use. Emergency Response Notification Systems are particularly well developed in the USA (see below).

For most countries that are Parties to ACAP, it is suggested that a much less complicated (and less costly) structure would suffice.

Where Emergency Response Notification Systems (ERNS) already exist, these are usually environmental in a general sense, and not particularly focused on birds. It may therefore be necessary to involve a separate body to maintain records of all emergency situations involving albatrosses and petrels, and to co-ordinate actions and publicity in close co-operation with the general ERNS. This role could be undertaken by any lead agency or national coordinator established under step 1.

Step 6: Identify and adopt appropriate measures to deal with emergency situations

Based on the list of possible emergency situations involving albatrosses and petrels (step 2 above), it is recommended that the availability of information on dealing with these situations (e.g. reports of incidents, existing guidance on oil or chemical spills, scientific research and monitoring) is reviewed and guidance is prepared on dealing with situations that may arise. This guidance should be disseminated to those who may have a role in dealing with an emergency situation.

Step 7: Adapt legislation where appropriate

It is recommended that each Country undertakes a review of current legislation relevant to emergency situations that may affect albatrosses and petrels (for example relating to the regulation of activities which may cause emergency situations, and bird species protection) and amend or adapt legislation as appropriate. Legal measures can be temporary – to apply only during emergency situations - or permanent – with the aim of changing the behaviour of people or industries or requiring them to take certain precautions. Consideration should be given to the introduction of a system of fines which, in the event of future violations, can provide resources to be used in mitigation.

It is important that consideration is given to effective enforcement of existing or new legal measures relevant to emergency situations.

If changes to existing laws or new legal measures are proposed to comply with ACAP guidelines for dealing emergency situations, it is suggested that steps should be taken to promote public awareness of the reasons behind the legislation, otherwise individual countries or interest groups may feel that unnecessary measures are being imposed upon them.

Step 8: Raise public awareness

It is recommended that the press and other media should be alerted to emergency situations which may arise affecting albatrosses and petrels. If a lead agency or national co-ordinator for emergency situations is established (step 1) then consideration could be given to including a public awareness role in the remit of this organisation or individual.

Emergency situations involving seabirds should be reported to the ACAP Secretariat in a brief, standardised format. The report, which may be no more than a single page, should contain the following:

- date and duration of emergency situation;
- location;
- type of emergency situation;
- sites affected;
- species involved;
- estimated impact of emergency situation;
- measures taken;
- estimated effect of measures taken;
- organisations involved; and
- public awareness activities undertaken.