

Great British Oceans Submission to South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands Marine Protected Area Five Year Review

The five year review of the South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI) Marine Protected Area (MPA) is a major opportunity to enhance the protection of one of the UK's greatest biological assets. There were welcome advances in marine conservation around the islands in 2013, but some strong protections - including several options identified by the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI) itself - were not carried forward.

The objectives of the SGSSI MPA were set out by the GSGSSI in their management plan published in 2013 and are as follows:

- Conserve marine biodiversity, habitats and critical ecosystem function;
- Ensure that fisheries are managed sustainably, with minimal impact on associated and dependent ecosystems;
- Manage other human activities including shipping, tourism and scientific research, to minimise impacts on the marine environment;
- Protect the benthic fauna from the destructive effects of bottom trawling;
- Facilitate recovery of previously over-exploited marine species;
- Increase the resilience of the marine environment to the effects of climate change;
- Prevent the introduction of non-native marine species.

This five year MPA review consultation requests that submissions focus on the effectiveness of existing monitoring for '*evaluating the extent to which the objectives of the sustainable use MPA are met*' and invites stakeholders to '*provide any initial evidence-based assessment of the effectiveness of current management measures and advice on the degree to which evidence might support any revisions to management measures*'.

Government agencies may have collected (or have access to) key baseline data by which they have measured the progress on the objectives set. It is now the responsibility of the GSGSSI to publish the results of monitoring and provide an analysis of how this demonstrates (or otherwise) the efficacy of the existing management regime. Without an objective analysis or presentation of the data, it is difficult for external stakeholders to make a reasoned and science-based judgement on the effectiveness of existing protection measures. However, given the global importance of the islands, the potential for climate impacts and evidence of increasing human pressure, we argue that stronger and more precautionary marine protection is warranted.

Since 2012, krill catch in area 48 has shown an overall increasing trend (161,085 tonnes landed in 2012 - over 200,000 tonnes every year since then, with 260,151 tonnes landed last year), and global catches seem likely to continue on this trajectory given projected growth in the krill-based nutraceuticals market. Interest in seabed mining also continues to grow, and though the environmental impacts of this are unclear at present, the potential risks, particularly in deep sea areas and in biodiversity hot spots, warrant extreme caution. Although temperatures recently cooled around the West Antarctic Peninsula, they remain high, and the area has been one of the fastest warming parts of the planet in recent decades.

With the intensity of these anthropogenic impacts set to increase, this is a crucial time to strengthen and expand existing protections around SGSSI. To this end, and in line with the objectives of the SGSSI MPA set out by the GSGSSI, the Great British Oceans coalition is calling for:

- (1) **Reclassification of the waters around the South Sandwich Islands as a fully-protected marine sanctuary.** This marine area is near-pristine, with only limited commercial fishing effort (which generates less than five percent of total revenues for GSGSSI). It has previously been argued that these vessels provide a deterrent to Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing in the area - but this is, of course, limited to the times and areas in which the vessels operate, and advances in satellite monitoring capabilities provide a cost effective opportunity to enforce a protected area without the need for commercial exploitation¹.
- (2) **A ban on hydrocarbon and mineral extraction across the whole SGSSI maritime zone,** recognising both the risks of operating in this environment and the importance and sensitivity of the region.
- (3) **Extension of the existing 12nm fully protected areas around South Georgia** to better cover penguin foraging areas (as demonstrated by penguin foraging data collated by BirdLife International, and to be further evidenced by the project outlined below).
- (4) **Closure of Shag Rocks to pelagic fishing** as suggested by GSGSSI in the 2013 MPA proposals, but not taken forward.
- (5) **More precautionary management of the krill fishery around South Georgia,** including: extension of the temporal krill fishery closure to October-April (to cover pre-laying breeding and fledging periods of penguins); increased reporting requirements (bringing it into line with other CCAMLR fisheries); updated survey to determine krill stock status (not done for 17 years); studies to examine fine-scale population dynamics in krill - i.e. to understand the impacts of localised depletion and move towards small-scale management unit approach.

¹ See 'Project Eyes on the Seas' - satellite monitoring is being used to enforce the Ascension Island MPA <https://sa.catapult.org.uk/news-events-gallery/news/ascension-island-uses-eyes-seas-monitor-new-marine-reserve/>

Forthcoming scientific research to inform MPA management

Two forthcoming projects, conducted by the RSPB, BirdLife International and the British Antarctic Survey (BAS), and funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, will address key questions pertaining to MPA management. Given the high relevance of these projects to the SGSSI MPA, we strongly suggest that the review is able to consider the outputs of the projects, which should be available by summer 2018.

Firstly, BAS intends to track gentoo penguins (*Pygoscelis papua*) in April 2018 (after birds have completed their moult). Unlike other penguin species, gentoos are resident in South Georgia through the winter, so the extent to which the existing spatial and temporal restrictions of the krill fishery minimise overlap with foraging gentoos is unquantified. This project will address these data gaps by tracking penguins from two roosting sites adjacent to krill fishing grounds, relating this to krill fishing activity and examining penguin diet composition.

Secondly, there are no confirmed marine Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in South Georgia's waters, in spite of a wealth of seabird tracking data from the islands. BirdLife International, will undertake a project to delimit marine IBAs for seabirds and Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) for other taxa (including marine mammals), specifically looking at overlaps that highlight important areas of sea for multiple taxa.

Great British Oceans looks forward to working with the GSGSSI over the coming year in order to realise the importance of SGSSI and the potential for enhanced protection. Given the growing pressures on marine resources further south in the CCAMLR area, which ultimately affect SGSSI, the creation of a fully protected area around the South Sandwich Islands would, we believe, show leadership and catalyse international thinking on the sustainable management of marine resources, and the creation of larger marine reserves.