



Paul Carroll

Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands

Annual Report 2021



Message from the Outgoing Commissioner

His Excellency Nigel Phillips CBE



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Commissioner of SGSSI

“Unprecedented” has been a theme for so many in recent years. South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands are no exception. As we emerged from the COVID pandemic, we entered uncharted waters in CCAMLR. External factors are the reality of life in an interconnected world and whilst at times there may be little we can do to influence them, we can decide how to respond.

The guiding values set out in Protect, Sustain, Inspire (PSI) state unequivocally how the government approaches the stewardship of one of the most remarkable places on earth. We have now gone further and put in place an implementation programme – embodying our values, and a commitment to deliver, define how we meet challenges.

That commitment to deliver has resulted in some fantastic achievements over the reporting period. To highlight just a few: the Royal Research Ship Sir David Attenborough visited South Georgia, tying up alongside the specially extended wharf for the first time ever in the Territory. Fixed-wing drones were used to monitor albatross populations, and at sea we significantly enhanced our ability to monitor krill biomass. Tourism recommenced, generating a new cohort of inspired ambassadors. We kept COVID out of the Territory and all who work there today are fully vaccinated; we even administered doses on the wharf side. The maritime zone has once again enjoyed unbroken protection. We continue to operate the world’s highest scoring Marine Stewardship Council certified Toothfish fishery. Finally in this brief summation of deliverables, some five years in the formation, new legislation now better manages our borders.

None of what I have set out would be possible without the efforts of remarkable people. In this my last year as Commissioner, I want to acknowledge again just how much we value our partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders. I will not single out anyone, all are vital. I do however want to offer my particular thanks to the incredible team that is the Government of South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands. People come and go, I am no different, yet that passion that infuses all who have the privilege to administer this jewel in the crown of the United Kingdom’s Overseas Territories is, I only slightly tongue in cheek suggest, “unprecedented”.

Onward!

Environmental Protection, Evidence-Based Decision Making, Sustainability, Openness:

“The approach will be to ensure long-term sustainability”

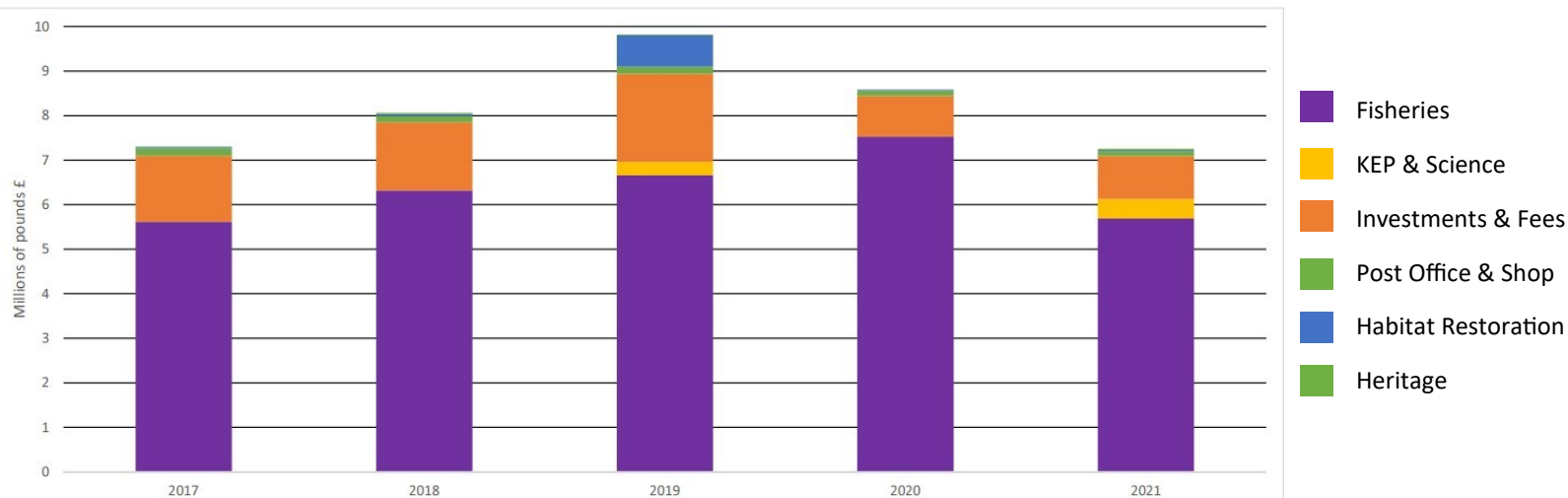
Income

The Coronavirus pandemic continued to impact heavily on the Government’s two main sources of revenue – fishing licences and tourism – during 2021. The absence of a tourism season in the 2020/21 season curtailed all forms of visitor income for the first half of the year, including landing charges, customs & harbour dues, accommodation fees and expedition permits. There were also knock-on reductions in ancillary income from Post Office shop sales and visitor administration charges.

Restrictions on international movement also caused a reduction in the number of vessels operating in the longline fishery (from 6 down to 5). This impacted the total revenue from licence fees paid to Government.

2021 proved to be a poor year for krill catches. Whilst the December 2020 forecasts for krill licence income was exceeded, estimates for ancillary income from transshipment fees were not realised. Therefore in contrast to 2020, the krill fishery did not offset reductions in tourism income.

A conservative revival in Antarctic cruise operations in late 2021 buoyed financials slightly, helped by strong collaboration between the Government, operators and IAATO on clear and consistent Covid mitigation protocols. The bottom-line impact was a loss of just under 20% of projected revenue for the year, compounded by the final payments for the upgrade to the wharf facility at King Edward Point. Thanks to prudent fiscal management by successive administrations, the Government was able to comfortably maintain operations through use of accumulated reserves.



Environmental Protection, Evidence-Based Decision Making, Sustainability, Openness:

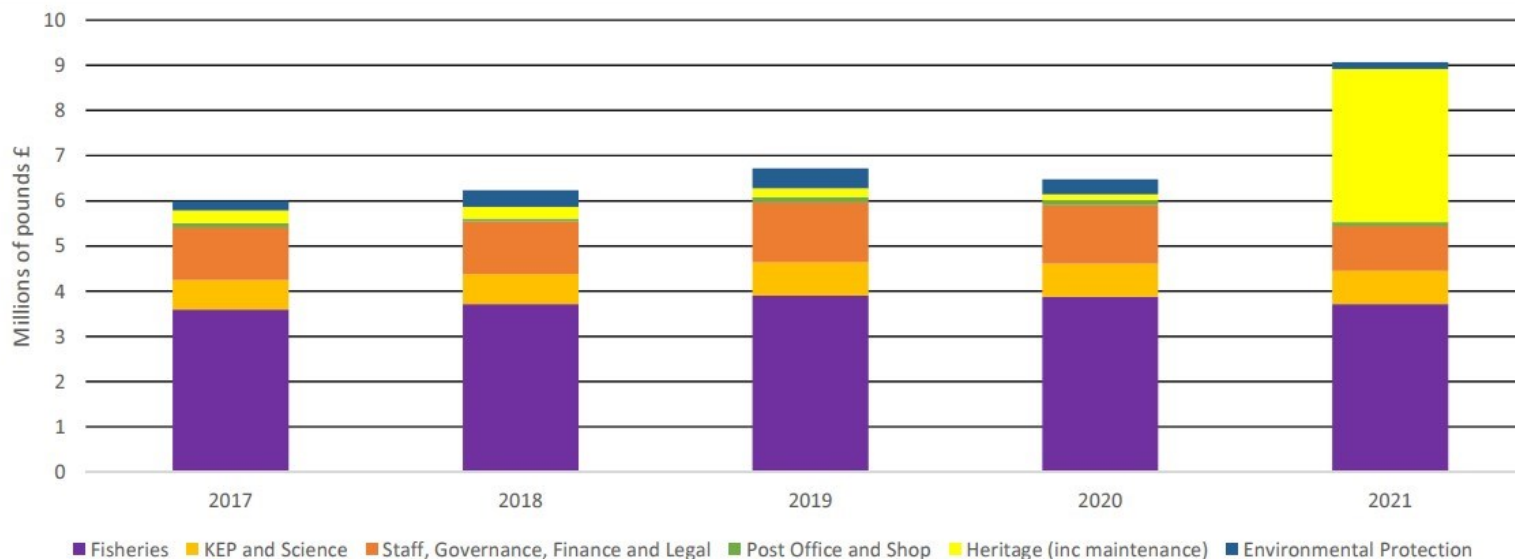
“The approach will be to ensure long-term sustainability”

Expenditure

Against the backdrop of a significant reduction to our income stream, the Government moved at the mid-year point to reduce operating expenditure whilst still upholding the highest standards of environmental management. Spend connected with marine science, long-term population monitoring work, invasive non-native species management, biosecurity and fisheries patrol was maintained at projected levels through to the year-end. Conversely, maintenance of the buildings and staff accommodation at KEP and Grytviken was scaled-back to the minimum level required to sustain operational delivery and to meet our contractual obligations, resulting in savings on staff salaries, materials and transport costs.

International restrictions on movement reenforced a de-facto position of a moratorium on in-person attendance at overseas events and conferences, and the 2021 Stakeholder meeting took place virtually.

The Government’s main area of spend remained the operation of a dedicated fisheries patrol vessel in the Marine Protected Area. Variations in the price of fuel remained relatively stable through to the end of the year, limiting costs. The redevelopment of the Wharf at KEP was mostly completed, with a small amount of remedial work to fenders on the jetty forecast to take place in 2022.



Marine Protection

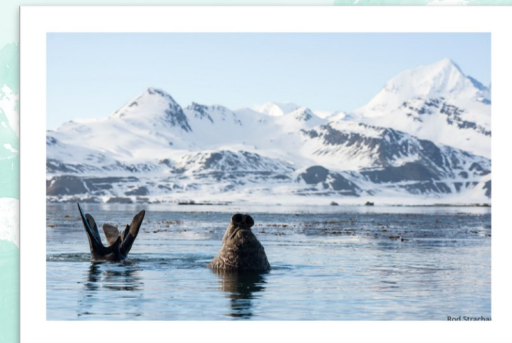
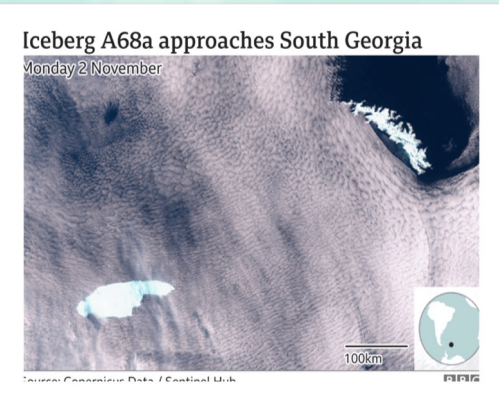
“To set an exceptional standard for management of our marine environment, underpinned by robust science”

In April 2021 the eyes of the world turned toward South Georgia to follow the movement of the A68 ‘megaberg’ iceberg that had calved from Antarctica. With a surface area of 5,800km² it remains one of the largest icebergs ever recorded, with satellite imagery showing it to be larger than South Georgia itself. There was considerable concern around potential impacts on the ecosystem, in particular penguin colonies, and BAS scientists, supported by GSGSSI and the UK Government Blue Belt programme deployed autonomous gliders to take oceanographic measurements in the region. An RAF maritime patrol flight from British Forces South Atlantic complimented this with overhead images. In mid 2021, A68 grounded and then rapidly broke up, before reaching the island itself.

The ongoing pandemic caused continued challenges to the operation of the South Georgia fisheries in 2021. Travel restrictions, prolonged quarantine periods, and enhanced precautionary measures were all approached with ingenuity and professionalism from the fishing industry and Government staff. The stringent management measures that have defined the SGSSI fisheries for many years were maintained, result in zero seabird bycatch in the toothfish fishery and zero cases of Covid-19 were reported on any fishing vessels in the South Georgia fleets.

2021 saw 2 vessels participate in the South Sandwich Islands (48.4) fishery, continuing the valuable, long-term research and monitoring work on both Patagonian and Antarctic toothfish in that region.

2021 was the final year of a 4-year licensing period for the South Georgia (48.3) Patagonian toothfish fishery. Only five or the six licensed vessels fished in 2021, but the move from a 2-year to a 4-year licence period demonstrably raised standards in the fleet, increasing compliance, and reducing the administrative burden on industry and the Government. Increased investment in both vessels and scientific capability look promising, however the failure to agree a catch-limit for the toothfish fishery at CCAMLR40 makes the outcome of the next licensing round difficult to predict. Whilst seven vessels were licensed to fish for krill, catch rates for 2021 were negligible. Two of the licensed fishing vessels carried out acoustic transects as part of a new programme to monitor krill around South Georgia, to be followed in 2022 with the installation of Darwin Plus funded echosounders to the Pharos SG to complete multi-year winter acoustic transects to learn more about krill abundance.



Building Future Resilience

“To meet the long term infrastructure and development requirements in a changing climate”

Grytviken

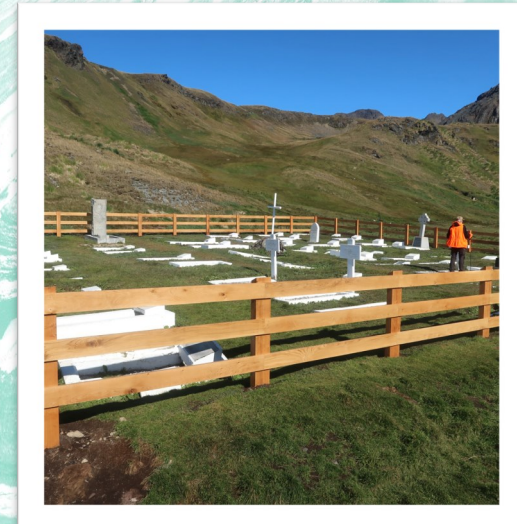
Despite the restrictions caused by the government’s response to the global pandemic, including a reduced building team in the early part of the 2021/22 season, a number of works were nevertheless undertaken at Grytviken. These included the continuation of the Museum re-wire, scheduled for completion in 2022 and the completion of the replacement of the Grytviken cemetery fence. The oak that had been curing since its delivery in 2019 was finally machined, installed and oiled over a period of 91 days.

Thanks to grant funding from the FCDO, an investigation into the feasibility of an additional micro turbine at Bore Valley was carried out. This exercise should lead to the installation of additional renewables over the next few years, removing the need to import additional fuel to heat buildings at Grytviken. In late 2021, during a visit by the Antarctic Patrol Vessel *HMS Protector*, a number of embarked crew assisted with the transportation of building materials to Maivikken Hut to allow the restoration of the structure in early 2022.

King Edward Point

The global pandemic dominated the government’s activities during 2021, with the teams at King Edward point separated for the majority of the winter months into discreet “bubbles” to minimise the impact of cross-infection in the event that the virus arrived in South Georgia. Nevertheless, the redevelopment of the new Wharf and Dolphin continued with only snagging and some additional fendering work remaining. The facility is now ready for the first call of the *RRS Sir David Attenborough* during her maiden voyage to the Antarctic in early 2022.

The upgrade to the VSAT communications system also progressed during both seasons, with installation of the new dish and dome due for completion by early 2022. This will bring a much-needed boost to internet connectivity on South Georgia, which will benefit the resident teams both personally and professionally.



Local Science, Global Impact

“To foster science and research that takes advantage of the opportunity afforded by SGSSI’s distinctive location”

After a reduced number of applications the previous year, 60 Regulated Activity Permits were issued in 2021 There were a high number of Darwin Plus funded project supported in the Territory including:

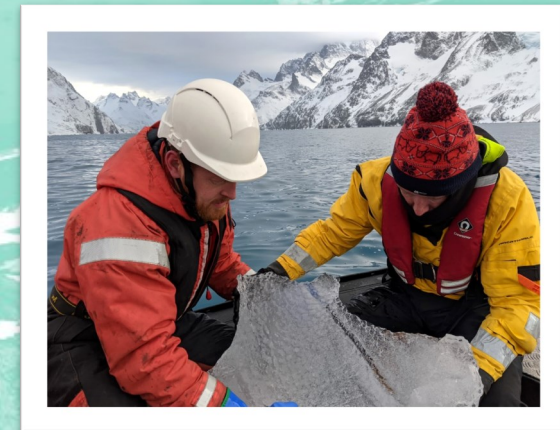
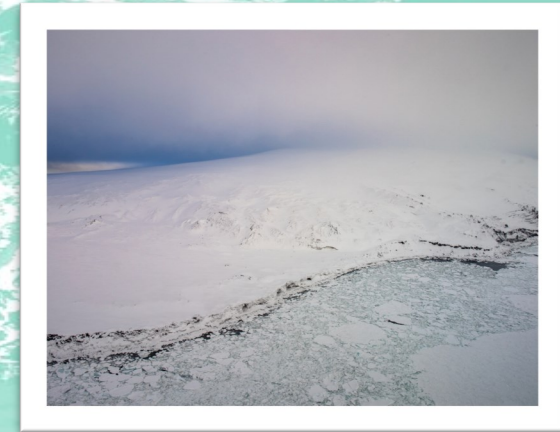
- ◆ A project led by the British Antarctic Survey, and supported from Pharos SG, to track albatross which, in combination with habitat preference models and fisheries data, will allow quantification of spatiotemporal overlap and help target better seabird by-catch mitigation measures
- ◆ A Marine Biodiversity Research cruise on board Pharos SG which successfully undertook algal and faunal biodiversity research in the intertidal and nearshore environment as well as undertaking oceanographic measurements in fjords along the north coast of South Georgia
- ◆ The first season of a Darwin funded project which used fixed wing drones to collect high resolution data of seabird and seal breeding sites and create digital elevation models for the sites to aid future monitoring.

British Antarctic Survey scientists at King Edward Point have continued to support GSGSSI’s understanding of the marine and terrestrial ecosystems in the Territory, under the auspices of the joint King Edward Point Project. In 2021, the BAS team were supplemented by scientists from a range of institutions including the University of Durham, Natural History Museum, South Atlantic Environmental Research Institute, and others to undertake research on seaweed, invertebrates and plants. Funding for these research visits were provided from a variety of sources, including Darwin Plus, the UK Overseas Territories biodiversity challenge fund.

In 2021 the KEP Project acquired two Mavic Pro fixed-wing drones. The potential for drones to be used for regular monitoring of land-based predators, and for extending monitoring to new areas and species, continues to be explored by GSGSSI and BAS to extend the range of monitoring whilst minimising disturbance to wildlife and the risk to humans from shore landings.

Seven academic papers have been published from KEP-related science, with five more expected before the end of 2022.

The 2021 South Georgia Groundfish survey consisted of seventy-seven completed trawls, and the estimated biomass of mackerel icefish was the lowest in the series. Catches of juvenile toothfish were good, with the majority being 40-50 cm TL (age 4+).



Local Science, Global Impact

“To foster science and research that takes advantage of the opportunity afforded by SGSSI’s distinctive location”

Monitoring of the krill-based ecosystem continued throughout 2021. Krill was in short supply during winter, with little sign in plankton samples or predator diets. Consequently, there was a slow start to breeding for gentoo penguins and fur seals and the numbers breeding were lower than average. There was evidence of an influx of krill in October, with krill appearing in Cumberland Bay plankton and in predator diets.

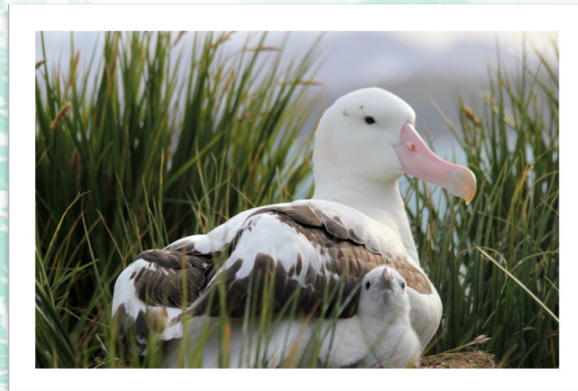
During winter, seals were in poor condition and numerous aborted fetuses were seen, including four confirmed in August, four in September and two in October. There was also adult mortality, with a few emaciated dead adults found on the beaches. The poor condition of seals was attributed to a lack of krill during winter and spring.

Elephant seal numbers and breeding success was high in King Edward Cove and numbers of breeding giant petrels increased at the study sites.

The Prion Island wandering albatross fledgling census was conducted in October 2021. There were 24 surviving fledglings, with two chicks having failed since the March and April hatching surveys. This included a UAV (drone) survey, piloted from the beach, to minimise disturbance.

The 2021 nesting census will be undertaken slightly later than usual, in January 2022, with a hatching census following in March 2022.

To the delight of residents and visitors alike, from December 2021 humpback whales were regularly spotted in Cumberland Bay, with photos collected for photographic identification.



Facilitating Sustainable Visits

“To put sustainability at the heart of every visit and inspire future ambassadors for the Territory”

The 2021-2022 tourism season marked a tentative return of cruise ships to South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands. Fewer vessels visited, and visitor numbers were down markedly from pre-pandemic levels, as vessels were not operating at full capacity. In total 11,829 people visited South Georgia, which includes cruise ship passengers, crew, expedition staff and yacht visitors. This is circa half the number seen in the 2019-20 season.

With a constantly evolving global response to the pandemic, several vessels changed their itineraries or cancelled visits at short notice. Those that did arrive were given a COVID-19 risk rating; Red for vessels with active COVID-19 cases on board, Green for vessels that met strict vaccination and/or minimum time at sea requirements, and Amber for those vessels that did not fulfil the Green criteria.

Despite the constraints of COVID-19 mitigation requirements, the government maintained a commitment to the highest standards of visitor management, with all Expedition Leaders still required to complete, and pass, an online briefing prior to arrival. Biosecurity self-audits remained a requirement, with government Officers boarding Green vessels to carry out compliance spot-checks. Only 3.5% of audits recorded biosecurity failures, an improvement on 4.5% in the season 2019-20.

In the period July 2021-June 2022, a total of 5,374 cruise ship passengers came ashore via 27 cruise ships, compared to 12,521 passengers via 78 cruise ships in the 2019-20 season. In addition, there were seven visits from yachts, which includes two trips by S/V Australis, with a combined total of 54 passengers and crew. Whilst some private yachts visited, the majority of smaller vessels were chartered by film crews.

Cruise ship passengers represented 64 different nationalities, with the top ten nationalities accounting for 92% of the overall passenger numbers. There have been changes in the demographics seen at South Georgia, which reflect the different national approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic. China, New Zealand and Austria were no longer represented in the top ten. Replacing them were visitors from Venezuela, the Netherlands and Israel.

Cruise ships visited a total of 61 visitor sites. The activities undertaken in popular order were small boat landings, boat cruising, ship cruising and extended walks. Boat landings by Zodiac recorded the highest activity number with 19,965 passengers landing at 27 visitor sites. Despite the challenges of operating as a visitor site during a global pandemic, Grytviken nevertheless hosted a very successful wedding in 2021.



Accessing Cultural Heritage

“To conserve, share and extend remote access to cultural Heritage”

Post Office & Philatelic

The government continues to run 2 post offices, one at King Edward Point (KEP) open all year round for personnel stationed at KEP, and one in the Slop Chest at Grytviken which is open for visitors during the summer season. The production and distribution of stamps remains an integral method of outreach for the Territory, and 4 new stamp series were launched in 2021:

- *Blue Belt Programme*

This was a cross territory issue celebrating the achievements of the UK Blue Belt initiative. It also highlights some of the key elements of the SGSSI MPA, including a sustainable toothfish fishery, compliance and enforcement through the fisheries patrol vessel *Pharos SG*, and actions to protect marine biodiversity including benthos and penguin species.

- *95th Birthday of Her Majesty the Queen*

These stamps highlighted the key aspects of Her Majesty’s life, from a young Princess, to her Coronation and Marriage, as well as aspects of her life enjoying leisure time and undertaking her Royal duties.

- *Southern Thule*

This was the first of a four-part series featuring the group islands of the South Sandwich Islands, focusing on the most southerly island group, Southern Thule. This series showcased the islands of: Bellingshausen, Cook and Thule. Each island is represented by a pair of stamps; one features an example of the wildlife that occurs there and the other a striking landscape feature.

- *Ecosystems in Recovery — Whales*

This set featured the southern right, hump back and Antarctic blue whale showcasing some of the fantastic research of the British Antarctic Survey “Wild Water Whales” project which is helping the government and others better understand and protect these majestic species.



Enhancing Relationships

“To inspire learning, partnership, collaboration and success”

Protect, Sustain, Inspire.

In March 2021, published its 5-Year Values Framework: **Protect, Sustain, Inspire.**

Following on from this, and with the appointment of a new Director of Strategy & Policy, fresh governance structures and processes were brought on line during 2021 to deliver on a commitment to increased openness and evidence-led decision making. An increasing volume of material relating to policy making and decision making is now available on the gov.gs website – with the government committing to open-access for all data arising from research & monitoring in the Territory by 2026. An implementation plan with specific milestones and success criteria will be published in 2022.

In tandem with a root-and-branch review of internal policies (with a completion date of 2023), the government began an ambitious project to research and publish the entire corpus of SGSSI law in a publicly accessible format by the end of 2022. Increased understanding of domestic legislation has led to new policies for the issuance of amateur radio licenses, scattering of ashes in the territory, open access to data, and Covid-19 protocols for visiting vessels being published in the latter part of the year.

In order to meet the government’s commitment to facilitating sustainable visits, in late 2021 new immigration legislation – the Entry Control Ordinance (ECO) – was completed, a culmination of 5 years of effort by successive administrations. Consultation on the provisions of the new law continue into 2022. The Government also continued along the Pathway to Protection to designate a Specially Protected Area covering the landmass of the Territory, to compliment the Marine Protected Area. An advisory group was constituted, with the target of delivering terrestrial protections in SGSSI by the end of 2022.

To embrace the opportunities to connect SGSSI digitally with the rest of the world, the Government implemented wide-ranging upgrades to IT and digital capability, both on South Georgia and in the Falkland Islands, to compliment the upgrades to VSAT infrastructure at King Edward Point. The vast majority of administrative processes in the Territory are now undertaken electronically, with invoices issued digitally and data held on a secure database administered by BAS. As a bonus, members of the government team at KEP were able to join the 2021 Stakeholders event virtually for the very first time.



Biosecurity

“To protect ecosystems through active management and monitoring”

Non-Native Invasive Plants

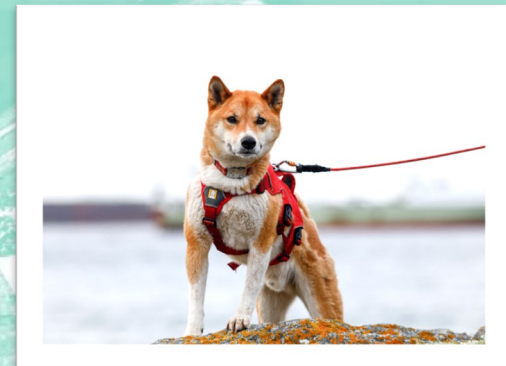
Following a reduced field season in 2020/21 due to Covid -19 restrictions, in late 2021 the non-native plant management team returned to the island to continue control work. Highlights of the season included:

- ◆ 3262 square metres of Class One species were treated this year, 2508 sq m of that being *Rumex acetosella*.
- ◆ 8950 square metres of Class Two species were treated this season.
- ◆ 41 management units were visited this season for both control and surveys
- ◆ One new Class One species was discovered this season—*Juncus effusus*—at Maivikken. There have been no previous records for this species on South Georgia.
- ◆ Six Class One species have been reclassified to Historic Class meaning there are 35 species (Class One) that are managed on a zero-population density basis. These are plants which may be present, but are controlled before they set seed.
- ◆ There are now 84 non-native plant species recorded from South Georgia. Of these, 39 species are historic and presumed extinct, 3 are widespread and naturalised; and 5 are common locally.
- ◆ Two research species require more information to classify.

Biosecurity Dog Programme

With stringent Covid-19 protocols in-force in the Falkland Islands along with significantly reduced tourism traffic in the first half of the year, the dog team primarily undertook searches of the licensed longline and krill fishing fleets, as well as the *Pharos SG* and local cargo vessels in the Falkland Islands.

In the latter half of the year, the team deployed to South Georgia and arrived at King Edward Point on New Years Eve, primarily to search vessels arriving within the Territory following a resumption of tourist visits. The team also tested the feasibility of using dogs in a post-border context as part of the government’s rodent incursion response planning. At the end of this season, the government intends to recruiting at least one additional dogs and an additional part-time handler to the team to ensure sufficient resilience with the projected upturn in tourism traffic to the Territory.



The Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands Staff Structure—December 2021



Non-Native Invasive Plant Team

CEFAS Fisheries Science Team

Fisheries Patrol Vessel & Crew

Biosecurity Dog Team