

Tristan da Cunha Biodiversity Project

The main objective of this project is to increase local people's control, ownership and involvement in implementing the Convention on Biological Diversity in Tristan da Cunha. At the suggestion of the then Chief Islander, James Glass, the project was set up as a partnership between the Tristan Island Government and the RSPB. The funding is from the UK Darwin Initiative, and the project started in May 2003 and finishes in April 2006.

The main aim of the project is to produce a biodiversity action plan for Tristan da Cunha, which has the backing and support of all the islanders. A socio-economic study of Tristan has been carried out to ensure that local priorities and concerns are taken into account when the biodiversity action plan is drawn up. The plan is being written on Tristan, with many islanders actively involved in its production. It is recognised that many of the conservation projects identified in the plan will require funding and expertise from elsewhere, but at the end of the project Tristan will have increased capacity to manage and provide staff for such projects.

The islands of Tristan da Cunha have a unique assemblage of flora and fauna, much of which has been studied only relatively recently. The offshore islands of Gough and Inaccessible are perhaps best known as two of the world's most important seabird breeding sites, and much of the conservation work in Tristan has concentrated on these two islands. The main island of Tristan is one of the few of the subantarctic islands that are inhabited, with a population of about 300. A large part of the project involves carrying out survey work on the islands of Tristan and nearby Nightingale to bring the level of knowledge of these islands up to that of Inaccessible and Gough.

The project is being managed by collaboration between RSPB project staff and the Tristan Natural Resources Department. A team of twelve Tristan Island Government employees are working with the project, seconded from their jobs as necessary. At the end of the project this team will have trained in several aspects of biological fieldwork, so that for any future conservation project on Tristan there will be qualified personnel available on Tristan.

The fieldwork aspect of the project to date has concentrated on producing habitat maps for Tristan and Nightingale, mapping the distribution of alien species, seal population surveys and seabird monitoring. For the second field season the seabird and seal work has been continued, but in addition some marine survey work, in particular seaweed sampling, has been carried out. An entomologist will join the team for the next three months to make collections of invertebrates from Tristan and Nightingale.

One of the main threats to the wildlife of Tristan is introduced species, and the project will look at ways of controlling the species that are already here, and investigate methods of

preventing further alien introductions. The first major study of the flora and fauna of Tristan was carried out on a Norwegian expedition in 1938/39. Comparing back to the papers written then, it is becoming apparent that there have been a considerable number of alien species colonising since then, particularly from South Africa. Rats were introduced to Tristan in the late 19th century, and these are continuing to cause declines in the breeding seabird population of Tristan. The project has discovered that numbers of several seabird species have declined in the last two decades.

There has been a very positive attitude to the project on Tristan – many islanders have worked with the project or have been involved in some way. The project hopes to link Tristan with overseas agencies and organisations, particularly in the UK and South Africa, so that further collaborative projects like this can take place, and there is much enthusiasm in Tristan to be involved in future conservation projects.

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