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Action to reduce the impacts of invasive species on the South Atlantic United Kingdom Overseas Territories



ABOUT THE PROJECT

Invasive species are a problem for all of the South Atlantic Territories. They affect livelihoods, lifestyles and endemic biodiversity. Each of the South Atlantic Territories has unique values that may be threatened by the arrival of new non-native species, and by the impacts of those species that have already arrived.

A project proposal submitted to the European Commission's European Development Fund (EDF-9), was awarded funding of some 1,900,000 euros over three years. The project began in December 2006, and will finish at the end of November 2009. The RSPB is managing the project's implementation in the five Territories concerned – the Falklands, St Helena, Ascension, Tristan da Cunha and South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

Below: An albatross soars over Tristan waters. The nesting sites of many seabirds in the Territories are threatened by invasive species: problems range from rodents eating chicks and eggs to plants encroaching on nest sites.

The objectives of the project are:

Overall: To conserve native biodiversity and therefore enhance economic prosperity and quality of life for people living on the South Atlantic UK Overseas Territories.

Specific: To develop regional capacity to reduce the threat that invasive species pose to the native biodiversity of the South Atlantic UK Overseas Territories.

The project works with local communities and stakeholders on the South Atlantic Territories to focus on those issues that people feel are most important and have the highest current or potential impacts. A multi-disciplinary approach is needed to address issues in areas such as policy, infrastructure, capacity-building and training, as well as practical surveys and control activities.

The focus of the project will vary in each Territory according to specific needs. The descriptions overleaf illustrate the diversity of the Territories and their problems with invasive species.





Above: Raymond Benjamin and Stedson Stroud work in the endemic plant nursery on Ascension. Many endemic plants are threatened by more vigorous introduced invasive plants, as well as by grazing mammals.

Below: Location of the UK Overseas Territories in the South Atlantic



ASCENSION

Ascension Island is no stranger to invasive species issues – in 2006, the island was declared “feral cat free.” Post-eradication, Ascension’s seabirds have started to re-colonise the mainland, freed from the pressure of intense cat predation.

However, new threats continue to arise. Mexican thorn (*Prosopis julifera*) is spreading over most habitats on the island, and may lead to degradation of volcanic features, make seabird nesting habitat unusable and prevent turtles from nesting as it encroaches on beaches. Other problems on Ascension include a suite of other introduced plants (including *Lantana camara*, *Paspalum conjugatum*, *Heliotropium curassavicum*) that are out-competing threatened endemic species on Green Mountain. Rabbits, rats and myna birds are also having unknown impacts.

In the first 18 months of project operation, actions on Ascension have included supply of equipment and training to combat some of the invasive plants; and assessment of rabbit numbers and training for Ascension staff in rabbit survey techniques. Future work may include developing education materials; assessing rat impacts on seabirds; carrying out botanical surveys island-wide to assess the distribution of introduced plants; and assessing the effectiveness of current Ascension legislation in preventing introduction of further invasive species.

ST HELENA

St Helena was discovered in 1502, and the introduction of invasive species began almost immediately with the release of goats to provide food for visiting ships. Rats, mice, livestock and various plant species have had a devastating effect on St Helena’s endemic species, and continue to do so – the St Helena Olive became extinct only in 2004.

Invasive species are having an impact on many aspects of life on St Helena, including agriculture, recreation and way of life. Plants such as whiteweed (*Eupatorium pallescens/Austroeupatorium inulifolium*), bilberry (*Solanum mauritanum*) and gorse or furze (*Ulex europaeus*) encroach on pasture and necessitate expensive management. Conservation and restoration efforts in the national park are being complicated by the need to remove invasive plants prior to replanting with native species, and prevent the return of invasive plants into restored areas.

Right: Fishing boats on Tristan: fishing is a significant part of most South Atlantic Territory economies. Invasive marine species could devastate fisheries, with flow-on effects through these small communities.

In the first 18 months of project operation on St Helena, actions have included starting an island-wide botanical survey with the aim of determining the distribution of all invasive plant species. Future work will include the development and implementation of management plans for key invasive plant species; working with landowners to improve pasture management; and the development of education materials and support for government in improving nursery production of endemic plants, to facilitate restoration and prevent re-colonisation by invasive species.

TRISTAN DA CUNHA

Tristan da Cunha is the world's most isolated inhabited island – it requires six-day boat trip, usually from Cape Town, to get there. The 300 Tristanians are rightfully proud of their islands and their unique biodiversity.

Unfortunately, the impacts of invasive species have reached even this remote corner of the world. Mice (*Mus musculus*) on Gough Island have been observed eating live albatross and petrel chicks of several species. On Tristan, mice and rats are affecting wildlife and livelihoods. If rats and/or mice ever reached the rodent-free islands of Inaccessible and Nightingale the impacts would be devastating. Introduced plants have become problematic more recently, and are starting to affect crops and become naturalised in some sensitive areas.

To-date, project activities on Tristan have included supply of equipment for control of invasive plants; provision of equipment and advice on improving rodent control on Tristan, and on preventing establishment of rodents on Nightingale or Inaccessible; and support for introduced plant surveys. In the future, there will be investment in training for Tristan conservation staff, development of education and training materials, and development of a quarantine manual.

THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

The Falklands is the largest of the South Atlantic Territories in terms of its land area – some 12,173 km². There are around 700 islands in the archipelago, most with some assemblages of introduced species. Most land is privately owned, and landowners take a variety of approaches to dealing with invasive species.

Mammalian predators (rats, cats, foxes) have caused problems on many islands in the Falklands, and in its first 18 months, the project has supported purchase of equipment and transport for projects related to fox and rat eradications. Actions have also been undertaken to investigate methods of control for calafate (*Berberis buxifolia*), and to control thistles and European ragwort. Surveys of the distribution of introduced plants are ongoing, and will continue throughout the project. Other future actions will include a workshop related to rat eradications; training for border staff; development of education materials; and further support for practical eradication and control projects targeting introduced mammals.

SOUTH GEORGIA

South Georgia is probably best known for glaciers, penguins and albatrosses. It has a spectacular landscape, and is visited by tourists from around the world who marvel at its history and wildlife. However, rats (*Rattus norvegicus*), introduced reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) and various introduced plant species do appear to be having negative impacts on South Georgia, and as climate change continues to warm the islands, these impacts are predicted to increase. Already, biologists who have a long association with South Georgia have remarked on the increased distribution of some plant species.

A programme to eradicate wavy-leaved bittercress (*Cardamine flexuosa*) at King Edward Point has been started, and this will continue throughout the project. A survey of other introduced plants and invertebrates will be undertaken in the coming months, together with an analysis of which are likely to become invasive in the future. Improvements to quarantine systems are also planned.



COMMON GROUND

All of the South Atlantic UK Overseas Territories are unique and have distinct problems related to invasive species, but they have several features in common.

- All have small populations, and a corresponding shortage of trained personnel to undertake work on invasive species.
- All are isolated – though travelling times range from a fairly short flight from Chile to the Falklands to a minimum of six days on a boat to get to Tristan da Cunha.
- All have economies centred on one or two main areas that depend heavily on the environment (eg fisheries, tourism).

Through action plans designed in consultation with stakeholders, this project will reduce the current effects of invasive species in the Territories and help to prevent future impacts occurring. For all of the Territories concerned the long-term outcomes will include:

- a regional invasive species strategy
- a regional early warning system
- a programme of education, awareness raising and training activities.

This should enable the development of regional skills and networks, and enhanced capacity for the Territories to address invasive species issues and avoid ongoing or increased impacts on biodiversity and the unique communities of these islands.

Right: Plants such as thistles and calafate encroach on agricultural land and require ongoing management to reduce economic impacts.



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