

The Falkland Islands Foundation

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The author, who is The Honorary Secretary of the Foundation, describes its aims and achievements.

While penguin watching one summer's afternoon on New Island in 1979, Sir Peter Scott, Richard and Maisie Fitter, Ian and Maria Strange (owners of half of New Island) and Michael Wright of World Wildlife Fund—US, decided to form a charitable organisation through which efforts to protect the Falklands' unique wildlife and maritime heritage could be channelled. The result of their inspiration was the Falkland Islands Foundation of which Sir Peter became chairman. At the time, of course, nobody had any idea that the Falkland Islands would soon become an international battle ground and that threats to wildlife would take on a new intensity, but in retrospect the establishment of the Foundation could hardly have been more timely. The events of 1982, which rudely transformed the Falklands from a peaceful agricultural backwater into a bustling military stronghold, miraculously caused minimal direct damage to wildlife but greatly increased the need for urgent conservation measures to ensure that the spectacular breeding colonies of penguins and albatrosses, and the rest of the Islands' fauna and flora, still exist for future generations to enjoy.

The most pressing conservation need is education. With several thousand troops stationed in the Falklands, together with a workforce of 1500 civilians recently arrived from the UK to build a new airport, the potential for damage is considerable. Many of the birds are extremely tame, and the fact that they can be approached without difficulty also means that

they can easily be disturbed. The military authorities have gone to great lengths to reduce the risk of disturbance by imposing conservation regulations which apply to all military personnel, and they have appointed a Conservation Officer to see that the regulations are properly enforced. Their task is not an easy one since a soldier's tour of duty seldom exceeds five months and as soon as one batch have learned to appreciate and respect wildlife another group arrives. To give an example of the problems this can cause, the only sizeable king penguin colony in the Falklands, which consists of about 200 birds and is an important tourist attraction, was badly disturbed by excessive helicopter visits in July–September 1982. Calm was restored after an almost total ban on visits had been imposed, but shooting in the vicinity of the colony by a newly arrived group of soldiers in July 1983 again caused a serious disturbance.

Cindy Buxton, a Trustee of the Foundation, has supplied the Ministry of Defence with a film of Falklands' wildlife which carefully explains the 'dos' and 'don'ts' and is shown to all military personnel before they arrive in the Falklands. In addition the Foundation is working with the Ministry of Defence to produce wildlife posters to publicise the army's conservation regulations. The Foundation has also supplied the schools with sample educational leaflets on various species, and if these prove to be popular a broader range of educational materials will be provided.

Another priority of the Foundation is to undertake an ecological survey of the Falklands and thereby establish a 'data base' of the sea-bird colonies, seal rookeries, tussock islands, fish and other

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components of the Falklands' ecosystems. Surprisingly little information of this kind is available, and the Foundation is anxious to get the work done before some of the development schemes being suggested are put into action. As Ian Strange points out in his article (see page 21), subdivision of the larger farms may have important social and economic benefits but could also increase grazing pressure on tussock islands which have previously been untouched or only lightly grazed. It is imperative to identify islands of special conservation importance as soon as possible so that appropriate conservation measures can be taken before they are over-grazed. Equally, it is vital to ascertain the sustainable yield of marine fisheries before a major fishing industry is developed and before, as has happened to most of the world's fisheries, over-exploitation has become the norm. The Falkland Islands present a unique opportunity to ensure that conservation and development progress hand in hand, but this cannot happen until a reliable 'data base' of the principal living natural resources has been compiled. A comprehensive ecological survey will be expensive and will take a long time to carry out, and the Foundation is concentrating on surveys of seals and sea-lions, birds and vegetation as a first priority.

The Foundation does not intend to become a major landholder in the Falklands but it will attempt to raise money to purchase or lease particularly valuable wildlife habitats that are under some degree of threat if the opportunity arises and if this is the best way to safeguard their future protection. Were changes ever to be made to the existing arrangements over sovereignty, wildlife habitats owned by a conservation organisation may stand a better chance of being protected than land owned by the Falkland Islands Government or by a private individual or company. The Foundation already manages the Twins off Carcass Island and seven small islands off New Island on behalf of the Royal Society for Nature Conservation and is in the process of becoming outright owner of these islands.

A less tangible, but nevertheless important, role played by the Foundation is as a source of advice and information. Its Trustees, Vice-Presidents

and Advisory Council comprise an impressive network of experienced conservationists and scientific experts on matters relating to the Falklands which can be tapped at short notice. When, for example, the Government announced its plans to build new harbour facilities at East Cove in order to service the new airport at March Ridge, the Foundation was able, within a few days, to provide the Government with information on fauna and flora in the area. Of particular interest is a rare fern, a moonwort *Botrychium dusenii*, which occurs on nearby Bertha's Beach. The Foundation requested the Government to commission an ecologist to visit the airport site in order to advise on how engineering designs and operational procedures should be adjusted in order to minimise damage to wildlife and wildlife habitats as far as practicable. Suddenly aware that the area had an interesting natural history, the Government agreed and environmental damage caused by the project will hopefully now be less than it might otherwise have been.

Mention should also be made of the Falkland Islands Trust, a local conservation organisation based in Port Stanley which is closely linked to the Foundation. Under the Chairmanship of Tom Davies, an agronomist with the Grasslands Trials Unit, the Trust performs a vital function because it has eyes and ears close to the ground and forms a point of local contact with the military and the Falkland Islands Government. The Conservation Officer, for example, looks to the Trust to provide him with information on violations of the army's conservation regulations, and the Trust will assist the foundation in managing land that is acquired for conservation purposes.

World Wildlife Fund—UK kindly provide office facilities for the Foundation. Their help is invaluable, but funds are desperately needed to finance conservation projects. The Foundation is a membership organisation and for ten pounds a year members receive a newsletter which is normally published every six months. Any contributions will be extremely welcome and should be sent to the Falkland Islands Foundation, c/o World Wildlife Fund—UK, Panda House, 11–13 Ockford Road, Godalming, Surrey GU7 1QU (Tel: 04868-20551).