Important Bird Areas and Antarctic Specially Protected Areas: Toward the development of selection criteria

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Summary

In 2015 the ATCM endorsed a report listing 204 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) across Antarctica and offshore islands south of 60o South. In doing so the ATCM adopted Resolution 5 (2015), which requested the CEP update the ATCM on which IBAs were or should be included in the series of Antarctic Specially Protected Areas (ASPAs).

This paper summarises intersessional discussions on selection criteria that might be applied to identified IBAs or other bird areas when considering ASPA designation.

Further work is required to refine and test the criteria to ensure that they provide a scientifically defensible approach to selecting IBAs or other colonies or aggregations[[1]](#footnote-1) that may merit consideration for ASPA designation. To support this, consultation with SCAR and other scientific experts is proposed. It is also recommended that consideration is given as to how further development of these criteria could support the CEP’s ongoing work to systematically develop the Antarctic protected area system.

The information presented in this Working Paper is supplemented by Information Paper 23.

Introduction

Important Bird Areas and Antarctica

The IBA programme was established by BirdLife International to identify sites of international conservation significance for the world’s birds. More than 12,000 IBAs in over 200 countries have been documented and delineated. The term ‘IBA’ is not a formal designation and does not imply that the site should necessarily become a protected area. It is simply an indication of the significance of a site for a single bird species or colonies or aggregation of birds[[2]](#footnote-2).

Between 2013 and 2015, with support from the Governments of Australia, New Zealand, Norway and the United States, and the Pew Charitable Trusts, work was undertaken to develop a list of IBAs for Antarctica using a standardized set of data-driven criteria and thresholds. The analysis resulted in 204 IBAs being identified across Antarctica and offshore islands south of 60o South.

The ‘Important Bird Areas in Antarctica’ report was presented to the 18th meeting of the CEP (ATCM XXXVII/WP 40) with the recommendation that the identified IBAs be endorsed. On the advice of the CEP, the ATCM welcomed the report and adopted Resolution 5 (2015) which recommended that Governments:

* welcome and acknowledge the report on identified IBAs in Antarctica, which covers breeding sites;
* bring the report to the attention of the Secretariat of the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels for its consideration including in the preparation of environmental impact assessments;
* take account of the information in the report in the planning and conduct of their activities in Antarctica;
* request the CEP to provide an update to the ATCM on the extent to which these IBAs are, or should be, represented within the series of ASPAs, in particular those areas that might qualify as “major colonies of breeding native birds”; and
* undertake appropriate monitoring of bird populations to inform future management actions that may be required.

Further work was undertaken to assess the extent to which identified IBAs were included within the current series of ASPAs, and a report was submitted to CEP XX (ATCM XL/ WP 37). This report identified three possible methods (based on population numbers, species diversity or a combination of both) for selecting IBAs that may merit ASPA designation. The report also identified additional factors (such as scientific importance, locality, rarity, threat status and proximity to human activity) that may need to be taken into account.

In response to this report the CEP encouraged interested Parties to work intersessionally to develop criteria for assessing the suitability of bird colonies for ASPA designation including to identify what constitutes 'major colonies of breeding birds' and to report back (Report of CEP XX, paragraphs 156-160).

Current representation of IBAs in ASPAs

Of the 72 ASPAs currently designated, 39 (54%) have listed avifauna as a primary or secondary value to be protected. Birds may or may not be present within the remaining ASPAs, although their presence has not been included in the description of values to be protected in their respective management plans[[3]](#footnote-3).

Of the 204 IBAs[[4]](#footnote-4) identified in 2015, 27 (13%) are already designated as ASPAs, two encompass ASPAs and one partly encompasses an ASPA[[5]](#footnote-5).

For 24 of the 27 ASPAs, the IBA trigger species was a subset of the species listed as being an ASPA value (i.e. in many cases the diverse assemblage of bird species was listed as the ASPA value), whereas in the IBA it was only one or two of those species that functioned as the IBA trigger. In the remaining three cases, at least one of the IBA trigger species was not mentioned as an ASPA value.

Draft criteria used to select seabird breeding colonies for protection

A review of spatial protection criteria for breeding colonies of seabirds used in other parts of the globe was undertaken to inform the development of the draft criteria (see Information Paper 23).

Having considered a range of issues, draft criteria in the form of a decision-making process that could be applied to the current list of 204 Antarctic IBAs, as well as other bird breeding sites across Antarctica, are set out in Information Paper 23 with some examples, and include:

* Criterion A. Percent global population present
* Criterion B. Percent of the Antarctic population present
* Criterion C. Threat status of the species
* Criterion D. Direct, indirect or cumulative pressures
* Criterion E. Unique or rare features

Limitations

Data on the population status and trends of flying seabirds in Antarctica generally remain extremely sparse. It is important to record the limitations in the population data that were used to identify the 204 Antarctic IBAs. There remains a lack of data for many bird areas in Antarctica, not least because so much potential breeding habitat has never been surveyed. Recent satellite monitoring efforts have improved knowledge for some species[[6]](#footnote-6), but satellite-based population estimates have low precision making trend estimation difficult, and for some colonies there has been little or no ‘on-the-ground’ verification. Targeted and repeated surveys are likely to be required to verify remotely derived population estimates and trends.

Further, the IBAs recognised in Antarctica by the ATCM (Resolution 5 (2015)), are only for breeding locations ashore. Elsewhere conservation actions for seabirds are developed on a species-by-species basis and encompass a range of actions that can be taken across the lifecycle and full ecological range of the species[[7]](#footnote-7),[[8]](#footnote-8).

The designation of ASPAs to protect breeding colonies of birds in Antarctica should not detract from the need to consider such additional or optional protection measures, including designation as a specially protected species, as well as the need also to protect offshore foraging locations[[9]](#footnote-9).

Discussion

The intent of this current work is to respond to the ATCM’s request to the CEP (Resolution 5 (2015)). The intent is not to increase the number of ASPAs by a large number, nor to bias the series of ASPAs in favour of protecting bird areas.

In some cases, existing ASPA designations could be modified to better account for identified IBAs, through for example, modifying the description of values being protected, amending management controls or adjusting ASPA boundaries to better accommodate the IBA. This might include consideration of including buffer zones or seaward extensions of ASPAs to account, for example, for transit routes or nearshore congregation areas adjacent to nesting sites.

There may be good reasons to consider some non-IBA bird colonies for designation as ASPAs. There are a number of bird colonies that do not meet the global IBA criteria, but which are likely to be significant in the context of conserving Antarctic biodiversity, including as important / unusual / major / representative areas occurring beyond larger colonies. It will be important to ensure that developed criteria are sufficiently broad so as to be applicable to assessing the suitability of both IBA and non-IBA colonies for ASPA designation.

Once developed, consideration could be given to incorporating the developed criteria into the CEP’s Guidelines for Implementation of the Framework for Protected Areas (Resolution 1 (2000).

Recommendations

The criteria presented remain in draft form and as a starting point for further consideration.

The CEP is invited to:

1. review the draft criteria and their weighting presented in Information Paper 23 and provide any additional comments or advice;
2. request SCAR, in collaboration with ACAP and other seabird experts as appropriate, and with interested Parties, to consider the draft criteria and how they might be applied and report back to the CEP with any advice and suggested revisions;
3. consider how the draft criteria might be incorporated into the CEP’s work on further development of the Antarctic protected area system;
4. provide a report to the ATCM XLIII on progress made in addressing the ATCM’s request set out in Resolution 5 (2015);
5. encourage their research communities to continue to monitor and survey Antarctic bird colonies so as to fill gaps in population data and inform changes in population levels.

1. The term ‘bird areas’ is used throughout this document, which is intended to include ‘colonies’ of birds, which is appropriate for many Antarctic breeding species which aggregate very strongly when breeding, as well as other locations where birds such as snow petrels and Wilsons storm petrels, only loosely aggregate when breeding. The term ‘colony’ is used when it clearly applies to a certain species or when referring to Article 3(2)(c) of Annex V to the Protocol which uses this term. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BirdLife International now refers to these sites as Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas. See: https://www.birdlife.org/worldwide/programme-additional-info/important-bird-and-biodiversity-areas-ibas [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Harris, C.M., Lorenz, K. and Sypoz, M. 2017. Representation of Important Bird Areas in the Series of Antarctic Specially Protected Areas. Report to the Governments of New Zealand, Norway and the United Kingdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In 2018 BirdLife International recognised a further (205th) Antarctic IBA at [Ryder Bay Islands](http://datazone.birdlife.org/site/factsheet/ryder-bay-islands-iba-antarctica), which contains more than 10% of the global population of south polar skuas. The islands in Ryder Bay are part of a proposed ASPA put forward by the UK and Netherlands to CEP XXIII. The USA has also put forward a proposal for a "new" ASPA in the Rosenthal Islands, and if adopted, this ASPA would include IBA No. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Harris, C.M., Lorenz, K. and Sypoz, M. 2017. Representation of Important Bird Areas in the Series of Antarctic Specially Protected Areas. Report to the Governments of New Zealand, Norway and the United Kingdom*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See for example: Schwaller, M.R., Lynch, H.J., Tarroux, A. and Prehn, B. 2018. A continent-wide search for Antarctic Petrel breeding sites with satellite remote sensing. Remote Sensing of Environment, 210, pp444-451. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Taylor, Graeme A. 2000. Action plan for seabird conservation in New Zealand. Wellington, N.Z. Dept. of Conservation, Biodiversity Recovery Unit, 2000. ISBN 0-478-21921-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Oppel, S., Bolton, M., Carneiro, A.P.B., Dias, M.P., Green, J.A. *et al*. 2018. Spatial scales of marine conservation management for breeding seabirds. Marine Policy, 98. pp37-46. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2018.08.024. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See for example: Handley J., Rouyer M-M., Pearmain E.J., Warwick-Evans V., Teschke K., Hinke J.T., Lynch H., Emmerson L., Southwell C., Griffith G., Cárdenas C.A., Franco A.M.A., Trathan P. and Dias M.P. 2021. Marine Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas for Penguins in Antarctica, Targets for Conservation Action. Front. Mar. Sci. 7:602972. doi: 10.3389/fmars.2020.602972 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)