

Before

After



Prions and diving petrels prefer steep coastal slopes with tussac. The slopes above the landing bay were known to have a particularly high density of burrows. Inset: Prions and burrowing-petrels littered the ground many burnt in their nests cremated above but perfect below as the fire passed over them.



The Bird Island fire is thought to have started on the slopes of the eastern peak and then rapidly spread. Thankfully it largely passed around the mixed colonies of albatrosses (14,500 pairs) and rockhopper penguins (10,250 pairs) but the prions tussac habitat has been irreparably damaged across large areas as the fire subsequently burnt into the peat.



The view of the landing bay colony showing just how close the fire came to spreading to the rest of the island. The fire break was built across the thin strip of interconnecting tussac below the colony and continued monitoring of the ground fire is needed to ensure it cannot breach this gap.

All photos left: views of the landscapes around Bird Island in 2010. Pics Grant Munro

All photos right: the corresponding views post fire when a team visited in February 2024. Pics: Megan Tierney and Grant Munro.

Fires - prevention better than cure

Report by Grant Munro

AS was highlighted last week the fire on Bird Island has been devastating to the prions and burrowing-petrels of which some 1.3 million call the island home.

The Falklands' landscape will likely continue to dry out whilst at the same time storm events with lightning will increase due to ongoing climate change. Undoubtedly such fires are only going to become more common. This year has seen fires on Bird Island and Grand Jason, last year Fox and Quaker Islands burnt and the year before Grand Jason and Broken Island.

Pristine rodent-free offshore-islands that have never been impacted or grazed now comprise only 0.15% of the Falklands total land mass. That's an incredibly scarce commodity, equivalent in area to just two and a half times the size of Stanley Harbour. Yet this tiny fraction of one percent holds a disproportionate amount of our wildlife.

In the past when tussac was more continuous around our coasts and the ground wetter, fire may have been a natural cycle but now with such pristine habitats so limited and widely separated their value becomes irreplaceable in a largely human influenced landscape.

We really can't afford to lose a single one yet Bird Island alone accounts for almost 10% of this tiny remnant untouched area.

These islands form a rich and productive ecosystem, for example Beauchene Island shows the highest known rates of peat accumulation. The seabirds enrich the tussac with their guano whilst the tussac peat provides their nesting habitat.

But if the peat is lost the system is lost. And if the peat soils burn or subsequently degrade with wind erosion down to the underlying clay or rock then unfortunately these land losses from year to year are cumulative - because once down to clay-patch they are not coming back, at least not within a human timescale.

Restoration efforts have been undertaken but these are costly, require intensive effort and are slow. Over the last 20 years many tireless people across the community have made great efforts, particularly at tussac planting. In total some 350,000 tillers have been planted covering 70 ha. But we have much more still to do, the area of exposed bare tussac peat around the islands is estimated at 5,000 ha. If we continue at the present planting rate it would take us another 15 centuries (1,500 years) just to restore what we already have. If we are to hold even and not go backwards we must prevent further loss and degradation. But each year, with the events we have just witnessed, more bare ground is appearing.

Such concerns extend beyond just the question of fire prepared-

ness but to all our activities and industries. Farmers are seeing ponds dry out and blow out and along with diddledee dieback and reduced pasture productivity this is necessitating stock numbers to be cut. Many farmers and land managers are seeking help and guidance to address this. Tourism relies upon our natural environment both terrestrial and marine, whilst off-shore industries link to our inshore waters and the land-marine interface.

These issues cannot be solved by any one person, land-owner or even government alone. They require us all to work together to seek solutions. They require a community decision on how we value the environment and a policy that prioritises sustainability both economic and environmental - the two are inseparable. This is not just relevant to fires but to all our land management and industries to ensure our future sustainability.

Some of this will come with a cost, but prevention is invariably better than cure. It is easier to catch and protect what we still have than to try and restore what we have already lost.

Twenty years ago a fire swept across Green Island. The initial intense fire passed-over rapidly and just a few days later the scorched tussac bogs were already starting to re-sprout. However, some hot-spots had also burnt into the peat and if the local FIFRS, MPC fire-

crew and volunteers had not intervened to quench the underground peat fires in a mop-up operation then the island would have likely been slowly and inexorably lost.

But due to that intervention, today Green Island is green once more with its thriving lush tussac now being used to restore Middle Island. That stitch in time saved decades of restoration effort at a far greater cost both financially and to our environment.

Of course, this may not be possible in every instance, each island is different, and safety must be paramount. The intention is not to point-fingers but to assist to give us a better chance of success - to work together to determine what the limitations to action are (remit, personnel, resources and logistics) and how we might better overcome them. And how as a community we respond to changing conditions in the future.

A fantastic recent initiative by FIFRS, DoA and Env. Dept. was the DEFRA Grassland Wildfire Training Course held over last Farmers' Week that brought two highly experienced fire-fighters and trainers to the Falklands.

If extended this highly practical and insightful course could potentially increase the pool of trained volunteers that can assist.

It is hoped subject to a funding application that this program will be repeated, and I would encourage anyone to attend.

Coastal land owners speak out on protection of inshore waters

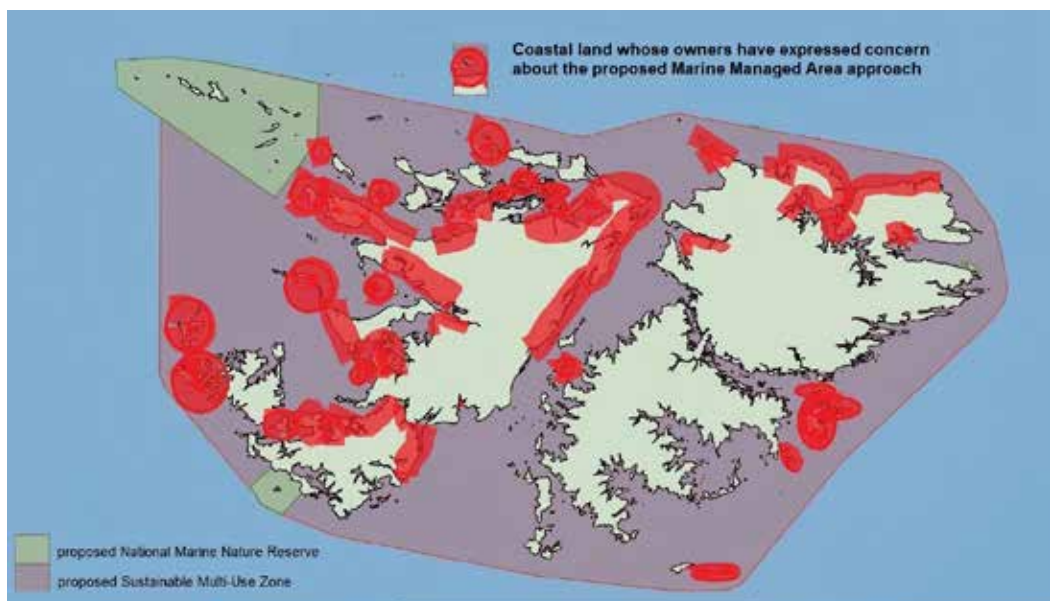
THE Falkland Islands Government is currently developing a framework for Marine Managed Areas (MMAs), a process which began back in 2012 and is now being reviewed by consultants. Last month, a group of six coastal land owners wrote to Members of Legislative Assembly expressing concern about the approach being taken for protecting the inshore waters.

The number of people supporting the letter's message has now grown to over 50.

The coastline and islands they own cover a large area of the Falklands, as shown on the map. They have four main concerns about FIG's approach to developing MMAs and Sally Poncet one of the group members outlined them for Penguin News:

1. There has been no stakeholder consultation with the people who live and work along the coastlines of the proposed MMAs.

2. 'Sustainable Multi-use Zones' (ie waters out to 3 nautical miles offshore) could leave the door wide open for industrial-scale ac-



tivities such as salmon farming or bottom trawling.

3. Traditional use of inshore waters by locals may be limited

4. Future small scale locally

owned truly sustainable developments may be limited.

She told Penguin News the group "joins with other stakeholders in asking FIG to provide

more information and clarity as to how the proposed new MMA plan is going to guarantee the level of protection our inshore waters deserve."