

“As World Oceans Day approaches on Saturday 8th June, we are reminded of the profound importance of our oceans and the diverse marine life they sustain. The waters surrounding the Falkland Islands are home to a rich variety of marine species, including magnificent baleen whales.

“Dr Caroline Weir, Cetacean Ecologist at Falklands Conservation, highlights the ecological importance of Falklands’ waters for sei whales after the completion of another successful field season. But also references increasing challenges faced by visiting whales. These stories below highlight the urgent need for continued and effective marine management to ensure the protection of these keystone species and their habitats.” - Falklands Conservation
Articles below by Dr Caroline Weir

Southern right whale fatality from fishing gear

LAST week, a dead southern right whale with fishing gear entangled around its tail was reported by Dot Gould at Pebble Island. Andrew Miller and I flew out to Pebble to collect tissue samples from the animal for Falklands Conservation’s ongoing whale research programme, and to investigate the entanglement further.

Despite the increase in sightings of this species in recent years, this was only the third southern right whale that has stranded in the Falklands since 1990. The whale was a male of 9.6 m length, indicating that it was a young animal, probably just a yearling.

It appeared thin overall and had likely been in poor body condition prior to its death. We collected samples of blubber, skin, baleen plates, and bone for our genetic and diet work on baleen whales.

The fishing gear wrapped around its tail and tailstock comprised monofilament gillnet, three different types of rope, and gillnet floats. While it initially appeared reasonably innocuous, closer inspection revealed that the gear had cut deeply into the tailstock on the dorsal and ventral surfaces.

The inner parts of the wounds comprised raw unhealed tissue, while on the surface there were multiple unusual and distorted tissue



growths around the injuries. On the ventral side, the tissue had grown to completely encircle the fishing gear, such that the only way to dislodge it was to cut the ropes/net and pull it through the wound.

The removed fishing gear weighed 12.1 kg in total. However, indents and scarring along the body of the whale indicated that additional ropes had been present earlier in the entanglement. It wasn’t possible to determine whether the animal had been cut free from the gear by fishers, or whether the additional gear had broken away at some point while being carried around by the animal.

Gillnets are not used in the

Falklands, and it is presumed that the whale collided with this fishing gear somewhere along the coast of South America. We are collaborating with bycatch researchers and vets in those regions to determine its origin. Consultation with a North Atlantic right whale entanglement expert indicated that the injuries to the whale constituted a ‘severe entanglement’ and very likely led to its death.

Further, the chronic nature of the injuries indicated that the whale had been entangled for many months prior to its death. Tragically, given the young age of this whale, it is probable that it suffered in this gear for much of its short life, becoming ever

more tightly entangled as it grew in size.

While this is the first case of a large whale mortality from entanglement reported in the Falklands, the problem is increasing globally.

Almost 83% of the Critically Endangered North Atlantic right whales in the USA and Canada have entanglement scars, with some individuals known to have been entangled seven times!

They are especially vulnerable to fixed fishing-gear including crab and lobster pots, and gillnets, which have ropes in the water column attached to surface marker buoys.

When encountering such ropes their response is to roll, causing the gear to wrap tightly around them. While some animals quickly drown, right whales have been documented carrying gear for well over a year before eventually succumbing to starvation or infection - a terrible welfare issue, and one that we are very sad to have witnessed with the recent stranding.

What can you do? Choose sustainably sourced seafood including the move towards ‘ropeless fishing’ which reduces whale entanglements. Find out more: <https://www.thefutureisropeless.org/>

Falklands’ waters remain significant for sei whales

DURING May, Falklands Conservation completed the final batch of boat survey work for their current Darwin Plus (DPLUS126) funded project.

This was our eighth consecutive summer/autumn of sei whale research in the Islands, and one of our most productive seasons so far with good whale numbers being found in Berkeley Sound compared to last year. We recorded 97 sightings of sei whales including several large groups of up to 15 animals.

Although sei whales are a shy and skittish species, many of the groups encountered during March and April were fairly relaxed around our boat and appeared to be socialising with one another in addition to their usual foraging behaviour.

One of the highlights of the season was watching the sei whales repeatedly lunge-feeding at the surface on their sides on a mirror calm evening. We scooped 31 whale poops for diet analysis, which is the most we have collected during any year and suggests

that there was plenty of lobster krill and other crustacean prey available during 2024.

In late April we successfully deployed a satellite tag on one sei whale which we named ‘Keppel.’ Following tagging, Keppel remained in Berkeley Sound for three days before exploring the north coast of East Falkland be-

tween MacBride Head and Cape Dolphin. On 5 May it moved away from the Falklands, heading north-east into the deep (>5,000 m depth) Argentine Basin. Sadly, the tag stopped transmitting on 15 May so we don’t know whether Keppel continued to the known sei whale wintering area off south-east Brazil or went elsewhere.



Top: The dead Southern right whale on Pebble Island. Inset: Removing the fishing gear from the tail of the whale. Above: A sei whale surfacing in Berkeley Sound with the reefer Ming Wang 7 at anchor.. Pics Caroline Weir.

During 2024, we re-encountered several individual sei whales with distinctive dorsal fins that we had first met in 2019, 2020, and 2021.

These re-sightings over several years emphasise the significance of Berkeley Sound, and all Falklands’ inshore waters, as a feeding destination for this globally endangered species.

Our work on sei whales has led directly to the international recognition of Falklands’ waters as both a Key Biodiversity Area and an Important Marine Mammal Area for this species in recent years, both comprising spatial tools that are highly relevant to marine management development and the mitigation of potentially harmful human activities on whales in the Islands.

Many thanks to everyone who has helped us during our 2024 whale season, especially Dot Gould and Emma Reid for hosting us during strandings, FIGAS, and to FIG Maritime Authority, Fortuna and Polar Seafood for boat support.