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# Waterbirds around the world

A global overview of the conservation,  
management and research of the  
world's waterbird flyways

*Edited by G.C. Boere, C.A. Galbraith and D.A. Stroud*

*Assisted by L.K. Bridge, I. Colquhoun, D.A. Scott,  
D.B.A. Thompson and L.G. Underhill*



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*Cover photography:* Whooper Swans *Cygnus cygnus* arriving at Martin Mere, England. Photo: Paul Marshall.  
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## Address by His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales

Wednesday 7 April 2004

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Ladies and gentlemen, I am conscious that I am appearing very much at the tail end of your conference and, by the look of the programme, you have clearly had a full and varied few days. So you are probably beginning to calculate how quickly you can join your own personal 'flyway' back home. But I am delighted that so many of you are still here and that, by all accounts, you have had such a successful conference. I am just relieved that I arrived in time to hear Dr John Cooper's riveting presentation.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I am very far from being an expert on either albatrosses or petrels but, like many other one-time mariners, I have a very special affection for these remarkable birds. I remember so well standing on the deck of a fast-moving warship in one of the Southern oceans, watching an albatross maintaining perfect position alongside for hour after hour, and apparently day after day. It is a sight I will never forget, and I find it hard (no, I find it impossible) to accept that it might one day be lost for ever. Yet that does now seem to be a real possibility – unless we, and others around the world, can make a sufficient fuss to prevent it. In 1996, three of the twenty-one species of albatross were officially listed as threatened. Four years later, when I sat down to write an article expressing my concerns about the decline of these magnificent birds, the total of threatened species had risen to sixteen. Another four years on, and all twenty-one species are threatened. The albatross family is now the biggest single bird family with every one of its members under threat.

I don't need to tell this audience that the most potent force driving the members of the albatross family to extinction is indiscriminate longline fishing, which is estimated to kill 100 000 albatrosses every year. One fishing boat reported more than 300 killed in a single day. But before I talk a bit more about that problem, I just want to say some thoroughly positive things.

First, this seems an entirely appropriate time and place to draw attention to the years of dedicated work by research scientists and their support crews, without whom we would know next to nothing about these most nomadic and elusive of birds. It must be hard and lonely work, carried out in cold, wet and thoroughly difficult conditions, and a very long way from home. But without the knowledge and data you take such pains to obtain there can be no coherent evaluation of either the scale of the problem, or the potential for solutions.

This scientific effort has been matched by BirdLife International and other non-governmental organizations, bringing these issues to the attention of a wider public. That is certainly how I first learnt of the scale of the problem and I suspect the same is true for many other people. There is, of course, a huge amount more to be done in terms of awareness-raising and advocacy.

Gaining awareness of the plight of a group of birds most people have never seen, and probably never will see, is a huge challenge. So I also want to mention the efforts of one remarkable man, who has – in his own inimitable fashion – taken up



His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales. Photo: Dougie Barnett.

that challenge and is drawing attention to the issue of albatrosses and longline fishing. John Ridgway, who may or may not like me to tell you that he is now sixty-five, has sailed with his wife, Marie Christine, and a small crew from their home in northern Scotland to the Southern Ocean, following the circumpolar track of the Wandering Albatross. John and Marie Christine and their crew are having great success in engaging with all sorts of different audiences at each landfall, and generating remarkable publicity, most recently in New Zealand and the Falkland Islands. Their yacht, English Rose VI, is now headed for home. They expect to berth in London in June, where there will be further opportunities to raise the profile of this issue.

In view of all the scientific and voluntary efforts I have just mentioned, I am pleased to be able to say that at least some Governments are also alive to the situation and willing to commit to taking effective action.

An international Agreement on the conservation of albatrosses and petrels (known as ACAP) came into force just two months ago. This was a huge achievement – especially as it has taken a very long time to materialize... ACAP is particularly important because it is legally binding on the countries that ratify it, and its emphasis on international co-operation is an essential first step to tackling the multiple threats to such a wide-ranging group of birds. The UK played a leading role in drawing up this key international treaty and was among the first to sign it. But ratification is the essential step. So I couldn't have been more

pleased to hear that Mr Elliot Morley, who has been a passionate fighter for the albatross, had announced, earlier in this conference, that the Government has now ratified the Agreement, without reservations and to a tight timescale. And I also want to draw attention to Elliot Morley's personal leadership on this topic, as someone with a deep understanding and concern for the issues.

Well, that was the good news. The bad news is that many countries with fishing interests in the Southern Ocean still need to ratify the ACAP, and some of the most important appear unlikely to do so – for reasons which can only be guessed at. At the same time, the problem of illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing appears to be getting worse. There are believed to be more than a thousand of these substantial pirate vessels, operating under 'flags of convenience', recognizing no rules and – with few exceptions – evading every sort of sanction and penalty available under international law.

Fishermen operating in responsible and well-regulated fisheries have adopted measures that almost entirely eliminate the deaths of albatrosses from longlining. Setting lines under water, or only at night, trailing a bird-scaring line and prohibiting offal discharge while fishing have all proved effective. Many fisheries also insist on the presence of observers on board to monitor results. The pirate vessels in the illegal fisheries, of course, take none of these measures. No-one knows how many albatrosses and petrels they kill every year, but the best estimate is that they are responsible for about one third of the total of around 100 000 deaths. But that is not the total of the environmental havoc they are causing.

One of the principal targets of the pirate ships is the Patagonian Toothfish. Sold under many 'consumer-friendly' aliases, such as Chilean Sea Bass in the USA and Mero in Japan, this valuable species is also very much under threat from over-fishing. Indeed, the Australian government has said that if fishing continues at current levels, the species faces commercial extinction. Living up to fifty years, and taking ten years to reach breeding age, it is a slow-growing creature which is being killed faster than it can reproduce. Just like the albatross, in fact, though even less visible.

Of course, it is much easier to be angry about the awful dual threat posed by the pirate fishing boats than to take effective action against them. I rather think that the Greenpeace report on this subject, which is based on intense investigation, is right when

it concludes that the only way to prevent continued pirate fishing is to close ports to these ships, close markets to the fish they catch and penalize the companies that are their true owners and operators. I know that Elliot Morley now leads an OECD Task Force on Pirate Fishing and I wish him every possible success in finding ways to do all those things. I certainly don't think that any single measure is going to succeed when the economic incentives for illegal action are so high and the chances of being detected and prosecuted are so low. It also has to be said that political willingness to act is notably absent in some countries.

Agreements on vessel monitoring and catch documentation do exist for Patagonian Toothfish, and appear to be having some positive effects. But there always seems to be a hard core of countries that want to do as little as possible and as late as possible – and preferably nothing at all. When an International Plan of Action to tackle the problem of pirate fishing was being negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations, several countries made strenuous efforts to water down the draft provisions. In particular, the opportunity to take effective measures against the use of chartered vessels in illegal, unreported and unregulated fisheries was missed. I just wonder how many of those countries claim to be committed to 'sustainable development' at the same time?

Ladies and gentlemen, it would be hard to find a more direct impact of fisheries, whether legal or illegal, on seabirds than the losses the albatross family suffers at the hands of indiscriminate longlining. But there are many examples of less direct effects all round the world.

Not far from here, in the North Sea, there is a sandeel fishery. It is now by far the largest single-species fishery in the North Sea, though not for human consumption – the sandeels are processed into fishmeal and oil, to feed livestock and farmed fish. Whether this so-called industrial fishing, targeting the bottom of the food chain, represents a sensible use of natural resources or not is a subject for another day. The point for now is that the Total Allowable Catch for sandeels for 2004 is 826 000 tonnes, despite the fact that last year the fleet was only able to catch around 300 000 tonnes (one third of its target). The fishing boat skippers simply couldn't find the fish to catch.

The seabirds evidently had the same problem. Kittiwakes are especially dependent on sandeels and last year the massive colony



His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales viewing Northern Royal Albatross *Diomedea sanfordi* at Taiaroa Head, New Zealand. Photo: Press Association.

at the RSPB reserve at Bempton in Lincolnshire had the worst breeding season in eighteen years of records. Many birds failed to nest at all and adults and chicks were clearly suffering from food shortage. Similar effects have, I know, been seen in the Shetland Isles. Here, seabirds had their worst breeding season for twenty-five years, with some Kittiwake colonies disappearing entirely and Puffins and Razorbills also seriously affected.

It is well known that the sandeel population has good and bad years, but there seem to be many more bad years than good. And there is growing evidence that the ecology of the North Sea is changing dramatically. The Sir Alister Hardy Foundation for Ocean Science, which has been monitoring plankton in the North Sea for more than seventy years, has established that higher sea temperatures have driven cold-water species of plankton much further north. They are being replaced by smaller, warm-water species that are less nutritious. Whether or not this is the cause of the dramatic fall in sandeel populations is not certain, but most recent studies show that rising sea temperatures, as a result of the changing global climate, will directly affect marine productivity – with as yet unknown impacts on fisheries and seabirds.

In the case of the sandeel fishery, there is little evidence of direct competition with seabirds. Indeed, one area where competition might have been a particular problem, known as the Wee Bankie and actually just offshore from here, has been closed to fishing for the last three years, to protect nesting seabirds – and this will clearly have to continue. In general, the fishermen and the birds seem to be suffering equally from the absence of their prey. But the sandeel is part of the food chain for other species too, including cod. I am told that at present cod stocks are so low that they are probably making little impact on the sandeels. But drastic measures are being taken to get cod stocks back to the levels of twenty or thirty years ago, and those measures should surely include ensuring that there will be enough sandeels in the North Sea for a recovered cod stock to eat.

There are plenty of complicating factors, but I find it difficult to believe that the sandeel populations of the North Sea will be able to support recovered stocks of cod and mackerel, a major industrial fishery and thriving seabird populations. In those circumstances it would be hard to argue that the industrial fishery should take precedence over human consumption fisheries and the needs of marine wildlife. Surely an ‘ecosystem approach’ to fisheries management requires fisheries to adapt to the marine environment, not the other way round?

I think the lesson to be drawn from all of this is that we live in an increasingly inter-connected world, in which actions have consequences – and huge actions have huge consequences. Before you point out that this has always been the case, let me explain what I mean – and I have tried to say this on various occasions in the past. It is simply that we now have unprecedented technological capacity to change ecosystems, very directly and very quickly, but also to monitor many of the detailed consequences of our actions. Man has always been able to change his environment, but has only comparatively recently gained the capacity to do so with such speed and finality. I would argue that this means that the need for wisdom and restraint in our actions has never been greater. I would also argue that the need has never been clearer for all the talk (dare I say “hot air”?) about sustainability to be translated into action and not just the repetition of “business as usual with little brass, sustainable knobs on”.

Our ancestors were able to hunt many species of whales to the edge of extinction and they did make the Great Auk extinct. But they did so over hundreds of years and without a fraction of our capacity to know – simultaneously – precisely what was happening. To give just one example, nylon longlines eighty miles long, containing thousands of baited hooks, are doing unprecedented damage, at unprecedented speed, to albatross populations. And, as Dr Cooper pointed out just now, satellite monitors enable us to know a great deal about what is happening.

In many ways the albatross may be the ultimate test of whether or not, as a species ourselves, we are serious about conservation: capable of co-existing on this planet with other species. Or are we going to sacrifice what’s left of wisdom on the altar of short-term gain? None of the short cuts and quick fixes that might help some other species will help the albatross. No nature reserve will ever be big enough to encompass more than a fraction of such a nomadic bird’s total requirements. Captive breeding and stock enhancement have no conceivable part to play. No corporate sponsor or private philanthropist can do any more than raise awareness of the problems. And no single nation state can take any effective unilateral action. Nor is there much time left – the clock is ticking very, very fast. Even if mortality from long-lining were, somehow, to be stopped overnight, the rate of decline in the populations and the exceptionally slow rate at which albatross species breed are such that recovery would take many decades.

To me, the plight of the albatross is a symbol of the emptiness of the rhetoric surrounding so-called ‘sustainable development’. Will it take the complete dodo-like disappearance of this noble winged creature to bring us to our senses? Or are we to remain blind and deaf to the appalling tragedy unfolding, out of sight and out of mind, in the vast foam-flecked spaces of the Southern Ocean?

Whatever the case, it would be a shameful travesty of our duty as stewards of this increasingly fragile globe if we couldn’t find a way of living our lives in such a manner that these magnificent birds can continue to share the same planet with us. Ratification of ACAP is an important step in that process, but the reality is that in the current dangerously critical situation the only effective actions will be those that are implemented immediately, and continued indefinitely.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am sorry to have dwelt so much on a single group of birds, and on just one issue. I know that you have covered a huge range of subjects relating to waterbirds during this week, and that some of you will be experts in species that are just as desperately threatened as the albatross.

If there had been time, I would have welcomed the opportunity to talk about subjects such as the importance of wetland habitats and the many adverse consequences of intensive agriculture around the world. Indeed, some people who have heard me speak before may be surprised at my ability to resist that particular temptation!

Forty years after one of the very first gatherings of waterbird specialists took place at St. Andrews, here in Scotland, your work remains hugely important. Reviewing past efforts, considering key questions for future research and co-ordinating future conservation actions are all essential tasks. I hope you feel this particular conference has been worthwhile. I applaud your efforts and I look forward to seeing the implementation of your thinking in years to come.