

Final report on Defra funded invasive aliens and climate change work in the UK's South Atlantic Overseas Territories

Anton Wolfaardt
Joint Nature Conservation Committee
June 2011

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Defra provided £250,000 to the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) to address priority alien invasive species and climate change needs in the UK Overseas Territories. These funds were provided as a contribution towards the International Year of Biodiversity. JNCC used the opportunity to initiate a focal point mechanism for regional conservation work in the South Atlantic Overseas Territories (SAOTs)¹, and this was used to develop, with representatives from each of the SAOTs, a list of priority activities to be supported by the funds. A total of £99,900 of these funds was made available through the focal point mechanism for activities in the SAOTs. Part of this mechanism involved setting up a vehicle for the funds to be transferred from JNCC to the Falkland Islands Government (FIG), and then allocated to project proponents according to a formal agreement.

In February 2010, JNCC and FIG signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) outlining the principles and obligations of both Parties in relation to the use of these funds (JNCC REF NO. A09 – 0181 - 0280). The Agreement included an indicative list of projects to be funded in each of the SAOTs and likely timings of the project work (see Schedule 2 of the MoA, and Appendix 1 of this report). This final report provides an overview of the project work that was supported by the funds, and follows two previous reports, one in July 2010, and the other in November 2010.

PROVISION OF FUNDS AND FUNDING MECHANISM

A total of £99,865 was successfully transferred from JNCC to FIG on 11 March 2010. The difference of £35 between the original amount transferred from JNCC (£99,900) and that received by FIG was presumably used for transaction costs. By July 2010, a total of £63,551.77 had been allocated for project work, and by November 2010, £87,611.77. By June 2011, £99,109.95 of the funds had been spent, with £755 remaining. The £755 unspent funds was due to savings in a number of project activities in the Falkland Islands. This saving has been earmarked as a contribution towards planned marine and/or terrestrial alien species management work that will take place from July to August 2011 in the Falkland Islands. The allocation will be finalised at the Environmental Committee meeting of FIG, which takes place in late June 2011.

It was agreed that the best way to allocate the funds was to split it equally between the five SAOTs. For Ascension, St Helena and Tristan da Cunha, it was decided that it would be most efficient to transfer the funds in one go, rather than in a piecemeal manner. This is primarily because each transfer from the Falkland Islands incurs transaction costs, but also because it makes it easier to plan and schedule the work in these distant OTs. The recipients of the funds were responsible for ensuring the funds were spent in the manner

¹ Falkland Islands, South Georgia, Tristan da Cunha, St Helena, Ascension.

originally agreed, to maintain satisfactory records of all expenditure, and notify the JNCC representative if there was a need or request to change the allocation of funds for any reason.

TRISTAN DA CUNHA

In total, just over £20,000 of the Defra funds was used to support a broad range of activities on the Tristan islands. These activities included continuation of ongoing work that had previously been initiated, generally through the EU funded South Atlantic Invasive Species project, as well as new project work.

Invasive alien plant management and biosecurity work, February 2010-March 2011

A total of £5,000 was used to continue efforts to control Loganberry *Rubus loganobaccus* at Sandy Point, on the main island of Tristan da Cunha. Areas at Sandy Point had become completely overgrown by Loganberry, transforming the structure of the vegetation. Although it is not clear what the impact is on the botanical biodiversity of the invaded areas, what is clear is that invasion by Loganberry has displaced several albatrosses from their nesting sites. The funds were also used to complete the erection of a field hut at Sandy Point to facilitate ongoing work at the site.

A further £5,000 was used to support the continued management of other priority invasive alien plant species on both the main island of Tristan da Cunha, and Nightingale Island. Efforts on the main island of Tristan focussed primarily on removing New Zealand Christmas Trees *Metrosideros excelsa* from the new volcano, the slopes towards the base behind Pigbite, and in and around the settlement.

The funds helped support a 17 day excursion in April-May 2010 by Trevor Glass, head of the Tristan Conservation Department, and his local conservation team to Nightingale Island, where they carried out a range of important conservation work. Nightingale Island has fortunately escaped invasion by rodents, which have had significant impacts on the biodiversity of two other islands in the Tristan Group: the main island of Tristan and Gough Island. However, there is always the possibility that human visits to the island may inadvertently introduce rodents that are present on the main island of Tristan (Ship Rat *Rattus rattus* and House Mouse *Mus musculus*). Given the importance of Nightingale Island for birdlife and biodiversity generally, the consequences of such an introduction would be devastating, highlighting the need for vigilance to ensure that Nightingale, and nearby Inaccessible Island, remain free of rodents. During the trip, Trevor and his team checked and serviced all bait stations that have been set up on the island as an early-warning system. The trip was also used to continue the removal of alien vegetation, including New Zealand Flax *Phormium tenax*, and Australian Brass Button *Cotula australis*, and to carry out maintenance work on the Invasive Species Hut on Nightingale Island. This visit to Nightingale Island was written up as a brief news update for the issue 24 of JNCC's Nature News.

An amount of £2,000 was used as a contribution towards the running costs (primarily petrol) of the vessel of the Tristan Conservation Department. This enabled members of the Tristan Conservation Department to visit Nightingale Island in April-May 2010 (see above) and on

several subsequent occasions, during which time routine alien management work was carried out, as well as remote parts of the main island's coastline.

Rodent management and biosecurity work

A visit to Inaccessible Island was undertaken to survey and maintain established bait stations for the presence of rodents, as well as other routine monitoring work. £1000 of the Defra funds was used to support this trip. Visits to Nightingale Island to implement a range of activities, including routine biosecurity monitoring, is described in the section above.

A total of £1,000 was provided to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) to purchase a supply of rodent bait stations and traps for the Tristan Conservation Department, to be used for biosecurity and contingency purposes. These were freighted from New Zealand to Tristan da Cunha, via Cape Town, and were vital in the response to the grounding of the MS Oliva on Nightingale Island in March 2011. As mentioned above, Nightingale Island is currently free of rodents, and it was feared that the wrecking of the Oliva on the shore of Nightingale may lead to an incursion of rodents. The Tristan Conservation team, following the protocols in the Nightingale Contingency Plan, immediately deployed as many traps as were available in the vicinity of the wreck to minimise the risk of any introduced rodents spreading beyond the wreck area. The Defra funds therefore helped support the effective rodent contingency response following the wrecking by increasing the number of traps available for this purpose.

The Great-winged Petrel *Pterodroma macroptera* population has been significantly reduced on the main island of Tristan da Cunha. Although formally protected by legislation, the breeding success remains very low as a result of chicks being killed by rats. In 2009, a study was initiated on Tristan da Cunha to assess whether the use of rodent bait in and around Great-winged Petrel colonies helped improve breeding success by reducing predation of chicks by rats. The initial findings of this study were promising, and so £1,000 of the Defra funding was provided to continue this work. The findings of this work show that the breeding success of Great-winged Petrels from a colony in which rodent bait was deployed was higher than a separate colony in which no bait was deployed. It is intended that this monitoring work will continue.

Training

A total of £5,000 was provided to the RSPB to facilitate a trip to the UK by Kirsty Green, an employee of the Tristan Conservation Department, for a range of capacity building opportunities. A trip report was provided to the JNCC officer in the Falklands and JNCC Peterborough. The report highlights that the trip was a very useful capacity building exercise, and enabled Kirsty to complete a PADI diving course, receive training in preparing funding applications at JNCC, and engage with colleagues at Kew, RSPB, JNCC and other institutions that are involved in conservation work in the Overseas Territories.

CONCLUSIONS

The ca. £100,000 provided by Defra to address invasive species and climate change work in the SAOTs supported a wide range of priority activities in these OTs. The funding mechanism set up for the project, through a MoA between JNCC and FIG, was effective,

and has since been used to disseminate further funding. Some of this subsequent funding is being used to support work that follows on directly from activities reported in this document.

In many cases, the Defra funds were used to continue or extend work that had previously been initiated. In so doing, the funds ensured that existing mechanisms were optimally used, and that previous work was further progressed, either by responding to recommendations of previous studies or initiatives, or by continuing ongoing efforts. In the context of invasive species management, it is crucial to maintain control and/or eradication efforts. The control of invasive Spear Thistle in the Falkland Islands, Loganberry, New Zealand Christmas Tree, and Australian Brass Button in the Tristan Islands are a case in point. Had efforts to control these species not continued, and without the funding they may not have, previous control efforts would have been undermined due to the replenishment of the soil seedbank.

Similarly, the funded actions have in many cases provided a baseline from which to continue further work. The marine invasive species monitoring projects in the Falkland Islands and South Georgia, the Thistle Strategy in the Falkland Islands, the construction of a track to the South Eastern coast of Ascension Island, and the Bastard Gumwood project on St Helena for which OTEP funding has recently been approved, are all good examples.

The funds also contributed directly, in the case of Kirsty Green from Tristan, and indirectly to capacity building within the Overseas Territories. The indirect contribution towards capacity building is a result of funds being made available to employ locals of the Overseas Territories to continue the implementation of invasive species management actions, thus enhancing their experience and expertise. Developing a well capacitated team of people within the Overseas Territories is particularly important for invasive species management, which requires a long-term approach, and will involve ongoing work for many years to come.

The project work highlighted a number of other issues which are important to bear in mind when considering conservation work in the SAOTs. First, all of the SAOTs are remote islands, and this presents logistical challenges, which has an impact on project planning – ordering of equipment and supplies has to be done well in advance – and costs. Second, but related, the SAOTs differ in terms of the capacity available to implement work and the logistical challenges and costs associated with project activities. For example, the cost of implementing a marine invasive species monitoring project at South Georgia may be five times more costly than implementing the same project work in the Falkland Islands. This is due to the costs of transporting personnel to South Georgia, and basing them there for the duration of the project work.

The capacity available to implement conservation projects is limited in all SAOTs. Conservation or Environment Departments and associated organisations often comprise only one person, who is responsible for a wide range of work. Consequently, work and project schedules are developed well in advance, and it may be difficult to respond to ‘ad hoc’ funding opportunities that require rapid expenditure of funds. However, given the focus of work on invasive species in SAOTs in recent years, including the work supported by the Defra funds, a broad programme of work is developing. One of the aims of the SAOT focal point mechanism is to help progress this programme of work, and thus facilitate a strategic and effective approach to conservation work in the SAOTs.

APPENDIX 1: Provisional list of activities to be funded
(from Schedule 2 of JNCC-FIG Memorandum of Agreement)

Tristan da Cunha

- Continued control of loganberry at Sandy Point, restoration of the site (re-planting apple trees) and completion of field hut at site for ongoing work there. This is a contribution to ongoing work, which will take place from February to June 2010, with a provisional budget of £5,000.
- Contribution towards the petrol costs of running the vessel which is used to access sites on Tristan da Cunha (and Nightingale and Inaccessible Islands) for ongoing work on invasive alien species. An amount of £2,000 will be provided in February/March 2010 as a contribution towards the ongoing costs of running the boat.
- Provision of training in the UK for one of the Tristan Conservation Department's officers. Training will include invasive alien species work, monitoring, baseline data collection, and other activities associated with work on invasive alien species and climate change. An amount of £5,000 has been earmarked for this. The exact timing is dependent on transport off and back onto Tristan da Cunha.
- Continued control of priority invasive alien plant species on Tristan da Cunha and Nightingale Island. This is a contribution towards ongoing work, which will take place between February and June 2010, with a provisional budget of £3,000 for work on Tristan da Cunha, and £2,000 for work on Nightingale Island. It must be noted that access to Nightingale Island is dependent on weather and sea conditions.
- Continued work to assess the viability of using rodent bait around burrowing petrel colonies to increase the breeding success of burrow nesting seabirds at Tristan da Cunha. This is a contribution towards ongoing work, which will take place from March 2010 until March 2011, with a provisional budget of £1,000.
- Purchase and deploy rodent traps to strengthen contingency biosecurity plans for Nightingale and Inaccessible Islands (currently rodent-free). An amount of £1,000 has been allocated. It is expected that the traps will be ordered in March/April 2010, and be transported to Tristan at the first available opportunity.
- Survey of established rodent bait stations on Inaccessible Island as part of the biosecurity surveillance plan for the island. This will take place between February and June 2010, with a provisional budget of £1,000. It must be noted that access to Inaccessible Island is dependent on weather and sea conditions.