



Media Release

Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

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Watching what they eat to help albatross survival

Collecting albatross poo might not seem like a glamorous task but analysis of seabird faeces by an IMAS researcher could help to contribute to the survival of the world's 22 albatross species.

A study led by PhD candidate Julie McInnes recommends that ongoing monitoring of the diet of albatrosses should be undertaken across a network of key global sites to enable understanding of the impacts of fishing and climate change on vulnerable populations.

“As we’re understanding more and more about the marine system, things are changing, but we’re often not collecting repeatable data where you can look at those changes over time.

“There are very few sites where we can look at long term studies and see if the albatross diet is changing over time, how it’s changing, and whether this is something that we need to be worried about.”

With albatross listed as one of the world’s most threatened seabird groups (17 of 22 are endangered/threatened species), analysis of their diet can inform conservation and management strategies as well as provide an insight into the status of the broader marine ecosystem.

Ms McInnes said new approaches, such as DNA analysis of scats, are helping to supplement established techniques for identifying albatross food, but the difficulty of accessing remote breeding grounds and collecting samples during the months the birds spend at sea means there are still major gaps in what’s known about albatross diets.

“Shy albatross in Tasmania stay around their colony during winter so we have access to the scats year round and can compare winter and breeding season diets.

“But they’re one of just two albatross species to do that and unfortunately for most albatross it’s still difficult to monitor their diets all year round.

“But we can still monitor many species over the breeding season. What we’re proposing is that we should have some key sites where there is regular research monitoring going on, where we can collect samples and build up a picture of changes resulting from different factors such as climate, fisheries and so forth.”

She said helping to ensure the survival of albatrosses has wider implications for the entire Southern Ocean ecosystem.

“You could say well they’re just another bird and it doesn’t matter if they’re here or not here, but everything fits into the ecosystem that we live in and if you take away a top predator like albatross there are going to be changes in the system.

“Where do you draw the line? If we lose one species we’re going to be losing other species.

Ms McInnes said that while collecting excrement wasn’t always pleasant, studying one of the world’s most majestic seabirds was a fascinating and rewarding experience.

“You get to see some pretty amazing remote places that many people aren’t able to get to, so I am very lucky in that sense.

“Albatross like to breed in exposed areas where it’s often wildly windy and they can land and take off without too many issues. Getting there and being part of their world is an incredible experience,” Ms McInnes said.

The study’s paper, “A review of methods used to analyse albatross diets—assessing priorities across their range” can be found at: <http://icesjms.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2016/06/20/icesjms.fsw105.abstract>

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