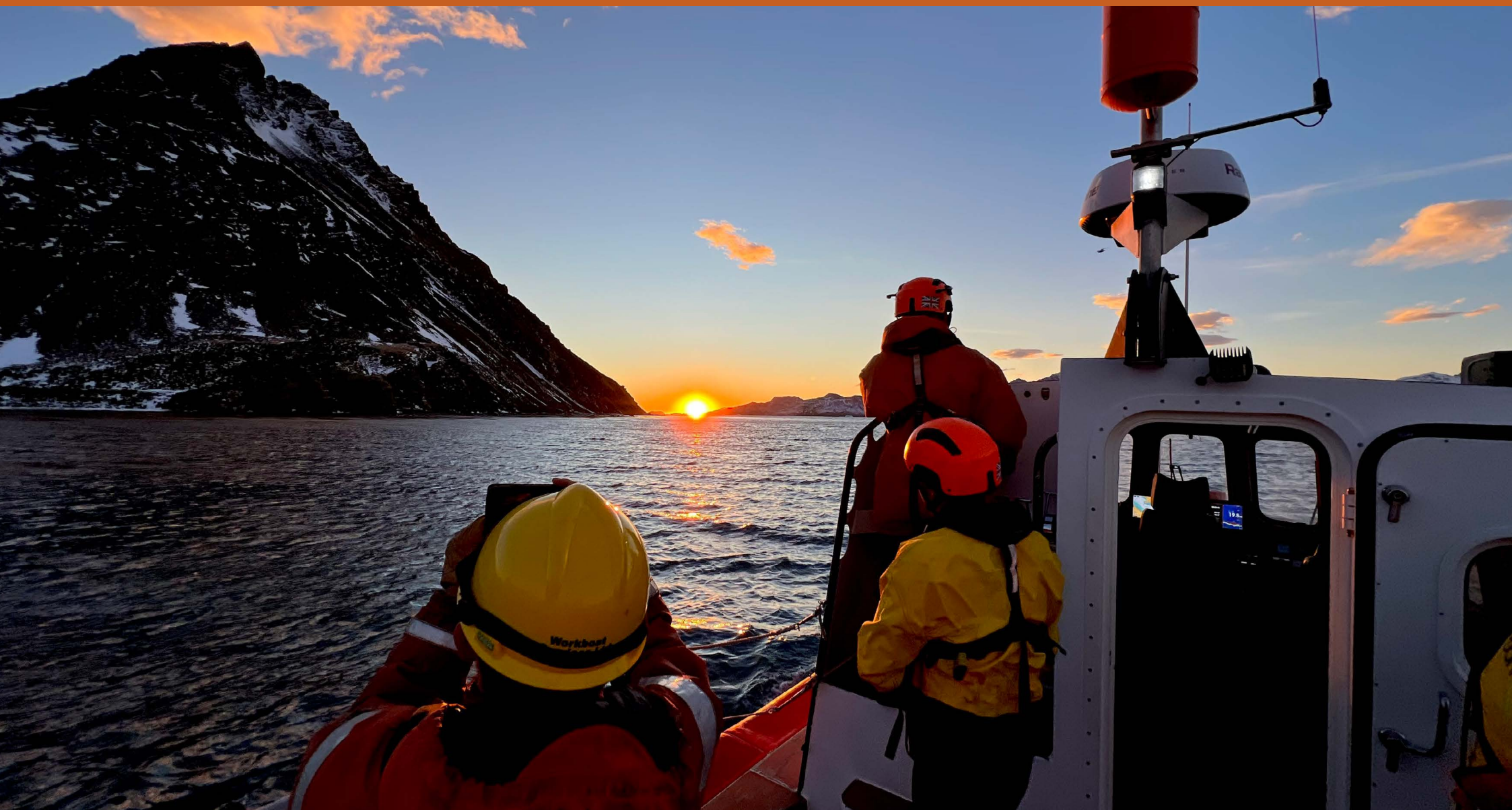




Annual Report 2023

Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands



Foreword

HM Commissioner Alison Blake CMG



These past twelve months in South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands have felt like a remarkable journey, marked by significant achievements towards the ambitious goals set out in our 2022 delivery programme. This annual report aims to recognise the dedication and hard work of everyone involved in making this progress possible—both within the Government team, and also within our growing community of passionate and committed partners and stakeholders.

We concluded the year by signing a new charter party agreement for the *Pharos SG*, ensuring her continued service as the Government fisheries protection vessel until 2028. After nearly 20 years of support from Byron Marine Limited, it was a privilege to see the operation of *Pharos* pass over to Workboat Services Limited, another Falkland Islands company. This transition underscores the enduring relationship of friendship, mutual support, and amity that exists between the two South Atlantic Territories.

In 2023 I was delighted to sign new Regulations into law that formalise environmental protections within the South Georgia & South Sandwich Islands Terrestrial Protected Areas, further complementing the long-standing, world-leading protections within the Marine Protected Area. This crucial step, along with the publication of comprehensive management plans for both these areas, demonstrates our unwavering commitment to protecting and preserving these globally unique ecosystems.

On the financial front, I am pleased to report that, following two years of Covid impacts on revenues, we ended 2023 with a budget surplus reversing the pattern of cash deficits seen in recent years. Our future focus will be on both financial and

environmental sustainability, recognising the need to invest in on-island capital projects, work in tandem with stakeholders to deliver shared objectives, and renew our aging inshore and ocean-going maritime assets, to ensure future resilience.

This year also saw the commencement of the second 5-year review of the Marine Protected Area, and also the process to recertify the toothfish fishery with the Marine Stewardship Council. Thanks to ongoing support from the UK Blue Belt and Darwin Plus programmes, an ambitious multi-year project to understand krill distribution in winter also concluded during the year, producing valuable data that will further enhance our understanding and ability to manage the future sustainability of the krill fishery.

As always, 2023 was not without its challenges. The arrival of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza required significant adaptations to our scientific and tourism activities during the summer season. I am extremely grateful to the tourism, research and scientific communities for their support in implementing our comprehensive suite of response protocols, as well as to those who provided much-needed additional expertise and logistical assistance.

South Georgia is an extraordinary place, and I feel privileged to be part of the team entrusted with its stewardship. None of the achievements outlined here would be possible without the support of our global community of partners and stakeholders. Together, we will continue to safeguard and celebrate the natural beauty and ecological importance of this remarkable Territory. Thank you for being part of this incredible journey.

Alison



Governance & Stewardship



2023 was a year where we saw many of the ambitions outlined in our stewardship framework *Protect, Sustain, Inspire* beginning to materialise. From the long-awaited passing of the Regulations that enact the provisions of the Terrestrial Protected Area, to the second 5-year review of the Marine Protected Area, to the completion of a scientific assessment of the impacts of climate change on the Territories, much has been achieved at a time when global events have diverted the attentions of many to elsewhere in the world. The coming year will see us take further confident steps towards the goals that have been set for the Territory, including updates to the currency, preparatory work to introduce a new immigration system, formalising of baseline ordinances that will clearly define the spatial extent of the South Georgia Maritime Zone, and the introduction of new policy and legislation for environmental impact assessments and biosecurity.



One of the priorities in 2023 was to ensure the continued service of the Fisheries Protection Vessel *Pharos SG* between the Falkland Islands and South Georgia, and the ship was successful transferred from owners Byron Marine Ltd to new owners WorkBoat Services Ltd in December. This provides GSGSSI, along with our partners and supporters, significant certainty around maritime operations until 2028. In 2024, we will begin the preparatory work to tender for a replacement vessel, as the *Pharos SG* approaches the end of her serviceable life.

We have maintained a productive dialogue with partners and stakeholders around the world, including the forging of new relationships. Representatives of GSGSSI joined the Red Ensign Group conference of UK maritime coastal states for the first time, and we also sent 2 delegates to the Overseas Search & Rescue training conference in Miami. This, alongside training for all staff in becoming "Human Rights First Responders" by the civil society group *Human Rights at Sea*, displays our commitment to becoming a mature maritime administration that upholds high welfare standards for all those working at-sea in our waters. Team members both new and experienced attended pre-deployment training at the British Antarctic Survey, as part of incremental work to support those deploying to South Georgia for the first time. Alongside this, newly-recruited Government Officers attended training in the safe conduct of at-sea boarding inspections provided by the Marine Management Organisation.



Governance & Stewardship

Further afield, representatives from GSGSSI travelled to the IMPAC5 Marine Protection Summit in Vancouver, Canada alongside Blue Belt colleagues, whilst others attended the COP28 climate summit in Dubai as part of the UK Overseas Territories Association delegation. Members of the fisheries and marine science team also attended the 42nd meeting of CCAMLR in Hobart alongside UK and industry representatives, and we were able to send 2 representatives to the annual conference of the International Association for Antarctic Tour Operators in Germany.



We also welcomed a number of visitors to our offices in the Falkland Islands, including the Director and Deputy Director of the Overseas Territories and Polar Regions Department, and the Minister Responsible for Overseas Territories David Rutley MP. Members of the Environmental Audit Subcommittee for the Polar Regions visited just before Christmas, before being treated to a COLD STARE flight in the MoD's A400 Atlas over South Georgia, ahead of boarding the RRS Sir David Attenborough for their onward journey to the Antarctic Peninsula.

Within the Territory, we welcomed the South Georgia desk officer from the Polar Regions Department FCDO on an operational rotation aboard *Pharos SG*, as well as a delegation of senior management from the British Antarctic Survey and a number of visiting science teams and expeditioners conducting research on the chinstrap penguin colony on Zavodovski Island.



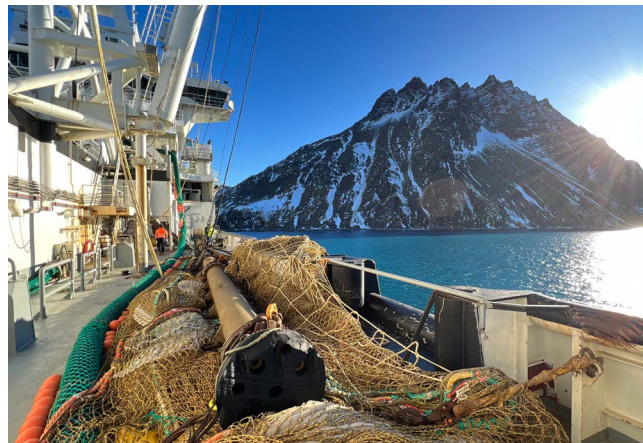
In May 2023 the teams at KEP joined with those in the UK, Falkland Islands and around the world to celebrate the Coronation of His Majesty King Charles III in Westminster Abbey. This included one of the world's most southerly street parties at King Edward Point, and naturally there were stamps. We also joined with other polar agencies to mark Polar Pride in November with the design of a commemorative South Georgia Polar Pride 50pence piece, which will be minted in 2024.



Finances



It has been another year for global uncertainty, however GSGSSI achieved a budget surplus at the end of 2023, reversing the pattern of cash deficits seen in recent years. Whilst the small economy of SGSSI continues to recover from the impact of Covid and the inflationary pressures seen in recent times, we remain mindful that events further afield can have a significant impact on island operations. We will therefore retain a cautious and conservative approach to finances in the short term, whilst we plan for a number of capital projects in the medium-long term.



Through careful financial decision making, our cash reserves were sufficiently protected to allow modest returns on fixed-term savings. In future years, a proportion of these will be moved to external investment funds with a conservative approach of security first, liquidity second, and yield third. A continued emphasis on growing and supporting the visitor offer, along with strong receipts from fishing licences has allowed for continued investment in our business support and corporate operations.

This has included significant upgrades to IT and telecommunications hardware and infrastructure at Grytviken, King Edward Point and in the Falklands, as well as continuous improvement in the business function of the Slop Chest and Post Office. As a result of a favourable cash position, we were also able to increase our financial contribution to the operation of King-Edward Point research station by 50%.



Staffing

2023 saw a slight increase in staffing FTE when in-house legal services were transferred directly to GSGSSI from the Falkland Islands Attorney Generals Chambers, and through the addition of a dedicated 2-year project manager to oversee the installation of the microhydro at Bore Valley. We also doubled the number of seasonal staff deployed into the Post Office and Slop Chest to better service increased demand from visitors.

GSGSSI's establishment at 31 December 2021 was therefore 16.7 FTE (14.8 in 2022) with a headcount of 18 (19 in 2022) inclusive of seasonal staff. Vacancies continued to be held in the Heritage Build Team due to a reduced workplan for the 22/23 and 23/24 seasons, and to enable workforce planning ahead of projected capital infrastructure works.

Pre-audit draft figures

GSGSSI Establishment at 31 December 2022			
Location	FTE	Headcount	Vacancies
South Georgia	6	7	3
Stanley	5.8	6	
UK	2.9	3	
External Secondees	2	2	
Total	16.7	18	3

Staffing costs continue to be extremely modest for a public sector organisation, at c.8% of annual operating costs.

GSGSSI Staffing Costs		
	2023 (000s)	2022 (000s)
Salaries	571	431
Seasonal Staff	86	181
Retirement Pension Contributions	4	5
Total	661	617

Income versus expenditure

GSGSSI ended 2023 with expenditure of £8.115million and revenues of £8.883million. Combined cash and asset reserves now sit at £40.857 million (£40.1million 2022). As in previous years, the vast majority of government spending was on marine protection, science, and the operation of the research facility at King Edward Point.



Strategy

Following on from the publication of the Government's implementation plan in 2022, during 2023 the following milestones were achieved:

The second 5-year review of the Marine Protected Area was undertaken with support from scientific and NGO stakeholders and partners.

We undertook an annual update to biosecurity guidance, so that all vessel owners/operators and visitors were made aware of SGSSI Biosecurity Policies before arrival. In 2023/24 this included additional annexes outlining a phased response to any outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza.

A comprehensive invasive plant monitoring and management programme continued to be funded, with the goal of driving down the prevalence of key invasive plant species.

A new Terrestrial Protected Area Management plan was published, in lieu of a National Biodiversity Action Plan, the latter being delayed by the publication of the new Global Biodiversity framework, agreed under the CBD.

A report on the effects of climate change in terms of the ecosystems in SGSSI was completed through a partnership with the South Atlantic Environmental Research Institute, including an assessment of potential future changes and approaches.

In 2024, it is the Government's ambition to:

Based on the outcome of the 2023 independent 5-year review of the Marine Protected Area, revisit policies and outcomes to enhance the protection of our waters, including by 2030 the key changes expected as a result of climate change and ecosystem recovery.

From the end of the year, ensure all vessels that operate within the SGMZ apply standards equivalent to ILO 188 to provide safe, ethical living and working conditions for all on board.

Assess which other international agreements we should join.

Working with stakeholders, deliver a science strategy that identifies the science required to deliver this framework and the wider management of the Territory and promotes scientific research of regional and global importance.



By the end of the year, put in place a new legislative framework for biosecurity, including measures for compliance and enforcement.

By the end of the year, review and update where necessary the legislative and policy framework for activities on SGSSI in view of the latest international legislation, guidance and standards, including the delivery of an EIA regime that is proportionate and effective in maintaining biodiversity conservation and sustainable activities.



Biosecurity

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza ("Bird Flu")

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) was first detected in brown skua populations on Bird Island on 23rd October 2023. This was the first confirmed case of HPAI in the Antarctic region.



In readiness for the likely arrival of the disease, the Government updated guidance on HPAI risk and response in the Territory ahead of the 23/24 season. This included enhanced biosecurity procedures and mitigation measures for different groups and activities depending on the risk at each visitor landing or science site. Visitors were subject to additional biosecurity measures including enhanced cleaning of clothing and field equipment when moving between sites with high densities of wildlife, as well as remaining vigilant for signs of disease.

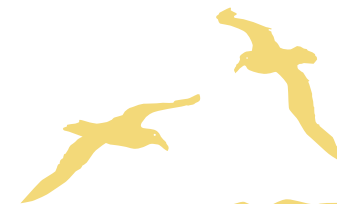
Following confirmation of positive cases, teams of staff from the Government and BAS mobilised aboard the *Pharos SG* to visit four additional locations at: Ocean Harbour, Hound Bay, St Andrews Bay and Moltke Harbour to collect swab samples from dead animals. Mortality at the sites, especially Moltke, was observed to be high amongst elephant seal populations. Swabs proved positive for the birds, but inconclusive for the seals.

GSGSSI worked with the UK Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) to deploy a veterinarian trained in more advanced sampling techniques, in order to confirm whether the disease being observed in seal populations was HPAI. This happened rapidly with

considerable support from the British Forces South Atlantic Islands to move the expert and specialist equipment to the Falkland Islands aboard the South Atlantic Airbridge, and then to South Georgia aboard the South Atlantic Patrol Ship *HMS Medway*. Sampling took place in December, and positive cases in elephant seals were reported in early 2024.

Throughout the summer season further cases of mortality, or symptomatic individuals, were reported to GSGSSI through a variety of channels, but predominantly from expedition staff on cruise ships. Samples were taken only when HPAI had not yet been confirmed in that particular species.

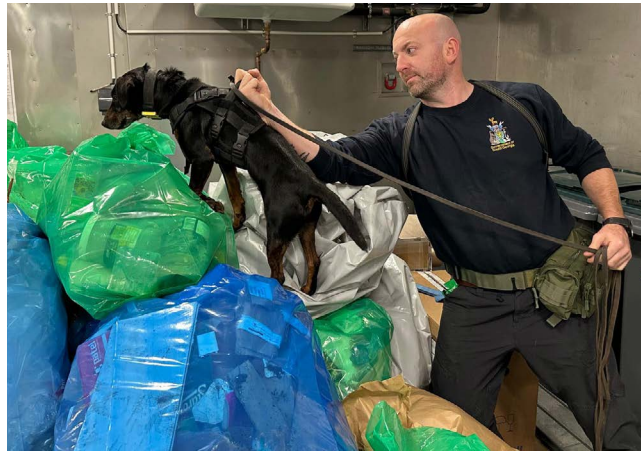
Measures were introduced to limit handling of any species confirmed or suspected to have HPAI. This resulted in modifications to some of the routine science observations and suspension in some cases.



Biosecurity

Biosecurity Dog Programme

In 2023 the GSGSSI biosecurity dog handlers attended intensive training sessions with Scent Imprint for Conservation, the Netherlands-based provider that supplied Hunter and King to the programme in 2022. This training continues to increase the theoretical and practical knowledge of the dog team. The handlers completed sessions on advanced detection techniques, handler-dog communication, and response strategies in the event of positive detections. The comprehensive curriculum ensured that the handlers were equipped with the latest methodologies to maintain the highest standards of biosecurity across logistics, visitor, fisheries and MoD operations. Later in the year, we hosted a trainer in the Falkland Islands under a reciprocal agreement to allow continued instruction in the operational environment. The trainers provided specialised instruction in advanced detection techniques and operational protocols, fostering a culture of continuous improvement. This investment in training underscores our commitment to safeguarding South Georgia from the threat of reintroduction of rodents, as well as increasing local biosecurity capability and capacity in the Falkland Islands.



Implementation of the Revised Vessel Searching and Reduced Biosecurity Audits at Grytviken

This year marked the successful implementation of revised vessel searching protocols and the introduction of a risk-based approach to biosecurity audits at Grytviken. These changes were designed to streamline processes while maintaining a robust approach to at-border biosecurity. The new vessel searching protocols have increased efficiency, allowing us to better manage throughflow of visitors coming ashore whilst still maintaining a robust approach. These modifications mark a continually evolving approach to biosecurity based on the most recent evidence and data, ensuring that Grytviken remains a secure and accessible hub for research and tourism.



Biosecurity

Training of the Rodent Incursion Response Plan on Island

As part of proactive biosecurity measures, drilling of the rodent incursion response plan that was revised in 2022 took place on South Georgia in early 2023. This exercise involved simulating potential scenarios of rodent incursions and testing our response protocols. The drills highlighted our preparedness and identified areas for improvement, ensuring that teams can swiftly and effectively address any real threats. The participation of on-island stakeholders in these drills has continued to foster a collaborative approach to biosecurity, reinforcing our readiness to protect the island's delicate ecosystem from threats.



Completion of the Second Stage of a Marine Non-Native Invasive Species Project

2023 saw the completion of the second stage of the Marine Non-Native Invasive Species Project delivered in partnership with the South Atlantic Environmental Research Institute (SAERI). Through collaboration with marine biologists and local experts, we have identified pathways for introductions of undesirable species into the South Georgia Maritime Zone, laying a solid foundation for future efforts to protect native marine biodiversity.



Marine Protection

Transfer of the Vessel *Pharos SG* from Byron Marine Limited to Workboat Services Ltd

In a significant boost to marine protection capabilities, the fisheries protection vessel *Pharos SG* was successfully transferred from Byron Marine Limited to Workboat Services Ltd in 2023, ahead of the scheduled expiration of the charter agreement in mid-2024. This strategic move ensures continuity of maritime capability with a trusted and proven vessel until at least 2028. *Pharos SG* plays a vital role in our marine monitoring and enforcement activities, and her continued service in SGSSI waters under management of a Falkland Islands company promises continued high-quality logistical support and maintenance. This transition underscores our commitment to maintaining a robust and flexible marine protection capability to ensure continued integrity of the Marine Protected Area.



Domestic Longline Toothfish Fishery with Additional Research Lines

The longline toothfish fishery for Patagonian and Antarctic toothfish operated under domestic measures again in 2023, and continued to include deployment of research lines in the Benthic Closed Areas which should be extended to additional shallow area research lines in 2024. These research lines support data gathering to better understand population trends in the fishery and to inform stock assessment of toothfish species. The collection of comprehensive data by onboard Observers is a key component in refining our approach to managing the fishery, ensuring effective commercial interests are balanced with environmental stewardship through a highly precautionary approach.

Participation by Staff in the REG Conference as Coastal States

In 2023 GSGSSI officials were invited to attend the UK conference of Red Ensign States hosted by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, enabling engagement with a much broader maritime community. This conference provided a valuable platform for sharing knowledge, discussing challenges, and exploring collaborative solutions in marine protection and maritime standards. Our contributions focused on successes in biosecurity and achieving human rights and other improvements in the fishery through the targeted use of licence conditions. Engaging with international peers at the REG Conference underscores our dedication to contributing to global efforts in marine conservation and protection.



Building Future Resilience

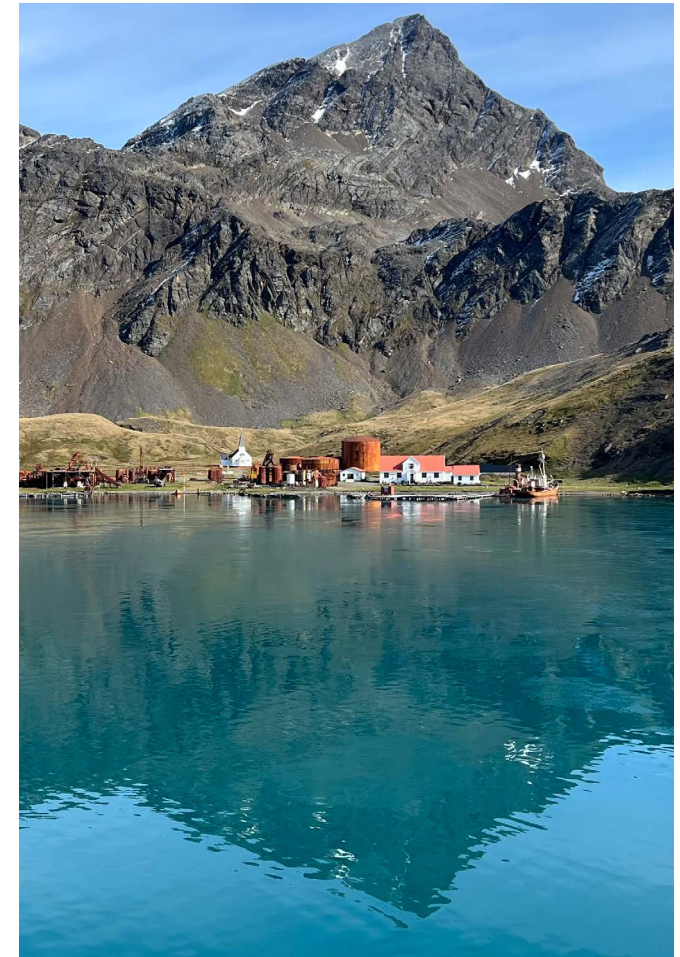
Work in this policy area highlights the Government's proactive approach to sustainability and preparedness. By investing in renewable energy, enhancing connectivity, and planning for sustainable infrastructure, we are fortifying our operations against anticipated future challenges and ensuring the continued protection of the Territory's unique environment.

Fabrication and Delivery of a Bespoke Micro Hydro Turbine for Bore Valley

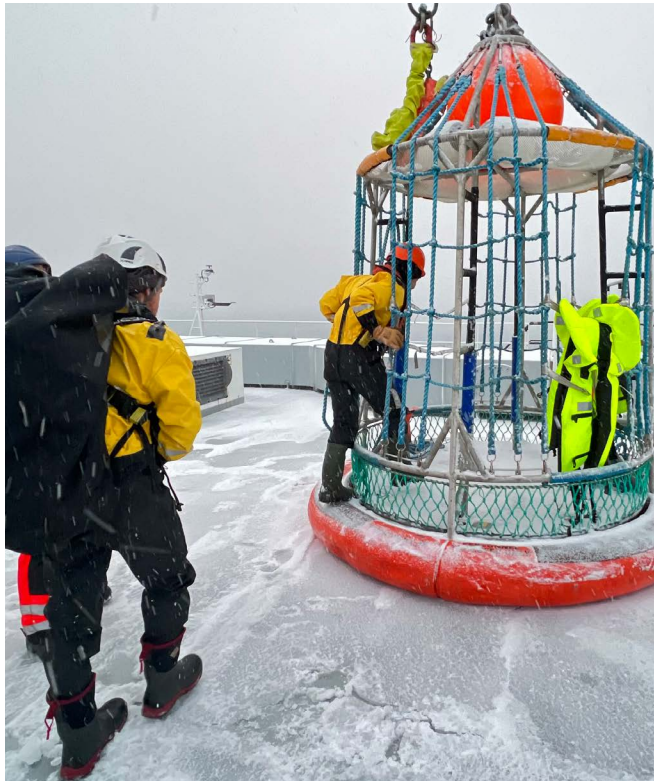
In 2023, we achieved a significant milestone in our renewable energy workstream with the completion of a bespoke micro hydro turbine for Bore Valley. The turbine, fabricated by previous suppliers to GSGSSI, Gilkes, represents a major step towards our ambition to meet the energy needs of all Government activity on-island from renewables by 2025. In September, we appointed a dedicated project manager to oversee the installation of the turbine along with other works. Initial site visits took place at the start of the season, with an experienced member of the GSGSSI build team collaborating closely with the project manager. This project highlights our commitment to reducing our carbon footprint, and enhancing our resilience to meet future energy needs.

Engineering Survey of the Boardwalk at Prion Island

In October, the Government completed an additional survey of the boardwalk at Prion Island, which has been closed for a number of years due to degradation of the structure. This survey forms a crucial part of work to develop plans for removal in the future. The presence of the boardwalk, which has served as a key infrastructure for visitor access and has facilitated access to the interior of the island for long term monitoring, is under review to ensure it aligns with our long-term conservation goals. The data gathered from the survey will inform consultation with the tourism industry and other stakeholders to ensure an appropriate balance between access, research and visitors.



Building Future Resilience



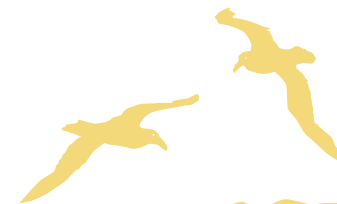
Installation of Starlink at Grytviken and King Edward Point

Towards the end of 2023, Starlink devices were installed initially at Grytviken and subsequently at King Edward Point to provide high-speed, reliable connectivity to support operations and staff welfare in these remote locations. Improved internet access is already facilitating better coordination of science and operational activities, has enhanced safety, and also supports the resident teams in staying connected with the broader scientific community and their families. This technological upgrade is a critical component of our strategy to maintain KEP as a resilient, well-connected research and operational hub.



Securing EU "Green Overseas" Funding for Renewable Energy Feasibility Studies

In a major boost to our sustainability efforts, in 2022 GSGSSI secured funding from the EU "Green Overseas" programme to conduct feasibility assessments for solar and wind power installations at KEP and Bird Island. This funding enables us to explore the potential of these renewable energy sources to meet our energy needs sustainably. In 2023 a tender was launched to find a delivery partner for this work, which will lead to a feasibility study that will assess environmental impacts, technical requirements, and economic viability, laying the groundwork for future renewable energy projects. This initiative aligns with our commitment to building a resilient energy infrastructure that supports our long-term sustainability goals.



Local Science, Global Impact

Second 5-Year Review of the Marine Protected Area

2023 saw the second 5-year review of the SGSSI Marine Protected Area begin with a multidisciplinary science symposium hosted at BAS Cambridge. Over 80 participants joined in person with many more experts attending remotely to hear thoughtful and engaging talks encompassing the entire ecosystem, from the tiniest plankton to mighty whales.

The symposium was primarily targeted at individuals and organisations who play an active role in undertaking research and monitoring work within the MPA, however the event was also made available via an online webinar to allow anyone with an interest in SGSSI or marine management in general to watch the presentations. The structure followed the different themes within the SGSSI MPA Research and Monitoring Plan, which was developed following the last review and provides a framework to guide science that will improve knowledge and understanding of the SGSSI marine ecosystem. Over 300 peer-reviewed papers relating to the SGSSI marine environment have been published since 2018.

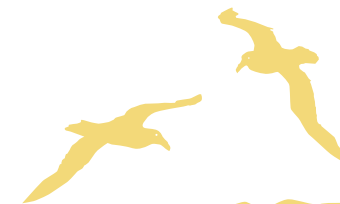


The key themes that emerged in discussions following the presentations were: the importance of maintaining long term monitoring programmes; a desire for security in future science funding; the importance of Blue Belt and Darwin Plus in supporting research; the need for a better understanding of krill flux in light of regional fishing activity, predator demands and climate change; concerns over declining albatross populations; and the need to reduce bycatch in fisheries beyond the SGSSI Maritime Zone. There was also a consensus that domestic management decisions taken by GSGSSI needed to be fully assessed to ensure they did not result in unintended negative consequences in other regions.

King Edward Point Science

GSGSSI funded science activities continued at King Edward Point (KEP) including observations of fur seal, elephant seal and gentoo penguin colonies, although seal handling and scat collection were suspended in December due to the confirmed presence of HPAI. The Darwin Plus "Winter Krill" project completed its second and final season over the winter of 2023, and sampling of four Eastern Core Box transects has continued every other month from *Pharos SG* with this work integrated into the KEP science plan. These surveys collect acoustic data and whale observations, along with plankton net tows and CTD drops.

The scientists at KEP have continued to support scientific observers embarked on vessels in the SGSSI fisheries through the provision of advice, sampling equipment, and processing samples. Long term fisheries work has continued in the form of age determination work for toothfish. Additional fisheries science work included a groundfish survey in early 2023, with 2 manuscripts in preparation using data collected during the time-series.



Local Science, Global Impact

Additional fisheries work supported by external funders included:

Evaluating the impacts of the South Georgia longline fishery on target and non-target species. As part of a Portuguese Government studentship, investigations have been conducted into the long-term impacts of the South Georgia longline fishery on target and non-target species.

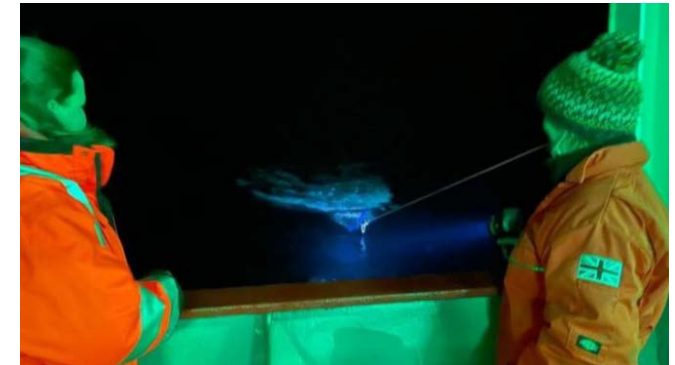
Spatial & temporal variability in Patagonian toothfish spawning. With funding from the UK Government's Blue Belt programme, a 6 month analysis of the spatial and temporal variability in spawning of Patagonian toothfish around South Georgia was completed. This analysis used 25 years of fishery data and showed a strong correspondence between spawning areas and the Benthic Closed Areas and negligible change in the timing of spawning.

South Sandwich Islands Toothfish. A PhD student is investigating toothfish-associated food webs of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

Climate change considerations into management of toothfish stocks. A Darwin Plus grant was secured to investigate ways to integrate climate change into fisheries stock assessments. The project commenced in September 2023.

A new Darwin Plus project "Hungry Humpbacks" was based at KEP towards the end of 2023 and will continue into 2024. The field team used the GSGSSI jet-boats and RHIBs to search for whales and undertake drone flights, as well as collecting biopsy samples and tagging individuals. A southern right whale was successfully tagged and biopsies were collected from blue, humpback and southern right whales. The marine biologists at KEP have continued to support the Darwin Plus funded Pelagic Biodiversity project alongside their usual workload.

Monitoring of krill dependent predators at KEP was disrupted by the confirmation of HPAI in swab and tissue samples from a range of species across South Georgia, including seals. Despite this, Antarctic fur seals in the study colony at Maiviken appeared to do well towards the end of 2023 with numbers of males and pups similar to the 22/23 season, but with a decrease in the number of females. Scientists from KEP have continued to support remote monitoring of various penguin colonies by the university of Oxford - covering the gentoo penguin colony at Maiviken, the macaroni penguin colony at Rookery Bay, and the king penguin colonies at St Andrews Bay and Salisbury Plain.

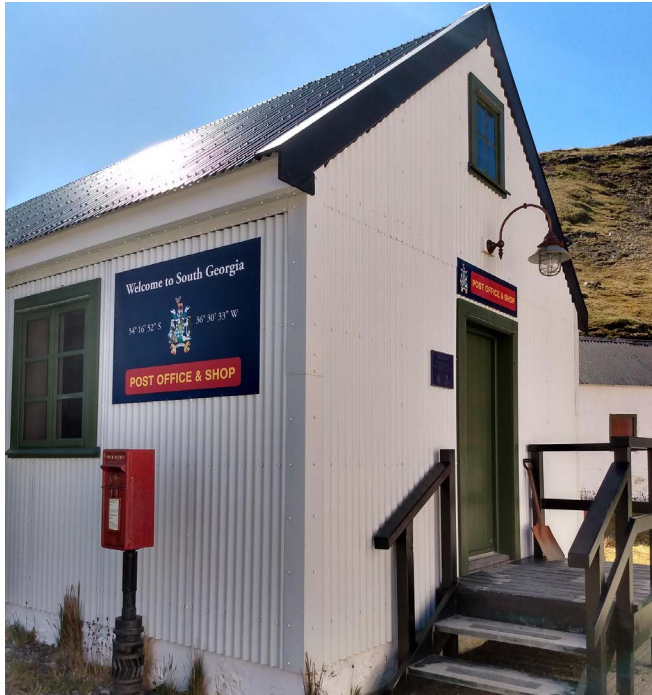


Long term monitoring of wandering albatross on Prion island continued throughout the year, with the fledging check on 11th October confirming that all 23 chicks observed to have hatched had survived to fledge. Monitoring of northern giant petrels and southern giant petrels also continued, although weighing of birds was delayed due to HPAI.

Science, monitoring and surveillance of the SGSSI-MPA continued to be supported throughout the year by resources from the UK Government's Blue Belt programme. This included funding of ongoing work by the UK's Centre for Environment Fisheries & Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) to investigate longline fishing interactions with seabed habitats using deep water camera systems deployed from fishing vessels, as well as support for the Groundfish survey.



Facilitating Sustainable Visits



The South Georgia Post Office and Slop Chest experienced a revolution in customer service facilitated by the rollout of a dedicated electronic point-of-sale system. Staff are now able to process card transactions with considerably more efficiency than had been the case with older, now obsolete card machines from a previous supplier. The number of stock lines were further enhanced to include a range of items sourced directly from suppliers in the Falkland Islands and Canadian Arctic, supporting businesses in remote communities. The most popular item was the inaugural South Georgia baseball cap that sold out within a few days of arrival.

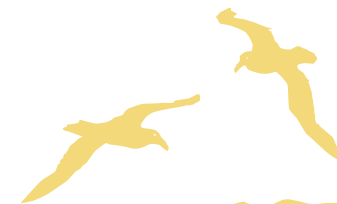
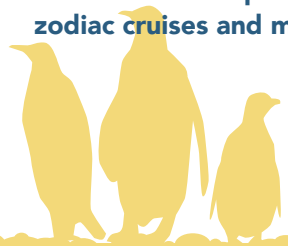
Implementation of the Regulations for the Terrestrial Protected Areas

On 30th October the Commissioner signed the South Georgia Terrestrial Protected Area (TPA) Regulations into law, completing the "Pathway to Protection" workstream that was commissioned in 2021. This was an important final step in ensuring holistic management of the marine and terrestrial ecosystems of the Territory, enabling continued conservation of biodiversity whilst delivering sustainable, low-impact activities including tourism. Over the last 3 years, the Government has been working with stakeholders to develop a management plan for the TPA and to enhance legal protections. At the heart of the Management Plan are key overarching objectives of: conservation; protection and preservation of the ecosystem; restoration of biodiversity; and ensuring that all activities are carried out sustainably with minimal impact on the ecosystem. The plan was published in 2023 and a research and monitoring plan will be developed during 2024.

Selection of a Preferred Contractor to Deliver the Entry Control Ordinance 2022

As part of the Government's ongoing efforts to enhance the management and oversight of visitor access, and working closely with the UK Home Office Border Security Programme, in late 2023 we selected a preferred contractor to build an IT system to implement the provisions of the Entry Control Ordinance 2022. This ordinance is critical for regulating the entry of visitors to protected areas, ensuring that all activities are conducted in accordance with our sustainability and conservation objectives. The chosen contractor has experience and expertise in implementing robust entry control systems, having completed a similar system for the British Indian Ocean Territory. This system will enable operators to apply for permissions in-advance on behalf of their guests and passengers, maintaining the integrity of SGSSI's borders and supporting sustainable tourism.

2023 saw continued buoyancy in the Antarctic cruise industry, albeit with more modest growth than was experienced in 2022. A number of landing sites were closed following reports of suspected and then confirmed cases of HPAI, however the industry were well prepared and provided a number of alternative experiences for passengers including zodiac cruises and marine-based activities.



Accessing Cultural Heritage

Throughout 2023 the Government continued to preserve and share the diverse human histories of South Georgia, working alongside our long-term partners the South Georgia Heritage Trust. This year was marked by a number of achievements and initiatives that increased accessibility to the South Georgia collections. Our focus remains on ensuring that the cultural heritage of the Territory is as accessible as possible – both to visitors and also those who are unable to travel to South Georgia in person.

Opening of the Ground Floor of the Main Store

In January the Trust and Government together opened the ground floor of the Main Store at Grytviken to the public. This new visitor space serves to illustrate how the interior of the whaling stations may have looked during the height of their productivity. The opening marks the end of a 5-year period of careful restoration and curation by the Museum team and members of the Government's heritage build team.



Successful Award of Funding for the: "Whalers Memory Bank"

The Government team were thrilled to hear of the Trust's successful application for grant funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, which will be used to deliver an ambitious community outreach project in Scotland during 2024. This initiative is designed to collect, preserve, and share the personal stories and objects of those who were involved in the whaling industry. The funding will enable the Trust to digitise records, create interactive exhibits, and host educational workshops, ensuring these memories are preserved for future generations.



Accessing Cultural Heritage



Darwin Plus Funding for the Creation of a New Whaling Exhibit

In addition to the National Lottery award, the Trust also secured funding from the “Darwin Plus Local” grant programme, part of the UK’s Biodiversity Challenge Funds. This grant will be used to create a new whaling exhibit in the South Georgia Museum at Grytviken. This exhibit will offer an immersive experience for visitors providing a comprehensive narrative that reflects both the economic significance and the environmental impact of whaling, as well as celebrating the recovery of many species in more recent times.

Visits to Whaling Station Cemeteries

The Government remains committed to its obligations as custodians of graves in the environs of the former whaling stations. This year, we facilitated visits to these sites to collect information on their state of repair. These visits not only helped us to take a snapshot of the condition of these important sites, but also provided opportunities for team members to pay their respects to individuals (relatives in some cases) who played a significant role in the cultural history of these islands.

New Zealand Antarctic Heritage Trust – Inspiring Explorers Programme

In our ongoing efforts to enhance heritage conservation efforts and networks, in 2023 the Government facilitated a meeting between the South Georgia Heritage Trust, UK Antarctic Heritage Trust and the New Zealand Antarctic Heritage Trust. The purpose of the session was to share knowledge and strategies for cross-territory heritage conservation in the polar and sub-polar regions. Later in the year, the Government welcomed an expedition of 22 young people from New Zealand to South Georgia as part of NZAHT’s “Inspiring Explorers” programme, where they undertook a number of at-sea and land-based activities and excursions, including a successful summit of Mount Hodges.

The Whaling Station Initiative – Stromness Manager’s Villa

Looking ahead, the Government has been working closely with the Trust as they formulate plans for a restoration project of the Manager’s Villa at Stromness Whaling Station to commence in 2025. This project seeks to preserve a key piece of physical heritage with a strong connection to the story of Sir Ernest Shackleton, and his escape along with his crew from their vessel Endurance when it became trapped by ice in the Weddell Sea. The Government will support the fundraising effort for this initiative by launching a commemorative issue of stamps and first day cover in 2024.



Enhancing Relationships

Throughout the year we have sought to strengthen relationships with key stakeholders across a number of sectors in order to foster a strong network of those who have an interest in South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands.

Media Outreach

September 2023 saw the first broadcast of the wildlife documentary "Evolution Earth" produced by the Academy Award winning production company Passion Pictures, and filmed in-part from the *Pharos SG* with assistance from GSGSSI during 2022. Episode 2: "Islands" and Episode 4: "Ice" featured the stories of South Georgia covering habitat restoration and species recovery, as well as the lives of penguins living in the region. The series was released on Sky Nature in the UK in 2024.

In October 2023, Mount Michael on Saunders Islands was the topic of a full size photographic feature in the globally renowned publication National Geographic entitled "The World's Loneliest Volcano". This was followed up by a television documentary "Explorer – Lake of Fire" which was broadcast on the National Geographic Channel in the USA and via Disney Plus and Hulu in the UK. Both pieces tell the stories of the first successful ascent of Mount Michael and confirmation of the presence of an active lava lake.

British Antarctic Survey

The Government's ongoing relationship with BAS continues to include the operation of the research station at King Edward Point and operational support from the *Pharos SG* to the BAS research station on Bird Island. In late 2023 a delegation from the BAS leadership visited KEP to meet with the overwintering team and to learn more about island operations post-Covid. Both organisations worked together closely in managing the response to the outbreak of HPAI and remain committed to shared stewardship of the ecosystems of the sub-Antarctic region. As in previous years, members of the GSGSSI team attended pre-deployment training alongside the overwintering teams at BAS Cambridge in September.

Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Living Marine Resources

Active engagement with the CCAMLR process remains a cornerstone of the Government's approach to sustainable fisheries management and marine conservation. Members of the GSGSSI team attended the annual meeting in Hobart, Tasmania as members of the UK delegation.



Royal Navy & British Forces South Atlantic Islands

In 2023 we welcomed the Royal Navy vessel HMS *Medway* to South Georgia whilst the incumbent South Atlantic Patrol Vessel HMS *Forth* underwent maintenance in Gibraltar. The vessel provided assistance to the Government in transporting specialists to the Territory as part of the response to HPAI as well as conducting shore landings at Grytviken and elsewhere.

Marine Management Organisation

The MMO provided support to the Government in the form of bespoke training for members of the fisheries team and Government Officers ahead of their deployment to the Territory. Staff were equipped with the necessary skills to safely undertake at-sea boardings and inspections of vessels in the relative safety of the UK inshore waters.

Enhancing Relationships

Tourism Industry

Following the easing of Covid travel restrictions, members of the GSGSSI team were able to attend two significant events in the Antarctic cruise industry calendar – the Sea Trade conference in Miami and the IAATO conference in Hamburg. GSGSSI presented updates to season planning and permitting arrangements including the tiered response protocols for HPAI.

Civil Society

The Government team in Stanley welcomed a number of visiting officials, parliamentarians and dignitaries from a range of organisations and countries, often in concert with the Falkland Islands Government. We were able to brief a delegation from Sierra Leone on the management of fisheries within the South Georgia Maritime Zone, and also met with representatives from Uruguay as part of efforts to enhance cooperation across the South American cone. We also met with the Minister responsible for Oversea Territories during his 2 visits to the Territory in November and December, during which we discussed the ongoing 5-year review of the Marine Protected Area and global efforts to ensure sustainable management of krill fisheries in the region.



Philatelic Outreach

In 2023 GSGSSI minted 4 stamp editions:

- Commemoration of the life of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II
- Celebration of the Coronation of His Majesty King Charles III
- BBC Frozen Planet II
- South Sandwich Islands Part 3





Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands

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