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South Africa Designates World's 6th Largest MPA

South Africa has started the process to designate the Prince Edward Islands Marine Protected Area, surrounding remote Prince Edward Island and Marion Island located in the southern ocean between South Africa and Antarctica. At a sprawling 180,000 square kilometers, it is the largest marine protected area (MPA) in the Antarctic region and the sixth largest MPA in the world, about half the size of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

“This is very good news and affirms South Africa’s commitment to MPA protection, as well as giving the world a bit of long-awaited protection for a piece of the Antarctic marine region,” said Erich Hoyt, Head of the Critical Habitat MPA Programme at WDCS and a member of the IUCN WCPA High Seas MPA Task Force.

The Prince Edward Islands MPA is set to confer various protection levels. A highly protected “no take zone” extends to 12 nm around the islands, as well as in other parts of the MPA, to help protect the heavily fished Patagonian toothfish. Other species to benefit from the protection include local killer whales, or orcas, long-finned pilot whales, sperm whales, humpback whales and southern right whales.

“Many people think the Antarctic region is already well protected — it is not,” added Hoyt. “This in effect presents a challenge to the Antarctic conservation body CCAMLR regarding the proposed Ross Sea MPA which is in international waters (on the high seas) of the Antarctic. Three weeks ago, in April, at the Antarctic Treaty meetings in Baltimore, USA, scientists and conservation groups led by the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC), of which WDCS is a member, pressed for a long-awaited network of Antarctic MPAs as well as a substantial MPA in the Ross Sea to protect this critically important ecosystem. We need now to take some big, bold steps.”

The Prince Edward Islands designation has been fueled by work from WWF-South Africa and other partners over the past 5 years who proposed detailed zoning plans for the MPA, as well as a draft management plan (see http://www.wwf.org.za/index.php?section=Publication_AboutUs&id=78). These plans are open for comments now, with gazetting and final designation due in July 2009.

Whales and dolphins have not been specifically included in the conservation plans but stand to benefit from the zoned protection along with other apex predators. Besides 10 whale and dolphin species, Prince Edward Islands’ waters include five albatross species; 14 species of petrel; substantial world populations of king, macaroni, gentoo and southern rockhopper penguins; and breeding populations of southern elephant seal, subantarctic fur seal and Antarctic fur seal.

The success of this grand gesture will depend on enactment of the management plan, creation of an effective management body, monitoring and enforcement. “It is up to South Africa to set it up,” said Hoyt, “but the UK, France and Australia which have island territories, as well as fishermen, in this region, can do a lot to help make it work — together with what we hope will be a visionary network of Antarctic high seas MPAs coming from CCAMLR.”