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Vast reserve to protect remote Prince Edward Islands in the Southern Ocean

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450,000 King penguins live on the Prince Edward Islands. Copyright Wildlife Extra

South African islands are home to vast populations of seabirds and seals.

May 2009. South Africa is to establish one of the world's largest Marine Protected Areas (MPA) around its Prince Edward Islands. This is an achievement of global importance which will help protecting a suite of spectacular wildlife, including albatrosses, penguins and killer whales.

The Islands, which consist of Prince Edward and Marion Islands, are located almost 2000 kilometres to the south of South Africa in the Southern Ocean, and form an important global biodiversity hotspot, which was subject to rampant poaching during the late 1990's.

Home to albatrosses, penguins and killer whales

The Prince Edward Islands is amongst the world's most important and diverse regions. But the islands, home to albatrosses, penguins and killer whales, have been threatened by illegal and irresponsible fishing practices in the past. The illegal fishing vessels around the PEIs were targeting Patagonian Toothfish. And the Albatross species were killed as bycatch in these operations.

Vast populations of seals and seabirds

Given the scarcity of land masses in the Southern Ocean, sub-Antarctic islands contain vast populations of seals and seabirds, which use these islands to breed and moult and are therefore critical to the conservation of such species. The islands support some 13% of King Penguins worldwide, five Species of Albatross breed there together with 14 species of petrels and five other species.



3000 Gentoo penguins live on the Prince Edward Islands. (C) Kevin Schafer/WWF

"This is a historic day in marine conservation in South Africa. All of South Africa's current MPAs are located very close inshore. The commitment of the first large offshore MPA moves South Africa into a new era of marine conservation," Dr Deon Nel, head of the WWF Sanlam Living Waters Partnership, said.

"South Africa has made a globally significant commitment to our oceans through its intention to declare this large MPA.," Jim Leape, Director General of WWF International said.

"In particular, South Africa plays a key role with several other countries including Australia, France and New Zealand, in protecting the amazing biodiversity and commercially important fisheries of the sub-Antarctic and, through this, helps to establish a fully representative, viable and effective MPA network for the Southern Ocean."

The announcement of Environment Minister Marthinus Christoffel Johannes van Schalkwyk, came after many years of close cooperation between the government and WWF.

At 180 000 square kilometres the Prince Edward Islands will be the fourth largest MPA in the world.

Seals

Three species of seal breed at the Prince Edward Islands, namely;

*Southern Elephant Seal and the sub-Antarctic and Antarctic Fur Seal.

*The islands support 33% (16 000 animals) of the world population of sub-Antarctic Fur Seals and 0.2% (760 animals) of Antarctic Fur Seals.

*0.26% (1800 animals) of the Southern Elephant Seals population is supported on Prince Edward Islands.

Penguins

Penguins dominate the avian biomass on the islands.

1. Four Species of penguin breed at the Prince Edward Islands: King, Gentoo, Macaroni and Southern Rockhopper.

2. The islands support some 13% (450 000 birds) of King Penguins worldwide, 4% (750 000 birds) of Macaroni Penguins and 0,5% (3000 birds) of Gentoo Penguins.

3. The population of Southern Rockhopper Penguins is about 5% of the world population.

Albatrosses

Five Species of Albatross breed on the Prince Edward Islands, together with 14 species of petrels and five other species.

* The islands support 44% (7300 birds) of all Wandering Albatross, 10% (21 800 birds) of Grey Headed Albatross, 21% (15 000 birds) of Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross and approximately 10% (4400 birds) of Dark-mantled and 2% (700 birds) of Light-mantled Sooty Albatross.