

MARINE MAMMAL AND BIRD POPULATIONS

6.1 During the Sixth Meeting of the Scientific Committee it was agreed that it would be useful for the Committee to periodically review the status of marine mammal and bird populations in the Antarctic with particular attention to those populations whose numbers were trending upwards or downwards. This appraisal might be undertaken at intervals of three to five years.

6.2 Accordingly, a single sheet format was drawn up for summarising the status of a given species at a particular breeding locality. This format sheet was then sent to the SCAR Sub-Committee on Bird Biology, the SCAR Group of Specialists on Seals, and the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission, seeking input of current information. Responses received during 1987–88 were presented at the Seventh Meeting of the Scientific Committee (SC-CAMLR-VII/9). These are discussed further in the 1988 reports of the respective SCAR groups (SC-CAMLR-VII/12).

6.3 While information sheets returned to date do not yet afford a fully comprehensive coverage of all data sources, they have stimulated interest in bringing together the various sets of long term data on the status of Antarctic seals and seabirds.

6.4 In considering these initial data, the following general comments made by the SCAR Sub-Committee on Bird Biology were of particular interest to the Scientific Committee:

- (a) While most downward trends in seabird populations appear to be attributable to the direct or indirect effects of human activities, no decrease can be linked at present with commercial harvesting in Antarctic waters.
- (b) In the case of the Wandering albatross (*Diomedea exulans*), the decline is probably mainly due to incidental mortality associated with fishing operations outside the Convention Area.
- (c) Increases in some populations (especially of penguins) may be due to increased availability of food at sea, but the precise nature of this is uncertain and, at least for the King penguin (*Aptenodytes patagonicus*), may be compounded by recovery from previous overexploitation.

6.5 The SCAR Group on Specialists on Seals observed that the abundance of the Antarctic fur seal (*Arctocephalus gazella*) is continuing to increase throughout the species' range. Around

South Georgia, the focal point of this expansion, the greatly increased numbers of wintering male fur seals, which take some fish (including *Notothenia rossii*) in their diet, might have implications for the population dynamics of these fish.

6.6 From the census data available, the population of southern elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina*) at South Georgia appears to be stable while populations of this species in the Indian Ocean sector are presently declining. In the Patagonia region and the South Shetland Islands region, fluctuations in elephant seal numbers were suggested to be linked with the El Niño Southern Oscillation event (SC-CAMLR-VII/BG/33, 34 and 35).

6.7 The SCAR Group of Specialists of Seals considered the data from surveys of seals of the Antarctic pack ice, noting in particular declines in population density values for crabeater seals (*Lobodon carcinophagus*), based on census data taken during the late 1960's and in 1983. The Scientific Committee endorses the recommendation of the SCAR Group of Specialists on Seals calling for repeated surveys of seals in selected areas of the pack ice to establish the basis for a reliable assessment of trends over a number of years. National programs were urged to take advantage of opportunities that may arise to conduct censuses of ice seals from ships cruising through pack ice area.

6.8 The Committee agreed that the value demonstrated by these initial steps in bringing together data on the status of marine mammal and bird populations in the Antarctic warranted further development of the process. It was stressed that attention should be focused upon counts made at a breeding site or defined area over a number of years under standard conditions, rather than single counts or estimates made in various seasons. The format sheet might be revised to this end.

6.9 Further consideration was given to the most practical means of extending this review of population trends. Recognising the valuable contributions made by the two sub-groups of SCAR in the initial phase, the Committee requests the Executive Secretary to thank them for the first step and to ask them if they would be prepared to continue to assemble such data on trends in Antarctic seals and seabirds and to review the material from time to time. On the understanding that both groups meet biennially, the material might be updated at their next meeting and reviewed at the following one, thus reporting to the Scientific Committee of CCAMLR within the time frame originally proposed.

6.10 The Scientific Committee of the IWC has advised that it plans to complete a major review of selected whale stocks in 1990 and will forward the results to the Scientific Committee of CCAMLR as soon as available.