

REPORT BY THE SCAR EXPERT GROUP ON SEALS (EGS) FOR SCAR XXX

1. INTRODUCTION

The group was established at SCAR XXVII in 2002, and currently has a Chief Officer, Deputy Chief Officer, a Secretary, and an expanded group of seven members. A new Chief Officer (Prof M.N. Bester) was appointed upon the retirement of Prof A. Blix. All others with an expressed interest in the study of Antarctic seals have been co-opted as members (92 at present). The group carried out most of its business by electronic means, and has maintained (a) an updated distribution list for communicating with the membership, and (b) the SCAR-EGS website (<http://www.seals.scar.org/>) which is linked both to the LSSSG and SCAR websites. Citations of current literature (2006-2008) pertaining to Antarctic pinnipeds are listed separately and are posted on the EGS website. The EGS website continues to feature the following: 1) History and Preamble; 2) Minutes of Previous Meetings; 3) Description of Antarctic Seal Species; 4) Updated versions of Status of Stocks Reports; 5) Participating (individual) Members; 6) Recent Relevant Publications (that replaces the Progress Reports of National Activities); 7) The Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Seals (CCAS); and 8) the Minutes of the Meeting to Review the Progress of the CCAS.

The group was able to meet on 27 July 2005 in association with the SCAR Biology Symposium in Curitiba, Brazil (25 – 29 July 2005), and again in Hobart, Australia at SCAR XXVIX (11 July 2006). The minutes of these meetings are posted on the SCAR-EGS website. The current status of the stocks of Antarctic fur seals, Subantarctic fur seals and southern elephant seals, as far as it is known, was reviewed and posted on the EGS website, while the status of the pack ice seals (Ross-, Weddell-, crabeater- and leopard-seals) awaits the outcome of the APIS Program, which is established as a separate and independent SCAR Scientific Program Group. A summary update on the progress and products of the APIS Program was presented at the 2007 XXX ATCM Meeting (posted on the EGS website), together with a White Paper on the status of knowledge of the biology, distribution and abundance of the Ross seal.

2. DEVELOPMENTS IN SEAL RESEARCH

Progress reports of national activities:

It was decided prior to SCAR XXVIX to discontinue the solicitation of research reports from Antarctic seal researchers in advance of the SCAR meetings as these do not represent all current developments in seal research. In lieu of this, citations of current literature are posted on the EGS website.

Exchange of research results and dissemination of relevant information:

Citations of current literature (2006 – 2008) pertaining to Antarctic pinnipeds are listed separately and posted on the EGS website.

Membership in the EGS subcommittee:

Membership is open to any scientist interested in Antarctic seals. A membership list was drawn up by canvassing through the distribution list; the membership list is posted on the website. Canvassing new members has been discontinued as we await the SCAR Executive approved merger of the EGS and EG on Birds. The core group of 7 persons, in addition to the three SCAR-appointed officers (listed on the EGS website) will stand down at the end of the SCAR XXX EGS Meeting.

The Antarctic Pack Ice Seal (APIS) field research program was concluded in 2000. National programs have continued to publish the findings of their independent research efforts under the internationally coordinated umbrella program. In response to a query in 2006 to the APIS Scientific Program Group regarding the status of the program, the EGS provided a summary of all research efforts and products by national programs (<http://www.seals.scar.org/pdf/IntAPISSummUpdateRevis.pdf>) to SCAR in 2006 which was subsequently presented by SCAR at the 2007 ATCM Meeting. Additional publications from the national APIS programs and research groups will be updated on the EGS website.

3. CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF ANTARCTIC SEALS (CCAS)

Review of returns

Parties to the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Seals (CCAS) and the Antarctic Treaty are required to report annually on certain activities conducted on seals during the previous year, and to provide these reports to other Contracting Parties and to SCAR. As in the past, the return of reports has been limited, in spite of the simple formats for the reports, which now also dispense with 'nil' reporting.

However, the EGS has no evidence to indicate that the number of Antarctic seals that have been "killed and captured" for scientific purposes exceeds a negligible level. Furthermore, we are unaware of any commercial sealing in the Antarctic since 1986/87. Therefore, there is no evidence that directed takes of seals are posing any threat to Antarctic seal populations.

Status of Stocks.

The current status of Antarctic fur seals, Subantarctic fur seals and southern elephant seals, as far as it is known, is posted on our website. Regional estimates of abundance of pack ice seals have been variously reported in the scientific literature by national programs and those publications are reported at the EGS website and updated annually. An integration of regional survey efforts is in progress, to the extent that consistency of survey methods and effort among those surveys allow.

Both Antarctic fur seals and Subantarctic fur seals continue to increase over their entire range, some populations of *A. gazella* (Bouvetoya, South Shetlands and the South Sandwich Islands) and *A. tropicalis* (Ile Amsterdam) having stabilized subsequent to a slowing down of the population growth rate as breeding space at the various sites has become increasingly saturated. Recent data especially for the fur seal populations at

McDonald, South Orkney, Gough and the Tristan da Cunha islands as well as Iles Kerguelen, Iles Crozet and Ile Saint Paul are needed.

Recent data for three stocks (South Georgia, Macquarie Island and Iles Kerguelen stocks) indicate that most formerly declining southern elephant seal populations have stabilized and some appear to be on the increase. Census data remain overdue for Campbell and Antipodes Islands, the whole of the Falkland, South Orkney, South Shetland, South Sandwich Islands and the Iles Crozet populations, as well as recent data for South Georgia.

4. ANTARCTIC TREATY AND THE COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION (CEP)

Provisions of Article 8 of Annex II to the Environmental Protocol require a continuing review of conservation measures for Antarctic fauna and flora. A review of the list of Specially Protected Species in Appendix A to Annex II was undertaken by SCAR in response to a request by CEP in 1999. The adoption of Measure 4 (2006) on Specially Protected Species: Fur Seals (Annex A) at ATCM XXIX in Edinburgh during June 2006 removed the *Arctocephalus* species from the list of specially protected species. A White Paper on the status of knowledge of the biology, distribution and abundance of the Ross seal was prepared by the EGS (submitted to SCAR in 2007) and subsequently tabled at ATCM XXX in New Delhi (2007). Working Paper 27, presented by SCAR at ATCM XXX, recommended that the status of the Ross seal remains unchanged as a Specially Protected Species, consistent with the recommendation that data deficiency should signal the need to collect additional data, not change a species' status. It was further recommended (point 16) that SCAR, in consultation with the Parties, CCAMLR and other expert bodies as appropriate, should establish how further assessments of population size and trends of the Ross seal can best be undertaken to improve the availability of comparable data.

5. CONVENTION FOR THE CONSERVATION OF ANTARCTIC MARINE LIVING RESOURCES (CCAMLR)

The CCAMLR Scientific Committee previously had a standing request to SCAR to provide an update of Antarctic pinniped status and trends every 5 years. The EGS provided an update for CCAMLR's consideration in 2005. However, the LSSSG (at SCAR XXVIX) indicated that CCAMLR will no longer request additional status reports until a workshop is held to articulate exactly what is needed for CCAMLR's Ecosystem Monitoring and Management Program. The CCAMLR Predator Abundance workshop was held in mid-June 2008.

6. SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE ON ANTARCTIC RESEARCH (SCAR)

SCAR has not requested advice from the EGS during the past two years. Unsolicited advice has not been provided.

7. EGS PLANS FOR THE PERIOD 2008-2010

The EGS will be disbanded as of SCAR XXX.

8. FINANCIAL REQUESTS

The reorganisation of the EGS (and the EGB) into an EG on Higher Predators (EGHP) requires funding, the extent to which needs to be determined by the LSSSG.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS TO SCAR

- (a) The new EGHP should continue to target individual researchers and research groups that are conducting research on Antarctic Seals for information on seal stocks.
- (b) Retain the separate listings in the current EGS website in a new EGHP website.
- (c) Carry forward the obligations to CCAS to the EGHP.
- (d) Encourage CCAS to call a meeting to review the operation of the Convention.
- (e) Establish an ad hoc group to provide a protocol for how further monitoring of the Ross seal population in Antarctica can best be undertaken.

EGS Chair and Secretary

30 June 2008