

Gaining weight, but not yet waterproof: penguins still need care

Title

As at 9 May, there are around 400 penguins remaining in the rehabilitation centre on Tristan ? there have been no further releases since 3 April. All remaining birds have gained weight well, but their feathers appear in poor condition after having been oiled and then washed. Release of these birds cannot occur until they are in excellent condition, as sending them into a cold south Atlantic without their waterproofing intact would be disastrous. Around 25 Tristanians are still working full time with the penguins, and the entire community remains dedicated to seeing the remaining birds head out to sea as soon as possible. Sadly, the overall rate of rehabilitation of the rescued penguins has been extremely low, with around an 88% mortality rate amongst those birds that were moved to Tristan. This is a much higher mortality than in other oiling incidents, and we hope that lessons can be learned that will improve this figure in any future incidents. The extreme remoteness of the Tristan islands and the necessary delay (at least 6 days sail from Cape Town) in getting vital supplies and staff to the islands probably contributed to the low survival, as birds would have been consuming toxic oil from their feathers for more than a week before rescue was undertaken. All remaining wild penguins have now departed from the islands, and headed off to their winter feeding grounds. We will not know the true impact of this calamity on the population until the birds return to breed on the islands in August and September this year. The wreck of the *MS Oliva* remains in the water near Nightingale, and some oil is still leaking from the vessel ? it is likely that winter storms will break the wreck up, and will disperse this oil, but we will need to continue to monitor the situation for possible impact on returning birds. The ongoing impact on Tristan?s lobster fishery is also unknown but being investigated. RSPB?s Brad Robson will travel to Tristan in September to assist the Conservation Department with their annual rockhopper census ? Brad knows the islands well, having spent a year living there with his family in 2008/09. We hope that some of the measures taken by the Tristan team, such as corralling penguins on land to prevent their exposure to oil, will have saved the lives of numerous birds. To-date, the insurers of the *MS Oliva* have paid for all the rehabilitation and clean-up efforts, and we hope they will continue to act responsibly in the coming months and years. There will, however, undoubtedly be some work that cannot be funded through insurance. One area where funds raised through the appeal can contribute will be ensuring that the people of Tristan da Cunha have sufficient resources on-hand locally to deal with any future oiling incident rapidly and without awaiting supplies from Cape Town. The community now has significant expertise in penguin rehabilitation, and we hope this can be shared with other

South Atlantic islands (e.g. the Falklands and the French territories) to enable them to also mount rapid responses if an incident like this one occurs in the future.