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## Pan-American Scientific Delegation Visit to the Falkland Islands

*Lindsay R. Chura and Raymond Arnaudo*

**S**PURRED by mounting recognition of the increasingly prominent role that science and environmental issues play in diplomacy, the first ever Pan-American Science Delegation to the Falkland Islands convened in January 2015. The delegation was organized by the South Atlantic Environmental Research Institute (SAERI) in collaboration with the UK Science and Innovation Network and the Falkland Islands government.

Delegates representing seven countries participated in this immersive scientific visit to the Falklands. We, the authors, were joined by nine senior researchers (heads of institutes and heads of departments) from Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and the United States. A range of fields were represented, including marine biology, climate science, botany, and geology. A representative from National Geographic and three filmmakers from Uruguay documented this landmark visit.

As an archipelago teeming with wildlife, and home to a small but growing number of scientists based at SAERI, the Falkland Islands are a gateway to the wider South Atlantic and a unique destination for international researchers

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to conduct fieldwork. Falklands-based experts from SAERI, the South Georgia government, the Falkland Islands Government Fisheries Department, and other environmental organizations briefed delegates on their work and highlighted areas ripe for collaborative research. Indeed, the overarching objective of this scientific mission was to showcase the range of research opportunities in the natural and physical environments in the Falkland Islands and wider South Atlantic.

Situated in the South Atlantic on the Patagonian Shelf, the Falkland Islands bring together two marine ecosystems: a southern temperate ecosystem and a subantarctic ecosystem. Enormous fishery and marine resources are supported by the Patagonian Shelf, which attracts fishing fleets from many countries. The ocean's fecundity also draws globally important seabird populations to the archipelago; the Falkland Islands host some of the world's largest albatross colonies and five penguin species. The region has a tradition of solid marine research and scientific study in support of sustainable fisheries and conservation. Its marine environments are near pristine but not as well studied as the land-based ecosystems. As a result, the Falkland Islands and South Georgia boast excellent natural sites for studying past climate trends and for investigating the historic populations and distributions of animals and plants. These include lake sediments and peat bogs that date back to the last ice age in some areas. Several delegates used the opportunity presented by this trip to apply for research permits and collect samples in order to explore future collaborative studies. Visits around the Falklands allowed delegates to immerse themselves in the field. We were struck by the diverse array of wildlife species dotted across the landscape—penguins, sea lions, and rare birds, to name but a few.

Engagement with the wider community was an important component of this trip, and time was carved out for both formal and informal interactions. Public forums served as an opportunity for delegates to present their research and to explain how their time in the Falklands will influence their future work. We also met members of the local business community—including several from the fishery sector. The members of the Legislative Assembly of the Falkland Islands actively participated in the visit, highlighting the government's strong commitment to environmental science. This support was further articulated at a reception that the governor hosted at Government House for delegates and members of the local community. Our conversations throughout the trip helped put into context the central role that the environment plays in the lives of Falkland Islanders.

The geopolitical context of the Falkland Islands points to the important role that science diplomacy can play in forging new science-based partnerships in the region. The expansive wilderness that served as a backdrop for our scientific field visits was the site of the 1982 UK-Argentine conflict. In response to Argentina's call for negotiations on the Falklands' sovereignty, the Falkland Islands government held a referendum on the political status of the Falklands in March 2013 wherein the Falkland Islanders were asked whether or not they supported the continuation of their status of an Overseas Territory of the United Kingdom. With a turnout

of 91.9 percent, an overwhelming 99.8 percent voted to remain a British territory and, as such, the Falkland Islanders exercised their right to self-determination. The Falkland Islanders we met expressed a deep commitment to helping shape their community, and building research partnerships offers an opportunity to engage islanders in a global dialogue focused on science and environmental stewardship.

This scientific mission significantly raised the Falklands' profile as a destination that presents wide-ranging opportunities for collaborative research, and on all measures this scientific exchange has been hailed a resounding success by the Falkland Islands government and SAERI. The delegation's time in the Falklands helped define a number of scientific priorities for future collaborative research partnerships in areas such as climate science, marine biology, and oceanography. It was extraordinary to observe delegates from across the Americas forge a cohesive research network, and there was palpable enthusiasm for building upon these partnerships at an institutional level. Outputs from this trip include the development of memorandums of understanding between SAERI and the research institutions represented on this delegation as well as the submission of joint research grant proposals.

As global citizens, how do we work to ensure that the messages of environmental stewardship highlighted by this scientific mission are disseminated widely? Close encounters with wildlife on our field visits around the Falkland Islands served as a humbling reminder of how much we have yet to learn about the creatures that coinhabit our world. The delegates returned to leadership roles in their home countries expressing a renewed commitment to conservation, as well as heightened awareness of the policy implications underlying their research. In the coming years, the international network of researchers created by this scientific mission will serve as a springboard for future work in the South Atlantic at the nexus of science and diplomacy. **SD**