

Project Update: March 2004

When we designed our RSG project, our main goal was to generate some public interest for marine wildlife in the coastal area of San Jorge Gulf. The results exceeded our expectations: 372 people of all ages, jobs and interests attended our courses and conferences; the media broadcast our work and school students published articles in newspapers extracting our conferences. Teachers asked us for training to apply conservation concepts into their classes. Through the stranding and sighting network, we found a total of 12 cetaceans species stranded or sighted in the gulf, including 9 odontocetes and 3 mysticetes and we achieved the active involvement of local people and institutions in our work. In regards to our field work, we surveyed by boat a total of 1003 Km (543 nm) by random line transects techniques.

The most frequent species in the area was the Peale's dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus australis*) including mother-calf pairs. Schools of Risso's dolphins (*Grampus griseus*) were also found foraging in shallow sectors, as well as Commerson's dolphins (*Cephalorhynchus commersonii*) and Killer whales (*Orcinus orca*). All these species occur in an area where important tourist activities and new oil development plans have been announced, in addition to the current problems with growing fisheries. Six students of the Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia "San Juan Bosco" participated in the surveys. As an outstanding achievement, the Provincial Government involved us in the creation of the Marine Protected Area of Northern San Jorge Gulf. The information produced by our project will be crucial to zone the coastal area, according to the distribution and habitat use of small cetaceans.

In brief, we are really satisfied with our achievements. The aim of this project was to initiate a community-based education and conservation program for Patagonian cetaceans at Golfo San Jorge, setting bases for long-term studies. We succeeded, and now we have a better insight of the biological, social and political framework of this area. Therefore we have new goals and an appealing challenge to follow this track that we have initiated.