# Funding suspension puts Falklands’ landmark conservation projects at risk



The Falkland Islands, a remote British Overseas Territory in the South Atlantic, have witnessed a significant commitment to environmental conservation, largely bolstered by the UK government's Darwin Plus scheme. Established to support biodiversity and tackle environmental challenges, the initiative has provided nearly £1 million annually on average since 2018. This funding has facilitated a multitude of green projects aimed at restoring crucial ecosystems, preserving endangered species, and enhancing local biodiversity.

Katie-jo Luxton, the director of conservation at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), has voiced strong support for the initiative, underscoring the critical role of Darwin Plus in safeguarding the Falklands' unique wildlife. She warns that any major withdrawal of support from the UK could have devastating consequences for local conservation efforts. This concern is echoed by Sacha Cleminson, a principal policy advisor at the RSPB, who highlights a troubling trend of diminishing funding. "The pot has been shrinking, shrinking, and shrinking,” he stated, noting the growing worries surrounding potential complete withdrawal of support.

The achievements of the Darwin Plus scheme are noteworthy. Among its successes, the restoration of carbon-rich peatlands stands out, pivotal in the global fight against climate change. These peatlands not only store significant carbon but also support diverse wildlife, including essential seabird populations. Similarly, the initiative has played a critical role in the recovery of sei whales and southern right whales, species that suffered severe declines due to past whaling practices. Recent projects have expanded efforts to study and protect these whale populations more robustly, with ongoing research addressing their distribution and ecological needs.

The protection of crucial habitats such as tussac grass is another success story linked to the Darwin Plus funding. Tussac grass is vital for maintaining the health of native bird populations, which includes iconic species such as albatrosses and penguins. The habitat preservation initiatives executed in collaboration with organizations like Falklands Conservation and BirdLife International have identified essential areas for seabird breeding, facilitating proactive measures in marine management practices.

However, the recent suspension of the Darwin Plus scheme has raised alarm bells. Reportedly effective since 1 April, this suspension has delayed responses to numerous applications for funding that were submitted in 2024, hindering the planning of ongoing and future conservation projects. The consequences of these delays are profound, jeopardising the ability of local organisations to retain staff and execute critical environmental initiatives. The current lack of access to EU funding, compounded by the territory’s historical ties to the UK, further isolates the Falklands from essential international financial support.

The potential retreat from Darwin Plus casts a long shadow over not just environmental conservation but also the political relationship between the UK and the Falklands. As Cleminson remarked, a reduction in support could imply a distancing of the UK from its territories, which would be detrimental from both an ecological and diplomatic perspective. The RSPB and other conservation bodies are advocating for the UK government to recommit to its investment in these vital initiatives, highlighting their success stories and the urgent need to continue supporting the delicate ecosystems of the Falklands.

In recent years, collaborative efforts involving various stakeholders, including the Detroit Zoological Society, have further illustrated the multifaceted approach required for effective conservation. Ongoing studies have investigated the impact of disease and pollution on populations of rockhopper and gentoo penguins, findings that aim to inform more effective management strategies moving forward.

As the landscape of conservation funding in the Falklands faces uncertainty, the importance of sustained governmental support and international collaboration cannot be overstated. The future of the region's unique biodiversity hinges on effective conservation strategies and financial backing, making the next steps for the Darwin Plus initiative crucial for the area’s ecological health and stability.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://en.mercopress.com/2025/05/31/falklands-darwin-plus-successes-peatlands-tussac-grass-sei-whales-protection-of-rockhopper-penguins), [[4]](https://falklandsconservation.com/seabird-kba/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://en.mercopress.com/2025/05/31/falklands-darwin-plus-successes-peatlands-tussac-grass-sei-whales-protection-of-rockhopper-penguins), [[2]](https://www.darwininitiative.org.uk/project/DPLUS208), [[5]](https://www.darwininitiative.org.uk/project/DPLUS126)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://falklandsconservation.com/peat-wetlands-project/), [[6]](https://falklandsconservation.com/whale-projects/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[7]](https://southatlanticnews.com/2025/03/30/dzs-field-study-protects-penguins-in-the-falkland-islands/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://en.mercopress.com/2025/05/31/falklands-darwin-plus-successes-peatlands-tussac-grass-sei-whales-protection-of-rockhopper-penguins> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.darwininitiative.org.uk/project/DPLUS208> - This project, funded by the Darwin Plus scheme, aims to conserve cetacean biodiversity in the Falkland Islands. It focuses on translating diverse cetacean datasets into key outputs that enhance the capacity of the Falkland Islands Government and local stakeholders to conserve cetaceans, outline best practice mitigation options for industry, and deliver effective cetacean stranding response within the Islands. The project is led by Caroline Weir and is set to run from July 2024 to March 2027.
3. <https://falklandsconservation.com/peat-wetlands-project/> - Falklands Conservation is undertaking a project to better understand and conserve the vital peat-wetland ecosystem in the Falkland Islands. Peatlands are crucial carbon storage areas, and the project involves surveying four threatened native habitats across the Islands. Data gathered includes peat depth, sward height, invertebrates, flora, and bird life. The project is funded by the Darwin Initiative and the Falkland Islands Government, with support from the UK Centre of Ecology and Hydrology and the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew.
4. <https://falklandsconservation.com/seabird-kba/> - Falklands Conservation, in collaboration with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and BirdLife International, has identified nine seabird species in the Falkland Islands' inshore waters as Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs). These species include the black-browed albatross, slender-billed prion, southern giant petrel, gentoo penguin, southern rockhopper penguin, brown skua, dolphin gull, the endemic Falklands steamer duck, and sooty shearwater. This recognition aims to inform marine management and conservation efforts in the region.
5. <https://www.darwininitiative.org.uk/project/DPLUS126> - Funded by the Darwin Plus scheme, this project focuses on advancing Falklands and region-scale management of globally important whale populations, specifically southern right whales and endangered sei whales. The project uses telemetry to track individual whales and conducts boat and aerial surveys to address data gaps on distribution, abundance, and ecology. Management outputs include a draft Species Action Plan, Key Biodiversity Area assessment, and recognition of Falklands’ whale populations by regional regulators. The project is led by Andrew Stanworth and runs from July 2021 to June 2024.
6. <https://falklandsconservation.com/whale-projects/> - Falklands Conservation has been conducting research on baleen whales since 2016, focusing on sei and southern right whales in the Falkland Islands' waters. The research includes satellite tracking, photo identification, visual surveys, faecal sampling, tissue sampling, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and acoustic monitoring. The goal is to better understand these species' distributions, population size, ecology, and interactions with human activities to develop effective conservation and management strategies. The research has received funding from the Darwin Plus scheme and other partners.
7. <https://southatlanticnews.com/2025/03/30/dzs-field-study-protects-penguins-in-the-falkland-islands/> - A team from the Detroit Zoological Society (DZS) conducted field research in the Falkland Islands to assess the impacts of infectious disease, pollution, and tourism on wild rockhopper and gentoo penguins. The study, initiated in 2018 in collaboration with Falklands Conservation, involved gathering biological samples and health data from penguin colonies. The research aims to develop informed, science-based conservation strategies to safeguard seabird species in the region.