

EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

RESTRICTED

Title of Report: Application for permission to visit Beauchêne Island for shallow marine and coastal research
Paper No: 204/09
Date: 17 September 2009
Report of: Environmental Planning Officer

1.0 Purpose

To advise Honourable Members of an application from the Shallow Marine Surveys Group to visit Beauchêne Island in December 2009 in order to conduct shallow marine and coastal research on the island.

2.0 Recommendation

That Members agree to the proposed research visit to Beauchêne Island in December 2009, subject to the conditions listed in Appendix 1.

3.0 Summary of Financial Implications

None

4.0 Background

4.1 Beauchêne Island is an FIG-owned National Nature Reserve and is the most southerly and remote island in the Falklands archipelago. Lying thirty miles to the south of Sea Lion Island, the island is a pristine environment hosting a wealth of seabird biodiversity. This biodiversity includes the largest population of rockhopper penguins in the Falkland Islands, the second largest population of black browed albatrosses and the only breeding site for fairy prions in the Falkland Islands.

4.2 Historically Beauchêne Island has been visited infrequently due to its remoteness and difficult landing aspect. In more recent years access to the island has been strictly controlled by FIG in order to reduce disturbance to the wildlife on the Island and minimise the risk of invasive plants and animals being introduced.

4.3 The last permitted landing on Beauchêne Island was made in 2005 by Falklands Conservation as part of a study of the resident black browed albatross population.

5.0 Shallow marine importance of Beauchêne Island

5.1 Beauchêne Island sits on the edge of the 100m water depth counter, with waters to the north gently sloping up to shallower waters, whilst to the south, the ocean floor slopes steeply down to 1,000m. The conditions above this line are considered to be cold temperate as dictated by the Argentine Drift Current. Below this the dominant feature is the cold northward flowing Falkland Current which is essentially a branch of the Antarctic Circumpolar Current. The shallow marine environment is a critical part of the biodiversity of Beauchêne Island, but it is not well understood.

5.2 Beauchêne Island lies directly in the path of the Falkland Current 30 miles to the south of the Sea Lion Group so is likely to be an 'outlier' in terms of the biogeography of the Falkland Islands and may be a 'stepping stone' for fauna of a sub-Antarctic origin via the Burwood Bank. It could harbour a unique suite of communities and therefore may contain some quite rare habitats and species.

5.3 It is important that areas all around the Falkland Islands are surveyed as benthic communities are very much determined by oceanographic conditions, exposure and other environmental factors. It will be very useful to build up baseline data on the marine environment of Beauchêne Island as the only previous work done on the marine environment here (in 1995) was descriptive and not quantitative.

6.0 The proposed survey

6.1 The Shallow Marine Surveys Group (SMSG) is headed by a group of experienced marine biologists and divers and assisted by volunteers from the community. They have been collecting, identifying and photographing marine animals since June 2006. Their work is currently funded by an OTEP grant, with contributions made by FIG and Falklands Conservation. SMSG intend to use a private yacht and a team of twelve to survey Beauchêne Island and the Sea Lion Island Group in December 2009.

6.2 SMSG intend to conduct littoral, sub-littoral and coastal surveys of Beauchêne Island using the same methodology they have used at other sites in the Falkland Islands, including the Jason Islands, Berkeley Sound and Port William. This will facilitate an assessment of the shallow marine environment of Beauchêne Island and will allow a direct comparison of the shallow marine environment with other marine areas of the Falkland Islands.

6.3 The coastal survey will entail several members of the party landing on Beauchêne Island. This is a necessary aspect of the survey as the methodology requires a coastal survey of bird life to ascertain interactions between the shallow marine and coastal environment.

6.4 Further details on the research team and proposed methodology are available from the Environmental Officer.

7.0 Conditions of visit

7.1 As landowner FIG is entitled to control access to Beauchêne Island. Where FIG agrees to grant permission to visit the island, it is entitled to impose such conditions as it considers appropriate in the interests of the preservation of the environment.

7.2 The Environmental Planning Department is content for a landing to be made on Beauchêne Island to provide an update on the island and any changes or impacts since the last visit in 2005, subject to a number of conditions. These are listed in Appendix 1 and incorporate strict biosecurity policy and invasive species mitigation measures that are standard operating procedures employed on SMSG expeditions.

7.3 In summary, SMSG will be required to abide by the Falkland Islands Countryside Code, including controls over lighting fires, smoking and proximity to wildlife. In addition to this the survey group will not be allowed to stay overnight on the island.

7.4 SMSG will also abide by a strict set of diving regulations which they instigate on all dives. This will be enforced on the survey of Beauchêne Island. A copy of the regulations is also available from the Environmental Officer.

7.5 As with all visits to FIG-owned Islands, a Post Visit Report will be required to be completed and returned to the Environmental Planning Department. This will provide an update on the general environmental condition of Beauchêne Island.

7.6 SMSG has said that it will produce a full expedition report on the visit to the island and will also make a community presentation to inform the public of the results of its survey.

8.0 Legal Implications

8.1 As landowner FIG is entitled to control access to Beauchene Island. Where FIG agrees to grant permission to visit Beauchene Island, it is entitled to impose such conditions as it considers appropriate in the interests of the preservation of the environment.

Appendix 1

To: Dr Paul Brickle, Chairman, SMSG

XX September 2009

Conditions of visit to Beauchêne Island by Shallow Marine Surveys Group

Dear Paul

Your application for the Shallow Marine Surveys Group to visit Beauchêne Island during 1 December 2009 to 15 December 2009 was approved by Executive Council on 17 September 2009, subject to the following conditions:

1. All members of the Group shall be made aware of, and carry, a copy of the Countryside Code (see below).
2. The zodiac shall be thoroughly inspected for pests and organic material before each shore deployment.
3. Take note that access beaches may be occupied by southern sea lions, elephant seals or South American fur seals, so extreme caution must be taken while landing and alternative routes taken if necessary.
4. There is to be no smoking, use of fuel stoves or camp fires to be lit on any part of the island.
5. No rubbish of any sorts shall be left ashore.
6. Extreme caution shall be taken not to trample the burrows of nesting seabirds. Areas of high burrow density must be avoided.
7. Do not damage or remove historical objects.
8. No animals, plants or soil of any description to be brought ashore accidentally or intentionally.
9. No fresh meat, vegetables, fruit or dairy products (especially poultry products and eggs) shall be brought ashore. Food must be stored in airtight containers and be checked thoroughly before leaving the vessel.
10. Ensure boots, clothing and equipment are clean before going ashore, paying particular attention to soil and seeds. Boots should be washed in a biocide.
11. No person shall stay overnight on the island (except in an emergency). All accommodation and catering shall be provided on board the vessel.
12. A Post Visit Report form shall be completed and returned to the Environmental Planning Department.

For additional safety it is advised that:

1. A two-metre set be carried and a contact arranged in case of emergency.
2. All persons requiring access to be physically fit, given that access is off launches/ zodiacs and across rocky beaches.

Finally, access to this island is entirely at your own risk and the Falkland Islands Government cannot accept any liability.

(Signed) Antony Payne, Environmental Planning Officer, Falkland Islands Government

The Falkland Islands Countryside Code

1. Always ask permission before entering private land.
2. Keep to paths wherever possible. Leave gates open or shut as you find them.
3. Be aware of the high fire risks throughout the Islands. Be extremely careful when smoking not to start fires. Take cigarette butts away with you.
4. Do not drop litter*. Take your rubbish home with you.
5. Do not disfigure rocks or buildings.
6. Do not touch, handle, injure or kill any wild bird or other wild animal*.
7. Never feed wild animals.
8. Always give animals the right of way. Remember not to block the routes of seabirds and seals coming ashore to their colonies.
9. Try to prevent any undue disturbance to wild animals. Stay on the outside of bird and seal colonies. Remain at least 6 m (20 ft) away. When taking photograph or filming stay low to the ground. Move slowly and quietly. Do not startle or chase wildlife from resting or breeding areas.
10. Some plants are protected and should not be picked*. Wildflowers are there for all to enjoy.
11. Whalebones, skulls, eggs or other such items may not be exported from the Falkland Islands*. They should be left where they are found.

* Such actions (with a few special exceptions) may constitute an offence in the Falkland Islands and could result in fines up to £3,000.