

# FORUM

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## WORLD SEABIRD UNION: FORMATION, AIMS, AND PROGRESS

David B. Irons and John P. Croxall

In the last issue of *Pacific Seabirds*, Malcolm Coulter and Craig Harrison wrote an opinion piece entitled "Why does the world need another seabird group?" (Coulter and Harrison 2012). Despite extensive discussions held at the PSG meeting of February 2012 with regard to the World Seabird Union (WSU), and numerous responses to Coulter and Harrison (2012) posted on the PSG Listserve, it appears that there is still a need to clarify some misconceptions about the WSU, its formation, and its purpose. Therefore, instead of providing a specific response to Coulter and Harrison (2012), the representatives of the 20 member organizations of the WSU decided that it would be more constructive to clarify details on the formation and purpose of WSU. This paper is a brief summary of: (a) how the WSU was formed; (b) what its objectives are; and (c) what has been accomplished so far towards addressing these aims. We hope that readers of *Pacific Seabirds* will find this helpful and informative.

We should emphasize that the World Seabird Union is a new organization that is made up of representatives of member organizations, which is designed to facilitate collaboration on scientific and conservation issues that affect seabirds at the global level. It is intended to complement and will not replace regional seabird organizations, such as the Pacific Seabird Group; it provides a forum for collaboration between researchers working on similar issues in all the world's oceans. We appreciate the concerns expressed by Coulter and Harrison (2012), but we hope members of all seabird organizations will support the World Seabird Union while they continue

to participate in the successful operations and activities of the groups represented in this new organization.

### BACKGROUND AND ESTABLISHMENT OF THE WORLD SEABIRD UNION

The World Seabird Conference (WSC) was held in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada in September 2010. It was organized by an International Steering Committee (ISC), which consisted of 24 scientists who came from 14 countries and represented 26 organizations. During 2009, in the early stages of planning for the WSC, the ISC indicated that one of the main objectives of the WSC should be to hold discussions on establishing and improving access to information and data on seabirds globally, and facilitating the use of these data. Towards this important objective, part of the WSC program was dedicated to a series of workshops, later entitled Legacy Workshops. The aim of these workshops and their potential role in the establishment of a global seabird organization was set out in the abstracts for the workshops (see Appendix 1), which were widely circulated and publicly available well in advance of the WSC.

The outcomes of these workshop sessions were summarized during the WSC's closing plenary (11 September 2010). A transition team (the World Seabird Union Transition Team; WSU-TT) was set up to establish the objectives and mode of operation of a global seabird committee. The transition team has held quarterly meetings since WSC. All agendas, papers, and minutes relating to these meetings are freely accessible on the WSU website, [www.seabirds.net](http://www.seabirds.net).

The transition team agreed that the global seabird committee should be called the World Seabird Union, that it should be established as a legally constituted organization governed by a board of directors, and that it should be a tax-exempt non-profit corporation, for instance under clause 501(c)(3) of the US tax code. The World Seabird Union was formed as an umbrella organization and is made up of a representative and an alternate from each organization interested and active in seabird conservation and research.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE WSU

1. Ensure mechanisms are in place to hold World Seabird Conferences at appropriate intervals.
2. Establish and develop effective communications between existing seabird organizations and researchers.
3. As feasible, establish a global initiative to develop a system of seabird status and trends indices.
4. As feasible, establish mechanisms to facilitate develop and manage global seabird database networks.
5. Facilitate the development of seabird initiatives benefiting from global and/or regional coordination/interaction.

Progress with WSU initiatives

### 1. FUTURE WORLD SEABIRD CONFERENCES

The WSU-TT, with support from De Armond Management Ltd (the team responsible for the management of the WSC), sent a questionnaire concerning any future WSC to all who attended and who originally expressed interest in the 2010 WSC. The responses indicated

overwhelming support for holding a second WSC. Key aspects of the responses were:

(a) Fully representative response, with 524 replies in total, comprising 52% full attendees, 23% students and 23% non-attendees. Of seabird group members, there were responses from members of all those which sponsored WSC, with most from the Pacific Seabird Group (171), The Waterbird Group (71) and the Seabird Group (61); there were 158 responses from those who are member of no seabird group.

(b) For year of the next WSC, no clear preference between 2013 (35%), 2014 (26%), 2015 (37%). Similarly, advice on frequency was almost equally split between intervals of 3 years (25%), 4 years (30%), and 5 years (25%).

Several initial expressions of interest have been received, and the relevant WSU committee is in correspondence with some of these parties with a view to selecting hosts and venue for another WSC, probably in 2015.

## 2. COMMUNICATIONS.

The organizational committee for [www.seabirds.net](http://www.seabirds.net) has been working in the last year to improve and develop the current website. Since the 2010 WSC, the seabirds.net committee has put together a work plan for the website, and an approximate timetable (the plan can be seen at [seabirds.net](http://seabirds.net)). The website was created *pro-bono* by Grant Humphries. Upon receiving funding for development of seabirds.net, the committee contracted with Dragonfly Science Ltd. in Wellington, New Zealand to put the technical infrastructure in place for the website. The updated and “final” version of the website was uploaded in August 2012 and is currently active.

The creation of a seabird personnel database (PETREL) was a high priority. This database was launched in August 2012 as the flagship feature of seabirds.net. The directory will eventually be linked to a number of the databases that will be accessed through seabirds.net. PETREL acts as a communication tool for seabird scientists around the world by facilitating the search for

contact information, and through the ability to post discussions and news to the global forum. Further, the forum will be directly linked to social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter in order to better communicate to a wider audience. Seabirds.net is also a hub for links to seabird databases (the Seabird Information Network), and to WSU member organizations’ websites from around the world. Future plans for the website include the creation of an online seabird bibliography, a seabird job search (technician positions, volunteer field work, graduate and post-doctoral positions), internationalization of the website (translations into multiple languages, including French, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Mandarin, and Russian), and creation of a WSU “News Network” of individuals who would report news on the website from various parts of the world.

## 3. DATABASES AND RELATED INITIATIVES

**3.1 Global seabird colony register**—The WSU-TT agreed that it was appropriate to move forward with this database. It would initially use the data entry fields, and the rules of access and use that were recently implemented for the Circumpolar Seabird Colony Register, which was developed by the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) on behalf of the Arctic Council. The WSU-TT agreed to proceed by entering and soliciting data for areas complementary to those covered by CAFF (and by other existing major regional seabird colony databases). A compilation of appropriate source data has been prepared. In addition, agreement in principle has been reached with BirdLife International that seabird data for sites that qualify as Important Bird Areas (some 3000 worldwide) would be available for, and/or linked to, the WSU database after BirdLife launches its global marine IBA inventory in October 2012.

The global colony register can also help identify gaps in global seabird knowledge, and it could thus encourage collection or submission of data for colonies that do not have recent records.

It will help local conservation organizations identify sites of global importance that need to be protected, monitored, or managed. It will provide a standard for information that allows organizations in the most remote corners of the oceans to identify interesting sites and to know what data they should collect and manage. While such database skills and know-how are widespread in North America and Europe, the global seabird colony register will also facilitate communication about well-known colonies that have active monitoring regimes in different oceans, so we can compare how populations are doing using the same methodology.

**3.2 Population and productivity indices**—As with the colony register, the WSU-TT agreed that it was appropriate to move forward with this, initially using the data entry fields and the rules of access and use that were recently implemented for the Circumpolar Seabird Colony Register, as mentioned above. It was agreed to proceed by entering and soliciting data for areas complementary to those covered by CAFF.

**3.3 Seabird monitoring database**—The WSU is sponsoring the work of a 17-member Regional Coordinating Committee that has been tasked with development and implementation of a World Seabird Monitoring Database (WSMD), modeled initially on the data-entry fields and the rules of access and use that were implemented in the Pacific Seabird Monitoring Database (PSMD) of the Pacific Seabird Group. During 2011, the committee undertook code revisions of the PSMD web application to make it suitable as an online pilot version of the WSMD. Programming and deployment of the WSMD online will be completed during 2012, followed by efforts by committee members to solicit data entry on a regional basis. In parallel with its initiative for a world database of seabird monitoring results, the Regional Coordinating Committee is building a database of seabird monitoring efforts,

past and present, regardless of whether or when there is a commitment to enter the resulting data into the WSMD.

**3.4 Seabirds at sea database**—Advice on the desired next steps to enhanced links between existing databases of seabird records at sea is still awaited from the working group that was established at WSC.

**3.5 Seabird tracking data**—At the WSC workshop it was agreed to investigate developing interoperability between databases for tracking of seabirds. The goal is that, should data be stored in one database and not the others, links between the databases could allow easy access to tracking data from any of the relevant databases.

There was subsequent discussion on the technological issues surrounding sharing of metadata between databases. The result was an agreed format for sharing data, and an example system to test it was set up by Movebank (an international online database for tracking animal movements). The system works well, and each of the other websites has been able to read from it. In March 2011, representatives from Movebank, BirdLife International, and OBIS-SEAMAP met in Hobart, Tasmania, during the Biologging IV Conference, to discuss the next steps and various technical issues. (OBIS-SEAMAP is the Ocean Biogeographic Information System Spatial Ecological Analysis of Megavertebrate Populations.

Development of the user interface to read the data has been slow, however, due to resource constraints.

Work is ongoing to complete the sharing of metadata, but despite the fact that interoperability has yet to be fully resolved, each database has grown substantially on its own, and each is continuing to improve independent access to tracking data.

**3.6 Mortality events**—Beached-bird surveys within Europe are centered on strandings of Northern Fulmars (*Fulmarus glacialis*) and Common Guillemots (*Uria aalge*). The former species

serves as an indicator of the widespread use and discharges of user plastics into the marine environment); the latter is an indicator of the risks imposed by chronic oil pollution. Most countries around the North Sea have comprehensive beached-bird surveys, and many other countries provide more incidental data. All stranded seabirds and marine mammals are generally recorded. Some recent attempts have aimed at using strandings data to highlight the incidence of bycatch in fishing gear. So far, the proposed merge or exchange of data with other continents (as proposed at the first World Seabird Conference) has not materialized.

A valuable perspective on database goals of the WSU is also given by Hatch (2010). Scott Hatch, along with many other PSG members, developed the Pacific Seabird Monitoring Database. Hatch feels strongly about archiving of data, and this paper gives his views on how data sharing and collaboration could be managed at the global scale. His ideas have provided important guidance to the WSU.

## REFERENCES

- Coulter, M.C., and C.S. Harrison. 2012. Why does the world need another seabird group? *Pacific Seabirds* 39:10-12.
- Hatch, S.A. 2010. A world seabird organization and Seabirds.net: meeting the challenge of the new paradigm. *Marine Ornithology* 38:69-77.

## APPENDIX 1: Titles and abstracts of two workshops held at the 1<sup>st</sup> World Seabird Conference to explore the idea of a world seabird governing body.

**Introduction to the aims of the global seabird legacy workshops** (8 September 2010)

*Conveners:* David Irons (US Fish & Wildlife Service) and John Croxall (BirdLife International)

*Abstract:* A main objective of the WSC is to generate better communication and collaboration between seabird researchers and organizations worldwide. We hope to do this by: a) facilitating improved interaction between existing seabird groups by establishing a

formal coalition of relevant bodies and a web-based communication system, and b) establishing better opportunities and systems for assembling and linking appropriate data on seabirds. This series of workshops has been organized to discuss these objectives and the best ways of addressing them. This recognizes that many aspects of effective research and conservation of seabirds would be greatly enhanced by the ability to link and analyze data at regional and global scales. It is also important to enhance input of seabird data to current initiatives such as ocean health, climate change and marine biodiversity, which will require improved coordination of existing data and more effective links to data and databases on marine systems generally. In these workshops, we will review opportunities such as seabird monitoring (including colony registers), seabirds as indicators, at-sea distribution of seabirds and mechanisms to enhance collaboration and cooperation among scientists and seabird groups.

**World Seabird Governing Committee** (9 September 2010)

*Conveners:* John Croxall (BirdLife International), Pat Jodice (U.S. Geological Survey and Clemson University), Kees Camphuysen (Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research), and David Irons (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service)

*Abstract:* The purpose of this meeting is to determine whether there is interest in creating a permanent world seabird committee that would: a) ensure the next World Seabird Conference happens; b) establish effective communication between existing seabird groups (and/or broader seabird community), via a global seabird web portal; c) oversee the development of initiatives benefiting from global and /or regional coordination/interaction. If there is sufficient interest in a world seabird committee then it would need to establish, at this Seabird Conference, the basis for an appropriate governance structure and some key sub-committees, e.g.: a) WSC Committee: responsible for selecting host/venue for next WSC and then be-

coming/handing over to an appropriate Steering Committee and Local Organising Committee; b) Communications Committee: responsible for establishing effective and efficient communication between existing seabird groups (and/or broader seabird community) via a global seabird web portal ( It will likely require a permanent dedicated resource

to achieve this) ; c) Database Committee: responsible for establishing mechanisms to develop and manage a system of global seabird database networks, including development of appropriate seabird indices. (This will also have significant resource requirements).

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## SEABIRD ORGANIZATIONS

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While my presence as organizer of the world's first Seabird Group did not appear to be required at the World Seabird Conference, the World Seabird Union, which was proposed there and which has been commented on by Malcolm Coulter and Craig Harrison (*Pacific Seabirds* 39[1]:10-12), surely deserves consideration in the light of general past experience.

The first Seabird Group was formed to meet a need for better organization of investigations and conservation. As with the first major seabird observations during Captain Cook's voyages in the eighteenth century, the first thing revealed was a need for financial support for analysis of the results. Since then, support has repeatedly been raised to initiate large investigations, such as study of the distribution of birds at sea around Britain, or the Smithsonian's Pacific

Ocean Biological Survey Program and the Alaskan Outer Continental Shelf Environmental Assessment Program (OCSEAP) in America—only for them to collapse under the weight of their results when the support was discontinued.

While the excess profits from the World Seabird Conference may serve to initiate a World Seabird Union, they are unlikely to maintain it for long, and in view of past experience with governments, they are unlikely to be any good for sustained support either. If the proposed organization is to last, it will probably be necessary to raise an army of subscribers to support it. Is the present organization capable of this?

Then when it comes to observations, initially we found that the first necessity is to secure uniformity of technique to make the data compatible, and then (like Captain Cook's crew) we found that we

had inadequate data processing, communication, and publishing facilities. These things are now easier to secure, but again there is a need to be sure that they remain available. There is also a need to incorporate a variety of past observations that are likely to be of historical value, which will need careful organization and a great deal of uninspiring labor. I am sitting on a good deal of past data myself, and when I am unlikely to last much longer, what can I do with it (or with my library)? There is a need to develop facilities to handle such things; but can the proliferating bureaucracy revealed in the 2011 report of the World Seabird Union handle them?

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