After many years of hopes, plans and not a few frustrations, the South Georgia Habitat Restoration Project was officially launched by HRH the Princess Royal at the Royal Geographical Society in London on 10th November 2009.

HRH was present at the event in her role as Patron of SGHT and announced a very generous donation to the South Georgia Heritage Trust from SGHT Trustee Professor Frederik Paulsen. Thanks to Professor Paulsen, the Island Foundation and the Rufford Maurice Laing foundation, phase 1 funding has been secured.

The event took place some seven months after Her Royal Highness made her first visit to South Georgia, as a guest of the South Georgia Heritage Trust aboard the MV Grigoriy Mikeev. During this voyage, the Princess was not only spellbound by the beauty of the island, but also became aware of how its wildlife and ecology could be transformed for the better if it could be freed of the mammals introduced by man over the past two centuries.

The Habitat Restoration Project
The aim of the Project is to sweep away the ecological damage brought about by invasive mammals on the island, and allow literally millions of birds to return and breed. Not only will this promote the recovery of bird populations, but it will also restore the native terrestrial ecology of the island, benefitting the native plants and invertebrates of this remote and stunningly beautiful outpost.

The Problem
Introduced alien species are now known to be responsible for a huge loss of biodiversity worldwide, second only to habitat destruction, and the effects are especially profound on islands. Unknowingly, whalers and sealers allowed stowaway rats to go ashore at many sites on South Georgia, and descendents of those stowaways subsequently spread throughout most of the vegetated parts of the island.

Accomplished predators, the rats consumed the eggs and young of millions of seabirds, to the effect that most species today are greatly reduced in number and completely excluded from areas where rats occur. Another ground nesting bird - the South Georgia pipit - was similarly eradicated from most of the island, and is now confined to the rat-free oases of offshore islands and a narrow strip of inhospitable coastline. It is found nowhere else in the world, and has now lost over 70% of its former habitat to rats.
The spread of rats on South Georgia continues today, their progress only limited by physical barriers - the sea and large areas of permanent ice. With global warming, however, the glaciers on South Georgia are in rapid retreat, so areas of the island once protected from rats have now been over-run. Even islands currently free of rats are unlikely to retain their status. One such - Saddle Island - has been recently invaded, and others are likely to follow when rats enjoy a ride on a mat of vegetation, or are swept onto a remote shore by the sea.

**The Solution**

Until recently, there was no realistic expectation of being able to control rodent pests on whole islands, let alone remove them entirely. But great strides have been made in the aerial application of toxic bait in the past two decades, and increasingly large islands are now being tackled successfully. More than 300 islands have now been cleared of invasive species worldwide, and the results have been spectacular - in most cases exceeding even the high expectations of those carrying out the work. In New Zealand - a country whose native wildlife has been catastrophically damaged by introduced predators - some of the few remaining native species have literally been saved from extinction by the removal of introduced pests from islands in the past decade. Here, and elsewhere, governments are recognising the value of invasive species eradication and funding multi-million dollar campaigns to restore their threatened habitats.

An implausible dream only a decade ago, the concept of clearing rats from South Georgia is now feasible. The island is many times larger than the largest yet tackled, and the project will need meticulous planning and field methodology, but it can be done. And it needs to be done quickly, before the remaining glaciers become ineffective and allow rats to cover the entire island. There is no time to lose.

“The eradication of rodents from South Georgia will be the largest operation of its kind ever undertaken worldwide. The plan is bold and audacious, yet it is achievable in just a few seasons of concentrated effort. Once completed, this operation will leave a legacy that will last for thousands of years.”
After two centuries of human influence, all negative, the wildlife of South Georgia is at a crossroads. Without positive human intervention, one bird species will likely become extinct, and many others will be greatly diminished as rats continue to eat their way through much of the remaining wildlife. But this depressing scenario is not inevitable. While the offshore islands remain rat-free, they act as biological reservoirs from which birds will recolonise the main island if and when it becomes liberated from rats. If this can be achieved, there is a short window of opportunity to restore South Georgia's ecology and wildlife to the condition in which Cook found it in 1775. At that time, South Georgia may have been home to more birds than any other island in the world, and we now seek to restore this Antarctic jewel to its former glory. The eradication of rodents from South Georgia will be the largest operation of its kind ever undertaken worldwide. The plan is bold and audacious, yet it is achievable in just a few seasons of concentrated effort. Once completed, this operation will leave a legacy that will last for thousands of years.

The project is being directed by Tony Martin, who is seconded to SGHT from the University of Dundee, where he is Professor of Animal Conservation. Tony has 30 years of experience of polar logistics and a deep passion for South Georgia and its wildlife, having spent many field seasons there as a zoologist with the Sea Mammal Research Unit and British Antarctic Survey. He says:

“This Habitat Restoration project is ambitious and challenging on a global scale, but success would yield a conservation legacy of breathtaking proportions. We have a unique opportunity to reverse two centuries of ecological damage wrought by alien pests, bring about the return of millions of seabirds and save the endemic South Georgia pipit. I am excited to be given the opportunity of leading this project, and ready to tackle the many difficulties that lie ahead”.

**Funding & Structure**

The Project is to be conducted in two phases, with an estimated combined cost of £6-7m. Our aim is to commence Phase 1 in February 2011. This phase will act as a trial of the special methodology required, and should see all land within 10km of King Edward Point/Grytviken cleared of rats after 200 years of their destructive presence.

Thanks to the generosity of Professor Paulsen, the Island Foundation and the Rufford Maurice Lang foundation, the funding for phase 1 of the project has been raised. Phase 2 is scheduled to commence in February 2012, and will see South Georgia completely free of rodents by May 2014.
Would you like to help us raise money?

Raising funds for the Habitat Restoration programme is a challenge. SGHT relies on donations – so you can really make a difference and help us to make this happen. We have made it as simple as possible to make a gift to SGHT. You can make a donation online by visiting our website: [www.sght.org](http://www.sght.org), or pick up one of our leaflets and fill in the donation form.

How you can help:

We are funding the clearance of 18 discrete zones over South Georgia (together covering all rat-infested habitat on the island) as shown in the diagram below. This is almost one fifth of the entire island of South Georgia and is by far the largest island eradication ever attempted.

We need continued support from you, the people who feel passionately about South Georgia, and who want to restore the island to its earlier status as one of the most important seabird islands in the world.

We really appreciate any donation, large or small. Many of our supporters like to set up a monthly or annual donation. If you would like more information about this, please get in touch with Alison Neil at SGHT HQ in Dundee.

CONTACT US:

If you would like to receive further issues of the South Georgia Dispatch, or to learn more about our Habitat Restoration Programme, please contact us:

**SGHT**

Verdant Works

West Henderson’s Wynd

Dundee DD1 5BT

Tel: 01382 229792

Email: alison.neil@sght.org

Web: [www.sght.org](http://www.sght.org)

---

**Ain’t no mountain high enough for the SGHT Half-Marathon!**

Once a year, madness pervades the island of South Georgia and the (human) residents become obsessed with the South Georgia Half Marathon. This is no ordinary 13.1 mile jog through Regent’s Park, this is full-on Mountain running up to a height of 1,000ft with lots of up and down – a challenging walk at the best of times – especially with the unpredictable South Georgia weather.

This year, the good people at King Edward Point and the Museum staff at Grytviken decided to raise money for the SGHT Habitat Restoration Programme to protect South Georgia’s birds. 15 people entered the half-marathon with all completing the course. The weather was perfect and all participants enjoyed the beautiful scenery along the way.

By using the www.justgiving.com site, the runners were able to contact family and friends and ask for sponsorship. Over £1,300 was raised, which helped us reach our target for the first phase of the Habitat Restoration Programme, which will allow endangered birds to recolonise both the Thatcher and Greene Peninsulas on South Georgia.

Perhaps you have a fund raising idea that could help us in our mission to eradicate rats? We’re hoping that many people will get excited about what we’re doing here in South Georgia and will be able to support us in our mission. It’s doesn’t need to be a Marathon, in fact, the more novel the idea – the better! If you’re keen to get involved and support us, perhaps take a look at www.justgiving.com and you’ll find lots of ideas to inspire you! If you find something then please contact Ruth Fraser, our PR & Marketing Manager ([ruth.fraser@sght.com](mailto:ruth.fraser@sght.com)) and she will be able to help you to promote your idea.