



An Ecological Assessment of Ascension Island's Shallow-Water Seamounts as Candidate Marine Protected Areas

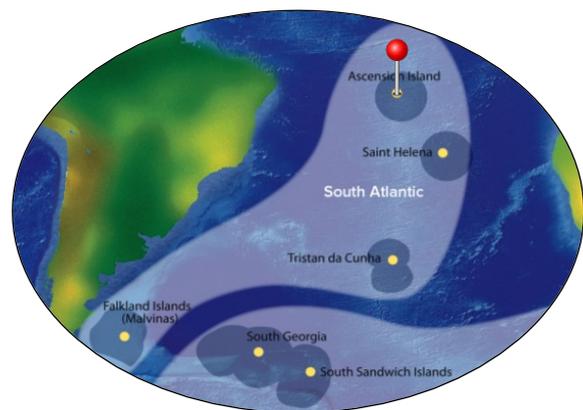
Targeted territory: Ascension Island

Total project budget: 303,012 Euros

BEST 2.0 grant awarded: 197,067 Euros

Duration: January 2017 – September 2018 (21 months)

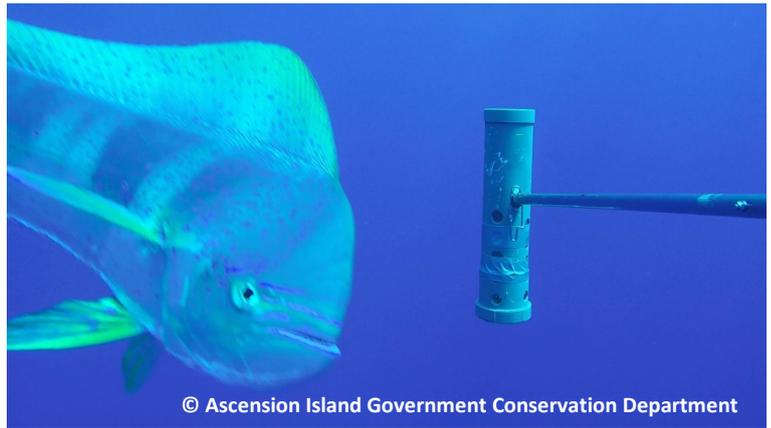
Lead organisation: Ascension Island Government
Conservation & Fisheries Department (AIGCFD)



Background:

Ascension Island Government (AIG) has spent the past 18 months considering the best way to manage its marine environment, taking into account the need to protect marine biodiversity alongside the economic driver to generate much-needed income for the Island. A licensed, foreign-flagged, commercial longline fishery for tuna operated in the waters around Ascension Island from 1988-2004 and then again from 2010-2013, with license fees contributing a significant portion to annual Government revenue. In 2014, AIG suspended the fishery whilst they reviewed and updated fisheries legislation and licensing criteria. As of December 2015 the commercial fishery re-opened in 50% of the Exclusive Fishing Zone (EFZ), with the remaining 50% of the zone closed to commercial fishing. This

forms the first step in the UK Government realising its manifesto commitment for a large scale Marine Protected Area (MPA) around Ascension. The current closed area covers over 220,000 km², including the entire southern half of the EFZ and an inner ring of 50 nautical miles surrounding the Island. However, there are still critical knowledge gaps that need to be addressed in order to identify those areas that would benefit most from spatial or temporal protection measures, and to allow the success of these measures to be evaluated. For this reason, AIG has deferred formal designation of MPAs while existing scientific data is compiled and analysed and new research can take place to enable informed decisions on the placement of marine reserves.



Description of the Project:

The project will undertake the first detailed ecological studies of Ascension Island's three shallow-water seamounts to feed into a major marine spatial planning exercise that is currently being led by AIGCFD, with the intention of designating the Atlantic Ocean's largest no-take MPA (or MPA network) within the next few years. Progress towards this goal is already well advanced in inshore areas; however, there remains a severe shortage of information relating to Ascension's offshore pelagic ecosystem.

Using an innovative combination of aquatic telemetry and underwater video census techniques, the project will assess the importance of Ascension's seamounts as aggregation areas for pelagic megafauna and determine the size of marine reserves needed to effectively protect such assemblages from the impacts of commercial fisheries.



Intended results:

- The significance of Ascension's seamounts as aggregation areas for pelagic mega-fauna is established.
- Spatial behaviours of seamount-associated sharks, tuna and billfish are characterised, including assessments of residency, ranging behaviour and regional migratory connectivity.
- Designation of seamount MPAs which will later form part of a large scale MPA or MPA network.

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