

Marine and terrestrial wildlife haven becomes four million-acre biosphere reserve

July 16 2014



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A rugged peninsula in Argentina's Patagonia region teeming with wildlife, including southern right whales, Magellanic penguins, massive elephant seals, flightless Darwin's rheas, and camel-like guanacos, has been declared a Biosphere Reserve by the United Nations Environmental, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Península Valdés on the Atlantic coast of Patagonia in Southern Argentina in Chubut Province has the largest breeding colony of

southern [elephant seals](#) in South America. In addition, it supports more than 70,000 pairs of Magellanic penguins, over 10,000 South American [sea lions](#), cormorants, gulls, terns, and nearly 4,000 southern right whales – almost one third of the remaining breeding population. On land, the peninsula supports over 4,000 guanacos and some of the highest densities of maras and Darwin's rheas in Patagonia.

The new Biosphere Reserve was designated by the International Coordinating Council of the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme at its 26th session in Jönköping, Sweden last month. The designation means the region, which is currently a provincial protected area, will work to reconcile sustainable economic growth, social development, and environmental protection.

The new reserve covers an area of over four million acres and will be divided into core areas, buffer zones and transition areas. The designation increases protection for the [wildlife](#) and its adjacent coastal waters. It includes a previously unprotected area known as Punta Ninfas, which contains large numbers of elephant seals, South American sea lions, a spectacular mixed colony of imperial cormorants and terns and a new colony of Magellanic penguins. The area is close to three large cities and is under increasing threat from uncontrolled access by people using off-road vehicles. The new Biosphere designation draws attention to the urgent need for ensuring the protection of wildlife here.



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WCS, which has conducted conservation work on the Península Valdés since the 1960s, provided resources to its local partner organization Fundación Patagonia Natural (FPN) in Puerto Madryn and Chubut Province to produce much of the required technical background to make the designation a reality.

Along with Fundación Patagonia Natural, WCS congratulates the Secretaría de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sustentable in the Federal Government of Argentina, Chubut Province's Governor, Martín Buzzi, and Chubut's Secretaría de Turismo y Areas Protegidas.

"Península Valdés is one of the great natural wonders of Latin America with greater concentrations of wildlife than any other area on the entire coast of Patagonia," said WCS President and CEO Cristián Samper. "Making this incredible area region a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve is the culmination of years of hard work by many great partners."

WCS first became involved with the conservation of wildlife of Península Valdés in the 1960s under the direction of then General Director William Conway. The first project carried out here focused on the protection of rare southern right whales. WCS researcher Guillermo Harris began working to help protect the wildlife based at WCS's field station on Península Valdés, in 1981 and WCS researcher Claudio Campagna began studying South American sea lions and southern elephant seals on Península Valdés around the same time.

Following a request made by the Argentine government and the Province of Chubut, UNESCO inscribed Península Valdés as a World Heritage Site (WHS) in 1999 based on its unique concentrations and diversity of wildlife. WCS and its local partner FPN played major roles in that designation and in the preparation of the corresponding management plan, a participatory process that took more than a year to complete. The new biosphere designation builds upon the existing WHS inscription and further highlights the extraordinary biological value of Península Valdés.

All of these efforts and many more in which WCS is involved on the peninsula, including management conservation, education and research, continue. To help protect the wildlife of Península Valdés, WCS works with researchers belonging to the local Science and Technology Agency of Federal Government of Argentina based at the Centro Nacional Patagónico (CENPAT), the Government of the Province of Chubut and Fundación Patagonia Natural.

Said WCS Senior Conservationist William Conway: "Southern right whales that swim within meters of shore, schools of dusky dolphins, huge colonies of Magellanic penguins, rookeries of South American sea lions that bustle with activity, orcas that beach themselves to capture pups and southern elephant seals that huddle in thousands on lonely sandy beaches, this is the wildlife that makes Península Valdés on the coast of Patagonia so special, one of the world's great natural wonders."

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

Citation: Marine and terrestrial wildlife haven becomes four million-acre biosphere reserve (2014, July 16) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-07-marine-terrestrial-wildlife-haven-million-acre.html>

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