

# Expedition to 'health-check' southern right whales around South Georgia

January 10 2018

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Southern right whales feed around the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia.  
Credit: Carlos Olavarria

An international team of researchers, led by British Antarctic Survey (BAS), travels to the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia this month

(January) to carry out the first scientific whale survey since whaling stopped in the 1970s.

Southern right whale populations were decimated after nearly 300 years of hunting in the South Atlantic. When commercial operations stopped, populations were expected to recover. The team of eight researchers and three crew, will spend five weeks on the research vessel 'Song of the Whale' to investigate the health of the animals in their feeding grounds. In addition, they hope to solve the puzzle of why large numbers of dead whale calves have washed up on the shores around Argentina in the last decade.

Photo-identifications and satellite tagging have revealed seasonal migrations of right whales between South Georgia waters and their calving ground at Península Valdés in Argentina. However, this area has had notably high calf mortalities, and a growing body of evidence suggests that South Georgia environmental conditions directly influence the breeding success of these whales. It is thought that availability of food at South Georgia is a primary factor influencing their reproductive rates.

Whale ecologist Dr Jennifer Jackson from British Antarctic Survey (BAS) is leading the expedition cruise. She says:

"Very little is known about southern right whales around South Georgia. We want to know how many use these waters, where and what they are feeding on, and how healthy they are. Ultimately we want to understand how the population is recovering from centuries of whaling and to help unravel the mystery of why so many calves have been dying over the last 10 years."

The team will locate the whales using advanced acoustics previously used to find Blue whales. By listening for their vocalisation or songs, the

team can detect the location of their calls and identify where they are. Once found, the team will take photographs for photo-identification, collect skin samples, and attach satellite tags to identify and track them. Team members will fly drones over the whales to assess their body condition and general state of health.

The team is seeking help from tourists, naturalists and other boat operators who will be sailing and working in the waters around the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and the Scotia Arc from January to March 2018. Good quality photographs and details of sightings of southern right [whales](#) will help create a benchmark and health check of the species.

Provided by British Antarctic Survey

Citation: Expedition to 'health-check' southern right whales around South Georgia (2018, January 10) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-01-health-check-southern-whales-south-georgia.html>

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