Foraging areas of southern elephant seals of the Falklands: shopping close to home

Sanvito, S.1, Fabiani, A.1,2, Ragazzi, L.3 and Galimberti, F.1
1 Elephant Seal Research Group, Sea Lion Island, Falkland Islands, fil_esrg@eleseal.org
2 Dipartimento di Biologia, Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata, Roma, Italy
3 Dipartimento di Biologia, Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Roma, Italy

Introduction
Foraging at sea has been studied in most populations of southern elephant seal (SES hereafter) of the South Georgia stock. A notable exception are the Falkland Islands. SES are charismatic marine mammals, a very important component of the Falklands biodiversity, and a key species in the trophic chain of the South Atlantic Ocean. Moreover, the Falklands are experiencing a great momentum of economic development, related in particular to the oil extraction industry, that may greatly affect marine mammals. The lack of information about foraging areas of SES is a big gap in knowledge of the ecology and biodiversity of the Falklands, that we tried to fill by deploying satellite tags on SES breeding females at Sea Lion Island (SLI hereafter), the main SES breeding colony in the islands.

Methods
We deployed location-only satellite tags (SPOT5, Wildlife Computers) on 23 females during the 2009-2011 breeding seasons. All females were born on SLI and of known age. They were sedated with Zoletil (average dose 1.1 mg/kg). Tags were glued on the head of the subjects using two components epoxy glue (Fig. 1).

Locations were: a) retrieved from the Argos service; b) filtered with an algorithm based on swimming speed, distance between fixes and turning angle; c) plotted and analyzed in ArcGis 10.

Results
• Females spent at sea an average of 69.7 days before returning to land for the moult. Time at sea decreased from 2009 (76.8 days) to 2011 (63.5 days).
• Contrary to expectations from resights of marked seals, most (60.9%) females foraged close to SLI, on the continental shelf, and in small areas with shallow maximum depth (Fig. 2, Fig. 3 left).
• For the 17 females with small feeding areas, the average overlap of their foraging area was 63.2% with the Falkland’s Exclusive Economic Zone, and 25.5% with Argentine’s EEZ (Fig. 4).
• Most SLI females foraged on the continental shelf close to their breeding colony, in small and shallow areas, often within the Falklands Exclusive Economic Zone.
• Having good food close to home may improve the female energy budget, and explain the SLI population resilience to environmental change.
• This prevalent feeding strategy may also imply a greater risk of adverse interaction with human activities (e.g., oil extraction), and a greater responsibility of the Falklands authorities in the management and conservation of the species.

Conclusions