IUCN Conservation Outlook Assessment 2014 **(archived)**
Finalised on 13 November 2014

Please note: this is an archived Conservation Outlook Assessment for Península Valdés. To access the most up-to-date Conservation Outlook Assessment for this site, please visit https://www.worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org.

Península Valdés

SITE INFORMATION

Country:
Argentina
Inscribed in: 1999
Criteria:
(x)

Site description:
Península Valdés in Patagonia is a site of global significance for the conservation of marine mammals. It is home to an important breeding population of the endangered southern right whale as well as important breeding populations of southern elephant seals and southern sea lions. The orcas in this area have developed a unique hunting strategy to adapt to local coastal conditions. © UNESCO

SUMMARY

2014 Conservation Outlook

Good with some concerns

The conservation outlook for the marine fauna that is the basis for the site's Outstanding Universal Value is relatively positive since the key coastal sites for conservation of marine fauna, as well as the breeding sites of marine mammals have been relatively well preserved and the threats to the coastal and marine environments are relatively small. However, together these threats add up to a source of concern for the conservation of the site's values. In particular, recent increased right whale mortality rates on the shores of Península Valdés have raised concerns from among the scientific community (e.g., the Scientific Committtee of the International Whaling Commission) aboutregarding the health of theis whale population. The management of the site has been relatively strong in addressing certain issues (e.g. tourism growth), but overall there is some concern that it is not sufficiently effective. The outlook forSome concerns also exist regarding the terrestrial biodiversity is of significant concern due to the weak management of this portion of the site, though the extent of biodiversity loss and degradation varies considerably in the Park.

Current state and trend of VALUES

Low Concern
Trend: Stable

Key coastal sites for the conservation of marine fauna, which are the basis for the site's outstanding universal value, have been relatively well protected. The biodiversity of the privately owned terrestrial components of the Park have been degraded. The extent of impacts varies according to land use, and grazing densities.

Overall THREATS

Low Threat

Current threats to the coastal and marine environments of the property (tourism growth, seagull attacks on whales, increased whale mortality, growth of coastal settlements) are each relatively small but together add up to a source of concern for the conservation of the site’s values. In particular, recent increased right whale mortality rates on the shores of Península Valdés have raised concern from the scientific community about the health of this whale population. While threats to terrestrial ecosystems (livestock grazing, the killing of native fauna, wildfires) are significant but vary considerably within the Park, they do not affect the marine fauna that are the basis for the site’s outstanding universal value. Potential threats from marine pollution and coastal development exist.

Overall PROTECTION and MANAGEMENT

Some Concern

With the Provincial Tourism Authority responsible for the protection of the area, management of tourism is relatively effective, while management related to terrestrial ecosystems and fisheries has been very weak. Conservation provisions for terrestrial portions of the site on private lands have not been enforced. An independent management evaluation found that only 20% of the objectives outlined in the 2001 Management Plan had been achieved. Available financial resources are currently insufficient to implement the management plan.

FULL ASSESSMENT

Description of values

Values

World Heritage values

- **Very important and significant natural habitats for the in-situ conservation of several threatened species**
  Criterion:(x)

  Península Valdés contains very important and significant natural habitats for the in-situ conservation of several threatened species of outstanding universal value, and specifically its globally important concentration of breeding southern right whales (Draft SoOUV, 2010; Payne, 1986; Cooke et al., 2001).

- **Marine fauna diversity and abundance**
  Criterion:(x)

  Península Valdés is one of the main sites in the Patagonian shoreline with a great variety of coastal settings, which are adequate for the breeding and feeding of numerous marine mammals, such as southern elephant seals (Mirounga leonina), sea lions and orcas (Orcinus orca) , and shorebirds (Draft SoOUV, 2010).

- **Breeding populations of southern elephant seals and southern sea lions**
  Criterion:(x)

  The northernmost colonies of southern elephant seals are found in this area, and they are the only breeding population of this species in continental Argentina (Campagna and Lewis, 1992). The population of South American

sea lions (Otaria flavescens) in northern Patagonia has shown a positive and sustained increase since 1990 and has become a significant tourist attraction (Dans et al., 1996).

Other important biodiversity values

► Largest preserved Patagonian steppe area

The terrestrial ecosystem is the largest preserved Patagonian steppe area, with populations of guanacos (Lama guanicoe), lesser rheas (Pterocnemia pennata), and maras (Dolichotis patagonum, endemic to Argentina), among others (Draft SoOUV, 2010).The Park also lies within a WWF Global 200 Eco-region and a WWF/IUCN Centre of Plant Diversity (WDPA, 2011).

Assessment information

Threats

Current Threats

Low Threat

Current threats to the coastal and marine environments of the property from tourism growth, seagull attacks on whales, the growth of Puerto Pirámides, and illegal beach settlements represent a pattern of relatively small threats that together add up to a source of concern for the conservation of the site’s values. Terrestrial biodiversity loss and degradation from livestock grazing, the killing of native fauna (hunting, poisoning, road kill), and wildfires is significant, but varies considerably within the Park. However, the concentrations of marine fauna that are the basis for the site’s outstanding universal values are not affected by these threats.

► Livestock Farming / Grazing

Low Threat
Inside site

Outside site

Most of the Valdes Peninsula is owned by private ranchers. Sheep grazing has caused major modifications in the steppe ecosystem and has degraded biodiversity. Only 2 of the 80 ranches on the Peninsula have developed management plans to preserve biodiversity. The degree of biodiversity loss and degradation vary with grazing densities, which are greatest in the northeastern and southeastern portions of the Park. At the same time, it should be recognized that the Outstanding Universal Value of the site is based on the numbers and variety of marine mammals, and not on the terrestrial environment (Monjeau et. all, 2011; Draft SoOUV, 2010; Nabte, 2010; IUCN, 1999).

► Housing/ Urban Areas

High Threat
Inside site
Outside site

Continual growth of Puerto Pirámides stimulated by tourism means increasing impacts on the environment, especially through waste generation, demands for fresh water, energy, and additional lands for expansion. (Monjeau et al., 2011)

► Housing/ Urban Areas

Low Threat
Inside site
Outside site

Construction of housing on the beaches is a relatively small conservation issue currently but could grow to be much more extensive with potential major impacts on marine mammals. (Monjeau et al., 2011)

► Commercial hunting

Very Low Threat

Native fauna, especially the guanaco, fox, and puma, have been impacted by hunting, poisoning, and road kills. (Monjeau,et al, 2011; SOUV, 2010) Hunting is fairly generalized throughout the Peninsula while poisoning is limited to 10 specific ranches (Nabte, 2010).

► Fire/ Fire Suppression

Very Low Threat
Inside site

Regular wildfires impoverish the native terrestrial ecosystems, The extent of biodiversity loss and degradation from wildfires is unknown (Monjeau et al, 2011).

► Tourism/ visitors/ recreation

High Threat
Inside site
Outside site

Though visitor management has been relatively well managed, increasing numbers of visitors have resulted in increasing pressures on the marine mammals that are the major visitor attraction, and more frequent human-wildlife disturbances. (WDPA, 2011; Monjeau et al, 2011; Draft SoOUV, 2010) Studies have shown that whale watching has some negative impacts on whales' behaviour (Vermeulen et al., 2012). A pilot study on the effects of swim-with-whale programs at Peninsula Valdés showed short-term effects on southern right whale behavior (Lundquist et al., 2012)

► Other

High Threat
Inside site

Seagull populations in the site have steadily increased over the years, because of food that is available at the Puerto Madryn open dump and from fishery bycatch at sea. These seagulls have learned to peck the flesh of the backs of whales when they surface, causing open sores that are then used as a food source for the gulls. This new gull behavior has caused the whales to modify their own behavior, surfacing less completely and for shorter periods (Rowntree et al, 1998, Sironi et al., 2009). This impacts tourism as the whales are seen less often and for shorter periods, and may at some point even drive the whales from the site. The overall extent of the impacts on whale health and behavior is unknown. The authorities resolved this issue by eradicating the seagulls pecking the whales, but not by addressing the problem of waste dumps. (Areas Naturales Protegidas y Guardaparques,

2012). Gull attacks appear to be affecting the overall health and survival of newborn right whale calves at Península Valdés (Thomas et al., 2013) and may be a contributing factor to the recent increase in right whale mortality rates at this site (Rowntree et al., 2013)

► Other

High Threat
Inside site

Between 2003 and 2011, 482 whales (of which 89% were calves) were found dead on the shores of Península Valdés (Rowntree et al., 2013). There exist at least 3 hypotheses about the causes. Three leading hypotheses to explain the spikes in mortality of first-year whales (calves) in 2005, 2007, 2008 and 2009 were identified by the workshop: a decline in food availability, biotoxin exposure and infectious disease. It was not possible to determine which of these is most likely, and it was acknowledged that some combination of factors may be involved. A fourth possible contributing factor, chemical contaminants, was considered less likely, and demographic factors, killer whale attacks, disturbance from whale-watching activities, vessel strikes and fishing gear entanglement were ruled out as significant causes of what appears to be a series of acute mortality events. (FPN, 2011; Report of the Southern Right Whale Die-Off Workshop of the IUCN SSC Cetacean Specialist Group, 15-18 March 2010, Centro Nacional Patagónico, Puerto Madryn, Argentina). Sixty-one dead southern right whales were recorded at Península Valdés in 2011 (Sironi et al., 2012). Kelp gull attacks can be a contributing factor to some whale calf deaths (Thomas et al., 2013).

Potential Threats

Low Threat

Potential threats from marine pollution and coastal development are very real and should trigger adequate responses with respect to disaster planning and stockpiling of equipment for oil spills, and pertinent legislation.

► Tourism/ Recreation Areas

Low Threat

Inside site
Outside site

The development of coastal areas in and around to the site may diminish the quality of penguin breeding habitat, reduce their reproductive success and increase the adult mortality rate (WDPA, 2011). The sale of ranches to subdivide for development of vacation homes is an on-going threat (Monjeau et al, 2011).

▶ Shipping Lanes

High Threat
Outside site

The regular traffic of oil tankers to and from Puerto Madryn represents a permanent oil spill threat (IUCN, 1999). Large ship traffic has caused fatal ship strikes on southern right whales in Golfo Nuevo (IUCN Consultation, 2014).

▶ Water Pollution

High Threat
Outside site

The City of Puerto Madryn near the site creates marine pollution through runoff, the discharge of liquid wastes, and oil pollution from transfer points and effluents from the aluminum industry in Puerto Madryn. (Draft SoOUV, 2010; IUCN, 1999)

Protection and management

Assessing Protection and Management

▶ Research

Mostly Effective

Península Valdés has long attracted scientific attention, with extensive research mainly concentrated on the colonial marine mammals and birds (WCMC, 2011). The Southern Right Whale Research program (conducted by ICB/OA) started in 1970 and is the world’s longest continuous study of a large

whale based on following the lives of known individuals.

▶ Relationships with local people

Some Concern

Relationships between and among governmental, non-governmental, and special interest groups have historically been difficult because of the establishment of a protected area on private ranchlands without previous understandings on conservation, and due to tensions between tourism and conservation. However, there have recently been some improvements in these relationships. (Monjeau et al., 2011).

▶ Legal framework and enforcement

Mostly Effective

The site is a unit of the Provincial System of Protected Natural Areas (Provincial Law No. 4617), and was established in 1983 as a multiple-use reserve (Provincial Law No. 2161) (Draft SoOUV, 2010). A Buffer Zone of 5 nautical miles around the Peninsula is an integral part of the nominated property (WDPA, 2011). Management is implemented by a non-governmental entity established specifically for this purpose. Conservation provisions for terrestrial portions of the site on private lands have not been enforced, and there is little enforcement of fishing laws or of illegal whale and porpoise watching by artisanal fishing vessels. (Monjeau et al., 2011).

▶ Integration into regional and national planning systems

Mostly Effective

The site is well integrated into the regional system of protected areas and tourism planning. (Monjeau et al, 2011)

▶ Management system

Some Concern

The Provincial Tourism Authority is responsible for the protection of the area, but decisions are agreed with representatives of all stakeholders, and implementation is carried out by a non-governmental management authority (WDPA, 2011). Major emphasis is on tourism management, and environmental education and interpretation. Annual operations plans have

been initiated, but have never been approved or used to guide management; only 2 of the 80 ranches within the site have an approved management plan (Monjeau et al, 2011)

► Management effectiveness

Serious Concern

An independent management evaluation found that only 20% of the objectives outlined in the 2001 Management Plan had been achieved. (Monjeau et al,, 2011). A study of terrestrial mammals found that the areas within the Park where threatened mammals were least abundant were those in the management zones indicated in the management plan as having the highest level of protection (Nabte, 2010).

► Implementation of Committee decisions and recommendations

Data Deficient

No Committee decisions have been taken since inscription in 1999.

► Boundaries

Some Concern

The boundaries of the property include all of the Valdes Peninsula, superimposed on 80 ranch properties, and a 5 nautical mile marine buffer zone. Given the conflicts between ranching and conservation, and the fact that it is the marine mammal concentrations that are the main basis for the site’s outstanding universal value, there is logic to redefining terrestrial boundaries on the Peninsula to eliminate ranch properties that are not key to the conservation of the coastal and marine area that hosts the marine mammal populations, while at the same time extending the marine boundary of the Provincial Park to include an area of 5 nautical miles around the Peninsula, so that it becomes an integral part of the Park, and not just part of the Buffer Zone (Monjeau et all, 2011). Others note that the site is one of the few protected areas worldwide in a desert environment and that the terrestrial ecosystems are equally important, though less iconic, for conservation (Nabte, 2010).

► Sustainable finance

Serious Concern

The Provincial government, the National Tourism Organisation and visitor fees finance management of the site, though the amounts are insufficient to implement the management plan. Only a small percentage of the visitor fees go back to the Park for management (Fundación Patagonia Natural, 2012; Monjeau, 2011; WDPA, 2011).

► Staff training and development

Some Concern

The staff of 15 administrative personnel and Wildlife Guards receive occasional training carried out by NGOs, but there is no overall staff training and development program. The site would benefit from increase in staff numbers, as well as additional equipment and vehicles. (Monjeau et al., 2011; Draft SoOUV, 2010).

► Sustainable use

Data Deficient

No studies have been undertaken to determine if current and projected uses of the property’s resources are sustainable.

► Education and interpretation programs

Mostly Effective

Although tThere appearsis to be no systematic plan for environmental education or interpretation and only sporadic and isolated activities (Monjeau et al., 2011), local NGOs have developed a number of educational initiatives, such as the educational program “Bringing the Whales to your School” (developed by the Instituto de Conservación de Ballenas) which was appliedimplemented at the local school in Puerto Piramides and in other schools in Chubut province.

► Tourism and interpretation

Mostly Effective

The Provincial Tourism Organisation trains the tour guides for private companies. Visitor centres exist both on the isthmus and in the nearby town of Puerto Madryn (WDPA, 2011; Draft SoOUV, 2010). Local NGOs provide

educational brochures to visitors, such as the Guide for Responsible Whalewatching, distributed annually by the Instituto de Conservación de Ballenas (www.icb.org.ar) in cooperation with the Administration of the Península Valdés Natural Area.

▶ **Monitoring**

Serious Concern

Monitoring of conservation outcomes is currently not being carried out (Monjeau et al., 2011).

Overall assessment of protection and management

Some Concern

With the Provincial Tourism Authority responsible for the protection of the area, management of tourism is relatively effective, while management related to terrestrial ecosystems and fisheries has been very weak. Conservation provisions for terrestrial portions of the site on private lands have not been enforced. An independent management evaluation found that only 20% of the objectives outlined in the 2001 Management Plan had been achieved. Available financial resources are currently insufficient to implement the management plan.

▶ **Assessment of the effectiveness of protection and management in addressing threats outside the site**

Some Concern

Management programs have targeted internal threats to the property. The few threats from outside the site, such as marine pollution and coastal development, have not been addressed to any extent.

State and trend of values

Assessing the current state and trend of values

World Heritage values

► Very important and significant natural habitats for the in-situ conservation of several threatened species

High Concern
Trend:Stable

While visitor management has been relatively effective in protecting the resting, breeding, calving and nursery sites of marine mammals; the management of terrestrial ecosystems and marine fisheries have been relatively neglected (FPN, 2012; Monjeau et al, 2011.; WCMC, 2011). Studies of threatened terrestrial mammals indicate that impacts on their populations are significant, especially from roads, fences, human settlements, and windmills, while impacts from grazing vary according to animal density (Nabte, 2010)

► Marine fauna diversity and abundance

Low Concern
Trend:Stable

Marine fauna has been relatively well preserved. However, increased whales mortality is of some concern, and requires additional research. (FPN, 2012; Monjeau et al, 2011.; WDPAWCMC, 2011; Rowntree et al., 2013, Thomas et al., 2013).

► Breeding populations of southern elephant seals and southern sea lions

Low Concern
Trend:Stable

The resting, breeding, calving and nursery sites of marine mammals have been well preserved (FPN, 2012; Monjeau et al, 2011.; WCMC, 2011).

Other important biodiversity values

► Largest preserved Patagonian steppe area

The terrestrial ecosystem is the largest preserved Patagonian steppe area, with populations of guanacos (Lama guanicoe), lesser rheas (Pterocnemia pennata), and maras (Dolichotis patagonum, endemic to Argentina), among others (Draft SoOUV, 2010).The Park also lies within a WWF Global 200 Eco-

region and a WWF/IUCN Centre of Plant Diversity (WDPA, 2011).

Summary of the Values

▶ **Assessment of the current state and trend of World Heritage values**
Low Concern
Trend: Stable

Key coastal sites for the conservation of marine fauna, which are the basis for the site's outstanding universal value, have been relatively well protected. The biodiversity of the privately owned terrestrial components of the Park have been degraded. The extent of impacts varies according to land use, and grazing densities.

▶ **Assessment of the current state and trend of other important biodiversity values**
High Concern
Trend: Stable

There has been relatively little active management of the privately owned ranches to protect terrestrial biodiversity. Biodiversity values of this component of the site are degraded, with the severity depending on particular land uses and the density of grazing (Monjeau,et al, 2011; Nabte, 2010). Biodiversity values related to other international designations (WWF Global 200 Eco-region and WWF/IUCN Centre of Plant Diversity) are degraded, with the severity depending on particular land uses and the density of grazing (Monjeau,et al, 2011; Nabte, 2010).

Additional information

Key conservation issues

▶ **Ship strikes and entanglement in fishing gear**
Local

Right whales get killed by ship strikes in Golfo Nuevo, and get entangled in

fishing gear. Other marine mammals (sea lions, elephant seals) are also affected by fishing gear.

► Disturbance of marine mammals

Local

While visitor management has reduced the degree of disturbance of marine mammals at critical resting, nesting, birthing, nursery, and feeding sites, increasing visitor numbers means that the small percentage of human-wildlife disturbances results in increasing pressures on marine mammals. The local whalewatching industry targeting southern right whales has increased significantly, e.g, the number of tourists going on whale-watch tours at Puerto Pirámides increased dramatically, from 17,446 in 1991 to 113,148 in 2007, an increase of 548% (Sironi et al., 2009).

► Seagull attacks on whales

Local

Seagull populations have increased considerably because of the abundance of food sources created by Puerto Madryn’s open dump and from other food sources (Lisnizer et al., 2011). The relatively new seagull behavior of attacking whales now links the dump and increased seagull population, to threats to the whale population (Rowntree et al., 1998; Sironi et al., 2009b, Thomas et al., 2013).

► Informal beach settlements

Local

Beach areas fall in a regulatory no-man’s land, making it difficult to control. New regulations are needed to provide legal recourse for management agencies to protect this sensitive part of the coastal zone.

► Growth of Puerto Pirámides

Local

Tourism has stimulated the growth of Puerto Pirámides thereby increasing the environmental impacts of this settlement.

► Livestock grazing

Local

While livestock grazing is known to cause biodiversity loss and degradation, the extent of these impacts varies considerably within the Park. Questions have also been raised about the importance of this threat given that the main basis for the site's outstanding universal value are marine mammal populations that are not directly affected by livestock grazing.

► Killing of native terrestrial fauna

Local

Hunting, poisoning, and road kills have lead to serious reductions in the populations of key terrestrial fauna.

► Fires

Local

Regular wildfires impoverish the native terrestrial ecosystems. The extent of biodiversity loss and degradation from fire is unknown.

► Marine pollution

Local

Oil spills by tankers or during transfer operations, and marine pollution generated by the city of Puerto Madryn are potential significant threats to the site's values.

► Coastal development

Local

Real estate development for vacation housing in and around the Peninsula would displace natural ecosystems and create new demands on the environmental.

Benefits

Understanding Benefits

► Contribution to education

The unique biodiversity of the site provides an exceptional setting to develop

environmental education programs.

▶ **Is the protected area valued for its nature conservation?, Does management of the site provide jobs (e.g. for managers or rangers)?**

Listing of the site as a World Heritage Site indicates international recognition of its Outstanding Universal Value for humanity.

▶ **Outdoor recreation and tourism**

Tourism based on the site’s values generates considerable economic returns at the Provincial level.

▶ **Livestock grazing areas**

Extensive livestock production in the Park provides livelihoods for 80 ranch owners and their workers.

Projects

Compilation of active conservation projects

№	Organization/ individuals	Project duration	Brief description of Active Projects
1	Fundación de Vida Silvestre, Argentina		Consolidating Bahía Samborombón as a Ramsar wetland of international importance and strengthening areas of biological importance for shorebirds are efforts that Fundación Vida Silvestre Argentina (FVSA) has carried out since 1978 in order to conserve the pampas grasslands and their coasts, as well as the coasts of the Valdés Peninsula in Chubut province, using birds as an indicator of environmental health
2	Fundación Naturaleza para el Futuro		The objective of the Project is to develop a system to manage domestic solid wastes in the Valdes Peninsula, Chubut Province.
3	PROAS		Evaluate, using non-intrusive techniques, the magnitude and characteristics of underwater cultural patrimony in the Peninsula Valdes and Puerto Madryn region.

№	Organization/ individuals	Project duration	Brief description of Active Projects
4	Instituto de Análisis de Recursos Naturales		Evaluation and actualization of the Management Plan for the Valdes Peninsula Natural Protected Area.
5	Instituto de Conservación de Ballenas / Ocean Alliance		The Right Whale Research Program provides science based data to government authorities to make sound conservation decisions to protect right whales and their habitat. It needs financial support for the long-term continuation of its right whale photo-id catalog, which is the most complete for the species in the world.
6	Southern Right Whale Health Monitoring Program (Universities and local NGOs ICB/OA, FPN)		Monitoring of the health of the Península Valdés right whales since 2003. Has built the most complete dataset of biological samples for the species in the world, based on post-mortem examinations.

Compilation of potential site needs

№	Site need title	Brief description of potential site needs	Support needed for following years
1	N.A.	Implementation of an independent evaluation of management effectiveness for the property.	
2	Park Management Authority and qualified NGOs and Universities.	Implementation of projects to implement all components of the management plan for the property.	
3	N.A.	Development of a trust fund for management of the property.	

REFERENCES

№	References
1	IUCN, 1999. World Heritage Nomination – IUCN Technical Site Evaluation.