

T/V Anitra Spill: International Projects Restoring Habitat in South America

Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Program



Red Knot

The Problem

On May 10, 1996, the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) reported that the Bahamian-flagged T/V *Anitra* spilled approximately 10,000 gallons of Nigerian light crude oil. On May 19, 1996, the USCG reported that as much as 42,000 gallons of oil were released into Big Stone Anchorage, Delaware Bay, where the vessel was anchored. Cold and stormy weather during the spill caused the oil to mix into the water column, forming tarballs. Over 50 miles of beaches were oiled over a 2-week period, including several State wildlife management areas, two State parks, and the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge.

Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Program

When hazardous substances enter the environment, fish, wildlife, and other natural resources can be injured. The Department of the Interior, along with State, Tribal and other Federal partners, acts as “trustee” for these resources. Trustees seek to identify the natural resources injured and determine the extent of the injuries. Trustees work with the responsible parties to carry out restoration activities, or recover funds from responsible parties to carry out the restoration activities. These efforts are possible under the Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Program (NRDAR), the goal of which is to restore natural resources injured by oil spills or the release of hazardous substances.

Restoring the Resources

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) (the Co-Trustees) reached a settlement with the Responsible Parties for \$1.5 million. A priority of the Final Restoration Plan developed and approved by the Co-Trustees included habitat



WHSRN

New signage at San Antonio Bay (Río Negro Province, Argentina) "Stop! No entry with vehicles or pets".

restoration and protection of migratory shorebirds on their wintering grounds.

Migratory shorebirds travel on a yearly basis from their northern breeding grounds in the Arctic, to South American wintering grounds, and back again. The Delaware Bay is an important stopover point in migrations, especially in the spring. The threats to migratory shorebirds in their wintering grounds are exacerbated by the lack of local government resources to protect natural resources. The implementation of restoration efforts in South America will serve to ensure the restoration and continued protection of migratory shorebird species, including those affected by the *Anitra* spill, during the part of their migratory life cycle when they are over 6,000 miles from the area immediately affected.

As the lead Trustee for the wintering migratory shorebird restoration projects, USFWS developed a cooperative partnership with the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences. Manomet is the home of the Executive Office of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN), a non-regulatory, a non-regulatory, voluntary coalition of

groups and individuals with the mission of the conservation of shorebird species and their habitats through a network of key sites across the Americas. WHSRN developed four restoration projects to be implemented in South America. The \$50,000 Co-Trustees have allocated to these projects are being leveraged with other funds through WHSRN coordination.

The *Anitra* Oil Spill Trustee Council-approved projects and activities are currently being carried out at four sites are of great significance for Red Knots and other shorebirds on the coast of Patagonia. Two of the sites, one Argentine and one Chilean, are on Tierra del Fuego and represent the only two major “wintering” areas (during the austral summer!) for Red Knots in southern South America. The other two sites, on the Argentine coast, are important stopover sites, especially during the northbound migration.



WHSRN

Restoring Red Knot habitat in their wintering grounds helps protect them in the area affected by the oil spill.

Restoration Projects

San Antonio Bay, Argentina, Río Negro, Argentina

San Antonio Bay is the single most important stopover site in South America for northbound Red Knots leaving their “wintering” area and heading for Delaware Bay. Fully half of the 15,500 Red Knots in this southernmost wintering population stop here on migration. The Red Knots’ condition on leaving San Antonio Bay is highly influential in their ability to continue the migration and to successfully gain weight at Delaware Bay before leaving for the Arctic breeding areas.

The three major beaches used by the shorebirds within San Antonio Bay are at Los Alamos, Mar Grande, and Villarino Beach. These beaches are a popular tourist destination for people from the entire province and beyond, with more than 250,000 visitors annually. Los Alamos has developed a corps of “environmental guards” who patrol the beach and work to reduce the disturbance to the birds. Mar Grande and Villarino Beach are more remote, and lacking transportation, the guards can only arrange infrequent visits. These two beaches are primarily used by local residents and fishermen who express little conservation interest or awareness.

To raise awareness and improve conservation efforts in these areas, a two pronged approach was taken. First, deteriorating and ineffective signage was replaced with visually attractive, professionally produced signage. Second, an innovative world-class interpretive center has been developed to serve local visitors and tourists as well as serving as an training and outreach center for local teachers. Finally, to reduce the threat to Red Knot habitat an environmental education curriculum will be added in all primary schools of the Province to raise awareness and appreciation of the knots and the international importance of San Antonio Bay to this long distance migratory species. Finally, to reduce the threat to Red Knot habitat an environmental education curriculum was added in all primary schools of the Province to raise awareness and appreciation of the knots and the international importance of San Antonio Bay to this long distance migratory species.

Río Gallegos Estuary, Santa Cruz, Argentina

The Río Gallegos Estuary comprises two important protected areas for shorebirds including Red Knot, Magellanic and American Oystercatchers, White-rumped Sandpiper, and rare Magellanic Plover. These are the Provincial Migratory Shorebird Reserve and the Río Gallegos Urban Coastal Reserve.

The major threat to the shorebirds and habitats of the Urban Reserve have been identified as destruction by local individuals who throw trash, construction waste, and other rubble into the wetlands. The lack of signage, appropriate fencing, and patrolling all contribute to the current situation.

To mitigate these threats, a permanent program of patrols and monitoring of the protected areas have been instituted; partners conduct a continuing awareness campaign directed primarily at the people living adjacent to the protected area; and signage, guardhouses and similar capital works have been installed.

Atlantic Coastal Reserve of Tierra del Fuego, Argentina

The coast of the City of Río Grande is the second critical “wintering” spot for Red Knots in Tierra del Fuego. The development of various economic activities here has been identified as being the greatest threat to the species in this part of its life cycle. Other shorebirds that spend their non-breeding season here include hemispherically important populations of White-rumped Sandpiper and Hudsonian Godwit.

To raise awareness and promote land use that is compatible with conservation, an interpretative “trail” for local inhabitants and visitors to learn about and come to value the birds they otherwise take for granted has been constructed. Basic equipment such as binoculars, telescopes and other such infrastructure are available. International attention and support for such activities raise the stature of habitat protection in the eyes of local and provincial officials who are eager for a sustainable economic engine for this area.

Bahía Lomas, Tierra del Fuego, Chile
Counts of “wintering” Red Knots at Bahía Lomas, a remote bay and Ramsar Wetland of International Significance in

the Chilean sector of the Island of Tierra del Fuego, are higher than any other site. The primary threat to the area is lack of recognition from Chilean national and provincial officials as well as from the local citizenry.

The Strait is the site of oil platforms that pump oil to the Island and is a major thoroughfare for oil tankers. A spill would have catastrophic impacts to the tidal flats that support shorebirds, including most of the hemisphere’s population of both the Red Knot and the Hudsonian Godwit.

To raise awareness to local citizens and officials, a center for the study of birds and other wildlife on the north coast of Tierra del Fuego will be established. The center will be a cooperative venture called the Tierra del Fuego Bird Observatory. It will serve as a base for research, monitoring and outreach to tourists and visiting birders with the message that protection of this area is the basis for sustainable and appropriate economic development in an area that has seen a sharp downturn in its fortunes with the departure of the national petroleum corporation.

Once established, the Observatory will serve as the base of operations for oil spill contingency planning, response, and education. It will support oil-spill contingency planning meetings for development of a long-term oil spill plan and will also be the physical platform for organized spill response. Information generated through the shorebird and ecological research done at the Observatory will inform the planners in how best to protect the shorebird resources.

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