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Special Conservation Services Levy compendium:

Monitoring wandering albatrosses at Auckland and
Antipodes Islands, 1995/96-2001/02

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Editor's foreword

Gliding majestically across the southern oceans, wandering albatrosses are a magnificent sight that has evoked admiration, and superstitious awe, from generations of seafarers. Unfortunately their opportunistic following of ships, and, since long-line fishing for tuna began, taking of squid used as bait on the lines, has made them liable to be accidentally hooked and drowned. Their delayed and long breeding cycle accentuates their vulnerability. The birds only start to breed at ten years of age, they pair for life, and each pair produces only one chick every two or three years. Moreover, to survive, chicks need more food than can be collected by one parent. So if one parent dies, the chick dies, and the widowed parent may take several years to find a new mate. The wandering albatross species in the South Atlantic and South Indian oceans have been well studied. They have suffered population declines of more than half over a period of 30 years of long-line fishing as a result of increased deaths, caused directly and indirectly in these ways by fisheries bycatch.

Two of the species of wandering albatrosses, Gibson's wandering albatross and Antipodean wandering albatross, are endemic to New Zealand. Although they constitute half the number of all wandering albatrosses, they had been little studied before the 1990s and their conservation status was unknown.

In 1991, Kath Walker and Graeme Elliott began a monitoring study on Gibson's wandering albatrosses on Adams Island in the Auckland Islands. In 1994, Gerry Clarke, Jacinda Amey and Gus McAllister started a similar study on Antipodean wandering albatrosses on Antipodes Island. In these population studies, survival, productivity and recruitment rates are estimated, so that the population can be modelled and sustainable bycatch levels can be estimated. Population trends are also monitored. From 1995, studies began on use of different kinds of attachments for satellite transmitters to be attached to small numbers of the birds, to track their movements at sea and identify ocean areas where they foraged.

These studies were initially funded and carried out by volunteers, with logistic and small financial assistance from Southland Conservancy and Science & Research Unit of DOC, and from tour boat operators and the New Zealand Navy. In 1995, the New Zealand Government commissioned research on both Gibson's and Antipodean wandering albatrosses and levied the New Zealand tuna fishers (through the Conservation Services Levy) to help pay for it. Publication of this work is also funded by the Conservation Services Levy.

This compendium contains a series of progress reports on this research, written annually between 1995 and 2002, with each report describing only the work carried out in the previous year. This collection is produced as an accountability document, and should not be regarded as setting a precedent for progress reporting: the current policy of DOC Science Publishing is to peer review and make available all reports within a year of their submission.

Comprehensive analysis of this work on albatrosses is being carried out and will be published when sufficient data have been collected. The first of these analysis papers (for Gibson's wandering albatross, published in 1999) has also been republished in this volume.

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