411

CENSUS OF SOUTHERN ELEPHANT SEAL AT ELEPHANT ISLAND, ANTARCTICA

L.L. Ciotti, M.M.C Muelbert

LMM-DOc./PPGOB - FURG, Rio Grande, Brazil

There had been no formal investigation of pinniped occurrence and distribution on Elephant Is. at Elephant Island (61º05'S; 055º20'W), Antarctica, by the Brazilian Government up until 1997 when a pilot study was established within the Brazilian Antarctic Program (PROANTAR). Thereafter, the presence, distribution and a description of most activities exhibited by pinnipeds on the island were monitored, especially those of Southern elephant seals (*Mirounga leonina*). This study was carried out at Stinker Pt., Elephant Is. during the austral summer from November to January of 1998/1999, 2003/2004, 2004/2005 and 2005/2006. Daily surveys conducted throughout the study period to ensured that all seals present along the study area were recorded such that the temporal and spatial distribution of individuals was known. SES were counted to monitor the status and trends of the study population. Our results show similar trends among field seasons. The total number of individuals gradually increased from early November to late December, decreasing after that. The maximum number of SES registered was 767 in 1998/1999, 768 in 2003/2004, 692 in 2004/2005 and 681 in 2005/2006. There was a decline after the 2003/2004 season which corresponded to a 10% decrease. Such decrease was not followed by a decrease in the number of pups counted in the study area. The maximum number of pups was 85 in 1998/1999, 149 in 2003/2004, 155 in 2004/2005 and 147 in 2005/2006, corresponding to an increase in numbers between the first until the last field season. Assuming that the number of pups is likely to reflect the number of adult females breeding in the area, it seems to be a better indicator of trends on the actual number of individuals occupying the area. If this is the case, we can suggest an increase in the number of individuals using the area for breeding over the past 6 years. It is important to continue monitoring pinniped occurrence and abundance at EI in order to enable future comparisons and a more detailed analysis of the present trends reported here in light of potential environmental variability.