The albatrosses and a killer whale

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The Albatrosses and a Killer Whale

Changes caused to the marine environment due to natural as well as human reasons, as stated by Safina, have made the albatrosses vulnerable (qtd. in Sakamoto et al. 1). As mentioned by Croxall and Brooke, in recent times, studies have been carried out about the diet and foraging habits of these birds. However, little is known about how albatrosses actually locate their prey in the open ocean (qtd. in Sakamoto et al. 1). Previous studies found it difficult to follow individual birds, and thus could not find out all about the foraging activities employed by them. This particular study is mainly aimed at examining how albatrosses find their prey, as well as how they deal with and respond to their environment while on their foraging trips in the Southern Ocean (Sakamoto et al. 1).

Four black-browed albatrosses were captured at their nest sites in Bird Island, Southern Georgia for the purpose of this study, and still cameras were attached to their backs. Three of the four birds were recaptured and the instruments retrieved. The fourth bird

could not be recaptured.

The camera was equipped with depth and temperature sensors. After the recovery of the instruments, the data captured, which included image, depth and temperature, were downloaded to a PC. The environment around the study birds was studied. Other animals or birds which appeared in the images were also scrutinized. Depth data were analyzed with a behavior analysis program. For each dive greater than half a meter, the maximum dive depth was calculated (Sakamoto et al. pp. 1, 2).

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One of the study birds had an interesting encounter with a killer whale, and this deserves special mention here. The pictures taken show a killer whale which has surfaced, soon after which the bird appears to have dived into the sea, ostensibly in search of food. The birds appear to have done a number of dives, both during the day as well as at night. In some of the images, a few of the birds were seen to be actively following the killer whale after it surfaced.

The study indicated a regular association of albatrosses with killer whales during foraging (Sakamoto et al. pp. 2, 3). As Ford and Ellis states, while feeding on fish,

killer whales leave a
lot of left over morsels and fragments of prey near the sea surface (qtd. in Sakamoto et al. 3).

Undoubtedly, these left over fragments form an important food resource for albatrosses. As
stated by Weimerskirch et al., this also helps the birds in saving a lot of energy which would
have been wasted, if they had taken recourse to chasing and catching their own prey (qtd. in
Sakamoto et al. 3). Croxall, Reid and Prince opine that this activity becomes particularly
rewarding at times when the availability of the natural prey of the albatross, the Antarctic Krill,
is scarce (qtd. in Sakamoto et al. 3).

The above study is a path breaking one, especially in the light of the threat posed to
albatrosses by the changes in their environment. The animal borne image recorders proved very
useful tools in tracking the birds during their search for prey. The study showed how the
albatrosses save a lot of time and effort by relying on killer whales for their supply of food,
especially during times when their natural prey is scarce. The information gathered from this
study will undoubtedly prove invaluable during any future efforts at conservation of albatrosses.

The study also demonstrates how interlinked different species are to each other, and indicates the

perils which could take place in the event of threats to the survival of any of these species. More

such studies will greatly help us in understanding and protecting different species.

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Works Cited

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