

Falkland Islands Science Symposium: A Social Scientist in the Falkland Islands

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Photo credit: Carlos Andrade

Our Land Rovers lumbered slowly along the heathland like a convoy of awkward insects. We were heading to the penguin colony at Volunteer Point on the eve of the Falkland Islands Science Symposium. Recent rains had turned the track – rough at best – into a sodden mess. As one and then another of our eight vehicles ran into trouble, the others would fan out to avoid the same fate, resembling ants that have lost

their pheromone track. All in all it was a six-hour round trip through rain and hail, and three vehicles had to be pulled out of precarious positions. The jarring drive made my ears ring well into the night. I remarked afterward that it was about the hardest place I'd ever tried to get to. This was greeted with surprise by my fellow delegates. "But I'm a social scientist, so you have to take that in context," I said. My field destinations can usually be reached in a hatchback. Despite my discomfort, I was more than glad we had made the effort to reach the Point. Three species of penguin, each with its own personality, charmed us for hours.

Sheep wandered among the penguins at times, reminding us that Volunteer Point was part of a working farm. Several of the agricultural experts I met later in the week felt that the penguins played an important role in keeping farms viable. The ranching style of farming traditionally used in the Falkland



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Islands has resulted in substantial vegetation change. Most of the giant tussac grass that once fringed the islands is gone. Patches of it persist in ungrazed outer islands and fenced minefields left over from the Falklands War. In its place are coastal paddocks that are deemed to have the best grasses for grazing, and hence are used for lambing. The health of these fields is in large part thanks to penguin poop. Guano rich in fish remnants returns critical nutrients to the soil, and sheep help distribute it.

I have been one of the Pan-American delegates to this Symposium, representing the social sciences. My research often examines how people respond to local landscapes and how that affects resource decisions. My inspiration comes from talking to local people in places experiencing or facing change. This week I have spoken to leaders of legislation, policy and industry; cabbies and tour operators; long-time Islanders and members of a diverse network of contract workers with a cacophony of Commonwealth accents. These conversations have suggested many exciting research opportunities. Like Volunteer Point, it takes some effort to get to the Falkland Islands. But the destination – and its future – are worth it.