Resurrecting the South African Ross Seal Project

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This study investigates the ranging and diving behaviour of Ross seals in a former area of high relative abundance off the Princess Martha Coast, Antarctica, their diet through direct (vomitus and scat collecting) and indirect (dive behaviour and stable isotope analyses) means, and compares their distribution and abundance on the cruise track of the SA Agulhas II. The study builds on earlier SANAP seal research initiatives in the pack-ice off Dronning Maud Land [1-5], extends earlier pioneering work [6,7] using technology such as Temperature and Depth Satellite Relay Data Loggers (SRDLs) and stable isotope analyses [8] to characterise Ross seal distribution, diet and the physical characteristics of the water column where they forage. Results are envisaged to contribute to detailing the structure and function of the pack-ice ecosystem [9] with a view to using seals as bioindicators of environmental change [10], likely due to global warming. After a very successful first season of fieldwork when a record-breaking number of Ross seals were accessed and instrumented, the continuation of the project is threatened by the shortage of funding in the current financial climate, and the SA Agulhas II sailing schedule.

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