
WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION - IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION

PENINSULA VALDES (ARGENTINA)

1. DOCUMENTATION

- i) **IUCN/WCMC Data Sheet (11 references).**
- ii) **Additional Literature Consulted:** Davis, S. ed. 1997. **Centres of Plant Diversity.** Vol. 3. IUCN/WWF, pp 549-542; Kelleher, Bleakley & Wells. ed. 1995. **A Global Representative System of Marine Protected Areas.** Vol. 2. IUCN/ WB/GBRMPA, pp 76-83; Stattersfield, Crosby, *et al.* 1998. **Endemic Bird Areas of the World: Priorities for Biodiversity Conservation.** Birdlife Conservation Series No. 7, pp 256-258; Reeves & Leatherwood. 1994. **Dolphins, Porpoises and Whales – Action Plan for the Conservation of Cetaceans.** IUCN/SSC Cetacean Specialist Group, pp 26-30; Bubas. 1996. **Orcas de la Península Valdés.** 13 p; Conway, R. & K. Payne. 1976. Patagonia: A wild shore where two worlds meet. **National Geographic.** 3/1976, pp 290-322; Erize. 1966. Sea Mammals of Patagonia. **Animals.** Vol. 8. No. 18, 4/1966, pp 479-481; CPPS/PNUMA. 1992. **Plan de Acción para la Conservación de los Mamíferos Marinos en el Pacífico Sudeste.** Informes y Estudios del Programa de Mares Regionales del PNUMA (UNEP), pp 110-155; Administración de Parques Nacionales de la Argentina. 1998. **Las Areas Naturales Protegidas de la Argentina.** APN/IUCN/FAO, 65 p; Leitch. 1990. **South America's National Parks: A Visitor's Guide.** The Mountaineers, pp 73-89.
- iii) **Consultations:** 5 external reviewers, National Parks Administration of Argentina, National Secretary for Tourism, National Commission of Co-operation with UNESCO, Patagonia Natural Foundation, Direction of Conservation and Tourism of the Chubut Province, EcoValdés Foundation, Superintendent of Península Valdés, National Centre for Patagonia, Association of Landowners of Península Valdés, Association of Artisan Fishermen, University of Patagonia, representative of Puerto Pirámides community, Whale watching tour operators, landowners
- iv) **Field Visit:** January 1999. Pedro Rosabal

2. SUMMARY OF NATURAL VALUES

Península Valdés is located in the Argentinean province of Chubut. It is a 4,000km² promontory, protruding 100km eastwards into the South Atlantic Ocean. The 400km shoreline includes a series of gulfs, rocky cliffs (some over 100m), shallow bays and lagoons with extensive mudflats, sandy and pebble beaches, coastal sand dunes, and small islands. The coastal zone of the peninsula is dynamic, including shifting coastal lagoons and an active sand dunes system with some dunes over 30m high. The Ameghino Isthmus, which links the peninsula to the rest of South America, has an average width of only 11km; the Golfo San José lies to its north and the Golfo Nuevo to its south. Effectively this gives the area an island quality. While the predominant vegetation is Patagonian desert steppe, 18 different communities can be found, representing a high diversity in such a small area. The number of communities represented in the area demonstrate its importance from the phyto-geographic point of view, considering that in the whole Patagonian region 28 communities have been described. Some 130 plant species from 41 families have been reported, with 38 species endemic to Argentina.

Península Valdés has important faunal values. A population of southern right whales uses the protected waters of Nuevo and San José gulfs as mating and calving areas from April to June. Recent surveys indicate that the population of southern right whales has been growing at an estimated annual rate of 7.1% and every year over 1,500 whales visit the Península. The southern elephant seal forms a mating and calving colony on Punta Norte, reaching peak numbers of over 1,000 individuals. This is the most northern colony of the species and the only one in the world reported to be on the increase. The nominated site is also very important as a breeding point for the southern sea lion.

In addition to the above, 33 other species of marine mammals are found in the area including a stable population of orcas. Favoured by the coastal geomorphology of Península Valdés, these orcas have developed a particular and spectacular approach to hunting: they chase young or adult sea lions or elephant seals into the shallow surf, in the process often stranding themselves on the beach; they then grab the prey in their jaws. This is a unique hunting strategy for orcas.

Terrestrial mammals are abundant, with 33 species being reported. Large herds of guanaco can be seen throughout the peninsula. Other species present include the mara, an Argentinean endemic, and the red fox, both endangered in other parts of the country.

Península Valdés has a high diversity of birds. There are 181 species of birds, of which 66 are migratory species, including the Antarctic pigeon, which is considered Vulnerable. The wetlands of the peninsula, some associated with inter-tidal mudflats and coastal lagoons, are important staging sites for migratory shorebirds and have been identified as a potential Ramsar site for the variety of migratory species that can be found in this area. The Magellanic penguin is the most numerous with almost 40,000 active nests distributed among five different colonies.

3. COMPARISON WITH OTHER AREAS

Península Valdés has many unique geographical and biological features. The nominated site is representative of the Udvardy Patagonia Desert Biogeographical Province, where there is currently no natural World Heritage site. It is also representative of one of WWF's Global 200 Ecoregions (Patagonian desert plains) which is considered to be of outstanding biological diversity, while its conservation status is considered vulnerable - so the area has high priority for conservation. The site is also representative of the Patagonian Centre of Plant Diversity and has an important biogeographical value as an "island" of the Patagonian desert region within the Patagonian Shrub-steppe. There are only two other protected areas in Argentina within the Patagonian desert biogeographical province: Talampaya National Park and Laguna de los Pozuelos, but both areas are far inland and do not compare to Península Valdés.

In relation to the global network of World Heritage sites, there are 40 natural sites with coastal and marine components, most of them in tropical and sub-tropical regions. In view of the geographic location of Península Valdés, below 42° South, it is appropriate to compare it with World Heritage natural sites that protect southern ocean and sub-Antarctic environments. This limits the comparison to few sites: New Zealand Sub-Antarctic Islands (New Zealand), Te Wahipounamu (New Zealand), Tasmanian Wilderness (Australia), and Los Glaciares (Argentina).

However there are important differences in the landscapes and biodiversity protected by some of the above mentioned sites. The Tasmanian Wilderness protects temperate rain forests in Australia. Los Glaciares National Park includes extensive ice fields and fresh water lakes of high hydrological importance and outstanding beauty. Te Wahipounamu contains New Zealand's highest mountains, longest glaciers and important examples of ancient flora and fauna of Gondwanaland.

The New Zealand Sub-Antarctic Islands World Heritage natural site was inscribed partially for the protection of the southern right whale with a stable population. According to recent reports on the status of this species, its total population is now about 7,000 individuals and is still heavily depleted

from whaling. The southern right whale population of Valdés is around 38% of the total Southern Hemisphere population. While 120 bird species are reported for New Zealand Sub-Antarctic Islands, 181 species are reported for Península Valdés, 66 of them migratory species. The peninsula character of Valdés means that a number of species of terrestrial mammals occur which are representative of the continent of South America – this obviously has no parallel in the case of the New Zealand Sub-Antarctic Islands.

The Whale Sanctuary of El Vizcaino (Mexico) also contains a combination of desert and coastal features, and also offers protection for whales and other marine life. However El Vizcaino protects a key site of Baja California for grey whales, thus its comparison with Península Valdés is very limited. Other World Heritage sites with important whale populations are Fraser Island and Shark Bay, in Australia, and Glacier Bay Alaska. However none of these provides equivalent protection to southern right whales, and they lack the impressive seal, sea lion and orca populations.

4. INTEGRITY

The pressures on Península Valdés are relatively light. The total number of people living in the area are 220, with 56 private farms and 8,000 sheep. There are 100,000 visitors annually (80% from within Argentina). However, the following stand out as potential or existing issues:

- ◆ conflict with sheep farming which competes for grazing with the lamas and is associated with the shooting of foxes. With the current decline in the prosperity of sheep farming, some farmers are turning to tourism as an income substitute, which would ease pressures associated with sheep farming;
- ◆ tourist pressures on marine mammals, either at sea or on beaches, though it is reported that most of the whale watching enterprises are responsibly operated. These pressures are likely to grow, particularly if the site is inscribed as a World Heritage site, and should be addressed in a more strategic way, ideally through a tourism management plan;
- ◆ potential threats of pollution from Puerto Madryn (a town on the south west side of Golfo Nuevo and outside the nominated World Heritage site); and
- ◆ potential threats of marine pollution from passing oil tankers. To counter this, there should be effective anti-pollution contingency planning in place in the area of the peninsula.

Official protection of Península Valdés has a long history, but has only recently been undertaken in a strategic and integrated way. In 1967, the first Provincial Reservations were created on Isla de los Pajaros (in the Golfo San José) and Punta Nortes by the Provincial Government of Chubut, aiming to protect the wildlife and scenic values of these two key areas in the peninsula. In 1974, the Marine Park of San José Gulf was created and the law for the Conservation of the Tourism Patrimony was sanctioned: this regulates tourism development in Península Valdés. In 1983, Península Valdés was declared a Natural Reservation for Integrated Tourism Development, which ensures that any tourism development takes place within ecological limits.

In relation to the conservation of the southern right whale, an Argentinean National Law declares this species to be a “Natural Monument”. This legislation was reinforced in 1985 with specific regulations to plan and control whale watching and observation of other marine mammals. In 1995, a strict reserve area (Category Ia, IUCN) was created in Golfo Nuevo to strengthen the protection of the southern right whale.

In all, there are now six wildlife reserves within Península Valdés which together should help ensure the protection of key sites on the peninsula and in the immediate surrounding waters. However there is a need to enhance the management of the peninsula and surrounding seas as a whole, in an integrated manner. It is also desirable to involve all landowners and cover all land use practices,

particularly sheep farming and tourist-based activities. These requirements were considered in the preparation of a management plan (The Integrated Collaborative Management Plan) which re-defined the peninsula as a Managed Resource Protected Area, following the definition of such an area under IUCN protected area management category VI. Provincial Law has endorsed this management plan, which establishes the zonation and management regulations for the entire area. Under this plan, the Provincial Tourism Authority will be responsible for the protection of the area, but decisions will be agreed with representatives of all stakeholders. The new management plan also expands the boundaries of this area, extending the limits in the Isthmus of Ameghino to incorporate new coastal areas. The area protected in Golfo Nuevo has been also expanded to provide additional protection to the southern right whale. In addition a buffer zone of five nautical miles has been established around the peninsula, thus expanding its previous marine component. There is also a buffer zone to the west, of varying width but protecting the isthmus from development pressures from that quarter. These areas coincide with the nominated site.

Since the 1970's, there has been a corps of Wildlife Guards in the peninsula controlling activities which might affect wildlife. Local police and the National Coast Guards support enforcement. New provincial legislation allows for the reinvestment of part of the revenue from tourism activities to manage this area. This provides additional resources to supplement those allocated by the Provincial government, and the National and Provincial Tourism Authorities. As a result, in 1998 the number of wildlife guards increased by 30%. Also equipment for communications and patrols, including vehicles and boats for marine patrols, has been renewed. These now number five new terrestrial vehicles and two new boats. Three visitor centres exist in the peninsula and are now undergoing renewal.

Management of the site includes a research component, addressing different natural features (climate, geomorphology, soils, vegetation and flora, wildlife). Research programmes have been implemented through the National Centre for Patagonia, Smithsonian Institution, and a number of Argentinean Universities.

5. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

None.

6. APPLICATION OF WORLD HERITAGE NATURAL CRITERIA

Península Valdés has been nominated under all four World Heritage natural criteria. In respect of criteria (i), (ii) and (iii) IUCN considers that there is inadequate evidence to support the case that the site is of outstanding universal value. However, it is certainly of regional importance in relation to: the aeolian and marine processes that generally shaped the peninsula during the Miocene period and aesthetic quality.

Criterion (iv): Biodiversity and threatened species

Península Valdés contains very important and significant natural habitats for the in-situ conservation of several threatened species of outstanding universal value, and specifically its globally important concentration of breeding southern right whales, which is an endangered species. It is important too because of the breeding populations of southern elephant seals and southern sea lions. The area also exhibits an exceptional example of adaptation of hunting techniques by the orca to the local coastal conditions. IUCN considers that this site meets criterion (iv).

7. RECOMMENDATION

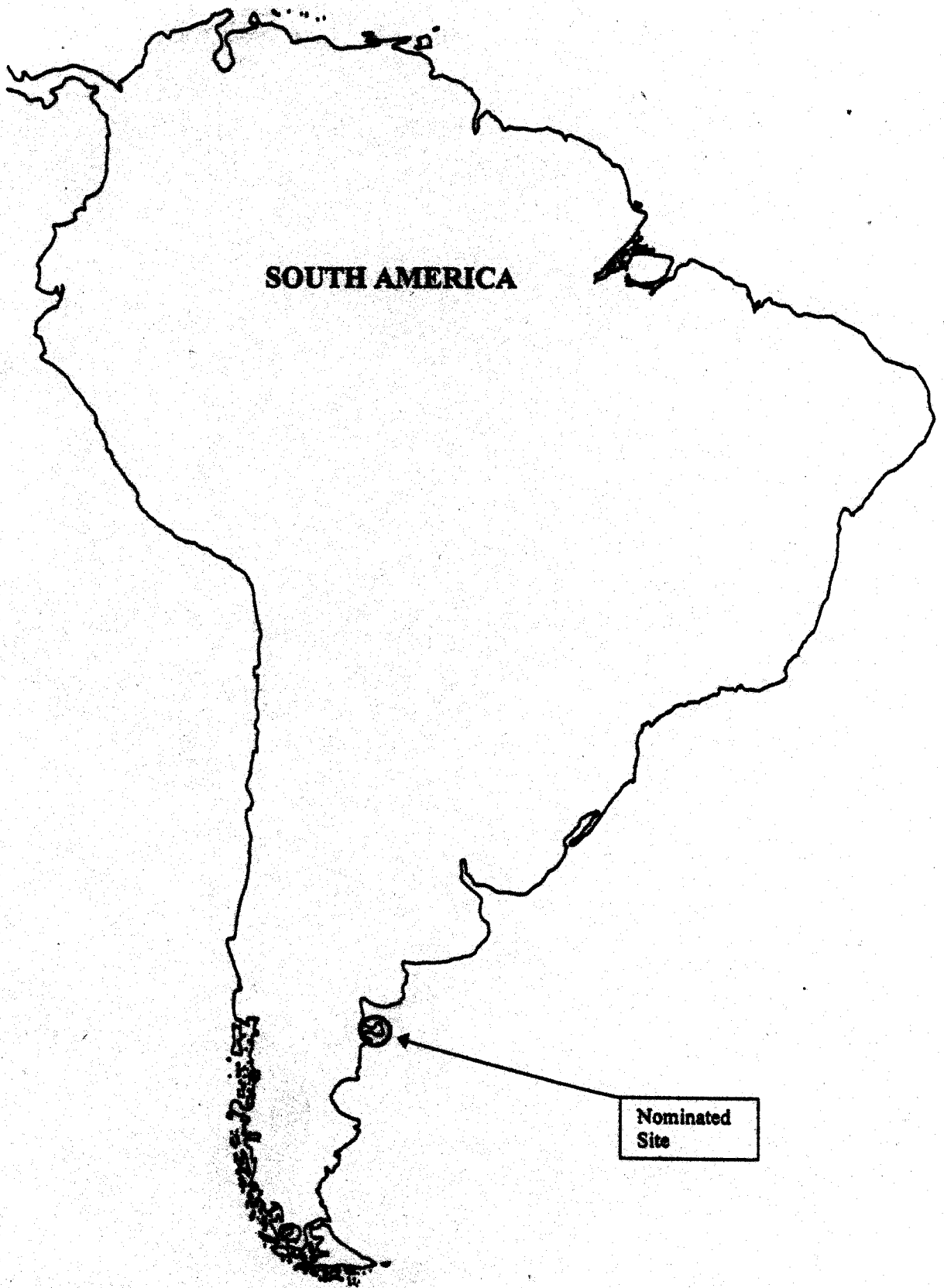
At its twenty-third ordinary session, the Bureau recommended that the Committee **inscribe** Península Valdés on the World Heritage list under criterion (iv). The Bureau commended the government of the

Province of Chubut for promoting the preparation of an Integrated Collaborative Management Plan for this site.

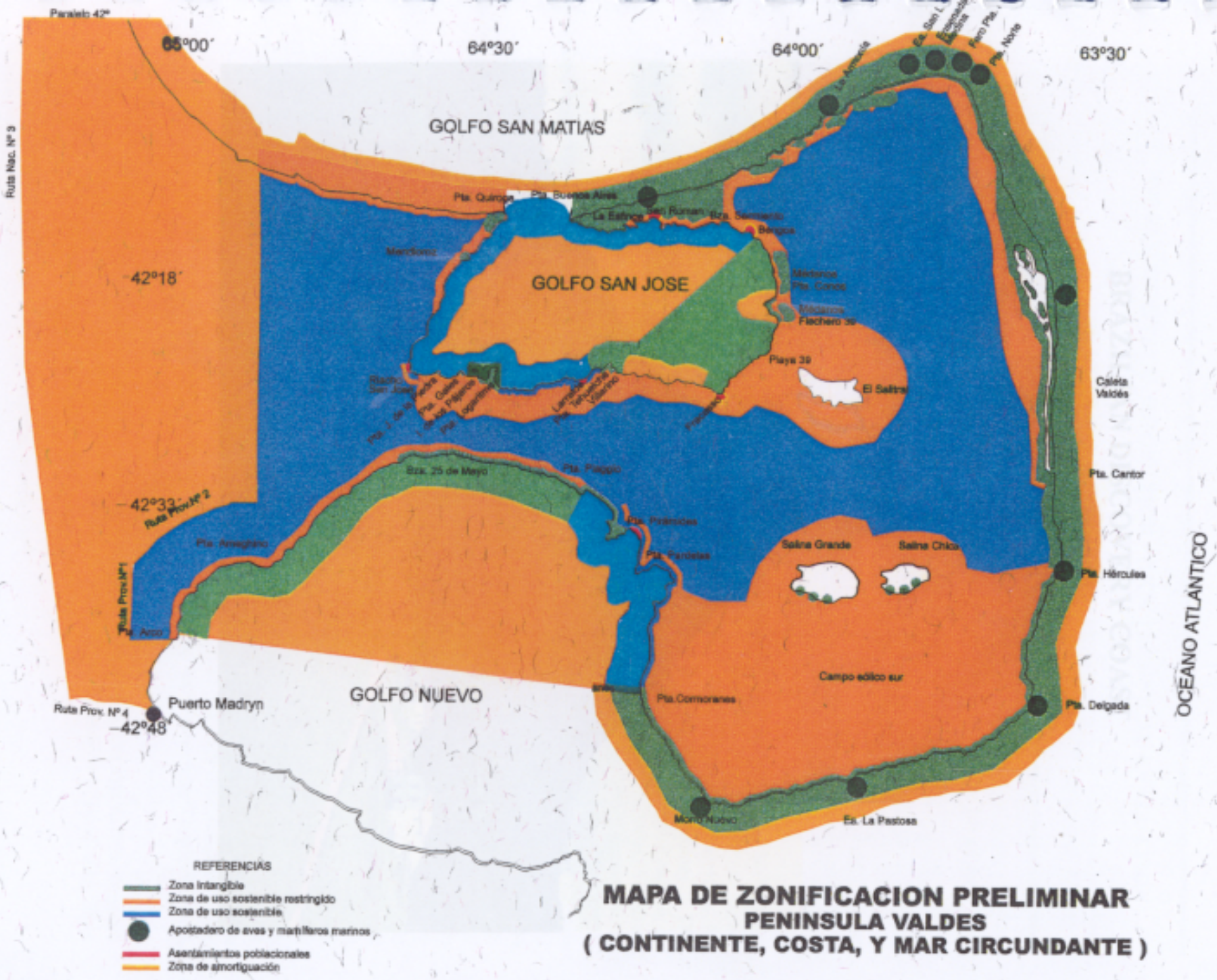
The inscription of the site on the World Heritage list provides an opportunity to reinforce measures to ensure the future integrity of the site. The Bureau recommended that the State Party, along with responsible regional and local bodies, should:

- ◆ ensure that effective controls are in place over any possible pollution threat from the town of Puerto Madryn to the waters of Golfo Nuevo;
- ◆ support the efforts of the relevant authorities to secure the equipment needed to respond quickly to any oil hazard from passing shipping so as to protect the marine conservation values of the area;
- ◆ produce a tourism management plan as an integral element of the overall management plan;
- ◆ encourage implementation of the Integrated Collaborative Management Plan, and in particular to ensure that farmers and other private owners of land can play a full part in the development of environmentally responsible tourism; and
- ◆ work at the international level to ensure that the marine mammals concerned are protected throughout their range.

IUCN noted that this may require the State Party to draw the nomination of Península Valdés as a World Heritage site to the attention of such international fora as the International Whaling Commission and the Convention on Antarctic Marine Living Resources.



Map 1. Location of Nominated Site



Map 2. Nominated Site