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Turning the tide on plastic pollution in St Helena and Ascension Island

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Plastic pollution is widely recognised as one of the biggest threats to the ocean. St Helena and Ascension Island, two of the UK's most remote Overseas Territories (OTs), are custodians of vast ocean estates home to abundant and unique biodiversity. Their entire Exclusive Economic Zones were designated as Marine Protected Areas, in 2016 and 2019 respectively, to protect these valued marine and coastal environments: resulting in a cumulative 893,411 km² of protected ocean in the heart of the South Atlantic. However, these environments, like those of many other small island nations, still suffer the pervasive impacts of plastic pollution: both from external sources and generated on the islands themselves. Currently, there are limited opportunities for people living on these islands to take positive action to protect their environment, resulting in a lack of community empowerment.

The South Atlantic Plastic Project is a Darwin Plus and John Ellerman Foundation funded three-year project beginning in 2022, spanning across both St Helena and Ascension Island. With a focus on local actor engagement, knowledge-sharing and co-design, the project aimed to: perform a system mapping exercise to quantify and reduce plastic waste, creating a strategy to trial interventions for single-use plastic reduction and improve waste management efficiencies; research the characteristics and sources of plastic pollution and their associated threats to wildlife; and explore opportunities for international action through a new UKOTs and Crown Dependencies network.

The project will conclude and results will be finalised by the time of the One Ocean Science Congress. Representatives of the project team will present key project outputs from the following: intervention work undertaken on St Helena following extensive community engagement; a study investigating the origin of single-use plastic bottle debris on both islands; research to quantify the prevalence and composition of anthropogenic debris found in brown booby (*Sula leucogaster*) and green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) nests on Ascension Island; and an investigation into ingested microplastics by inshore marine species in the waters of both islands.

It is hoped that the work undertaken on this project will serve not only as a catalyst to continue work addressing plastic pollution into the future locally, but will bear relevance to other small island nations in scaling of effective interventions and capacity sharing globally.

Project team: Ascension Island Government (AIG), St Helena National Trust (SHNT), St Helena Government (SHG), Zoological Society of London (ZSL).