

Chile, April 2026

Concern for the Conservation Status of the Humboldt Penguin in Chile and the Case for Reinstating the Natural Monument Decree

Open letter from the scientific community

We, the undersigned scientists dedicated to the study and conservation of the Humboldt Penguin, wish to express the importance of reinstating to formal proceedings the decree that declares the Humboldt Penguin (*Spheniscus humboldti*) a Natural Monument species.

The most recent scientific evidence is robust and conclusive: the latest census conducted in 2025 across the main reproductive colonies in Chile indicates that the population has declined to fewer than 2,000 breeding pairs. This figure represents a critical level of abundance and reflects a sustained downward population trend over recent decades — the reason the species was reclassified as Endangered in 2025.

The colonies of north-central Chile have experienced a reduction of more than 60% over the last 5 years. These figures stand in stark contrast with historical estimates that indicated significantly larger populations, exceeding 30,000 individuals toward the end of the last century. Since 2017, evidence has already shown signs of decline, which has intensified alarmingly in recent years. Chile has historically hosted 80% of the global Humboldt Penguin population. Currently, in Peru, where the remaining 20% reside, historically low population figures have also been recorded.

In recent years, events have arisen that make protecting this species even more necessary. Between 2022 and 2023, SERNAPESCA documented the deaths of more than 3,000 individuals as a consequence of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), of which only a fraction could be confirmed as directly related to the disease — suggesting that other factors also contributed to these deaths. Concurrently, the El Niño phenomenon intensified during this period, causing reduced prey availability, which led to the interruption of breeding. Added to this is the constant pressure of threats such as incidental capture in fishing nets, competition for resources, pollution (hydrocarbons and plastics), and habitat disturbance from increasing anthropogenic pressure — all intensifying their effects on the species. Consequently, there is an urgent need to increase its protection effectively across the entire territory, including by implementing the Natural Monument decree.

The Humboldt Penguin is supported by a legal and technical protection framework. At the international level, its conservation is backed by its inclusion in Appendices I and II of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS) and Appendix I of CITES, and it is still categorised as "Vulnerable" on the IUCN Red List pending an update of supporting data.

At the national level, its status has recently been elevated to "Endangered" in accordance with the Species Classification Regulation (Decree 54/2025, MMA). It is also considered a hydrobiological resource under the General Fisheries and Aquaculture Act (Law 18,892 of 1989 and its amendments), which entails specific protections. Complementing this is Decree 204/2025 (SUBPESCA), which renews the national extractive ban for a period of 30 years, and Decree 38/2011 on the observation of marine mammals, reptiles, and birds, establishing norms for their observation and approach. Additionally, the species has a Recovery, Conservation and Management Plan (Decree 01/2024, MMA), developed through participatory planning.

The Humboldt Penguin is a key bioindicator of the health of the marine ecosystem of the Humboldt Current. Marine birds and mammals are relevant components of the Humboldt Current System, as they contribute, among other functions, essential nutrients for marine productivity, which in turn sustains fishery resources of global importance. Their decline reflects a broader deterioration of the ocean, upon which — directly and indirectly — all human life depends.

Despite this critical scenario, biological evidence indicates that the Humboldt Penguin has recovery capacity, given its reproductive potential of up to two breeding events per year. Previous experiences in Peru have demonstrated that the species can recover even after severe declines, provided that threats are reduced and adequate environmental conditions are ensured. Recovery is possible, but it depends on the urgent, effective, and sustained implementation of conservation measures based on the best available scientific evidence.

The presence of Avian Influenza detected in Chile in March 2026, combined with climate projections suggesting the recurrence of an extremely strong El Niño event during the current year, raises the alert level for the conservation of the species along the Chilean coast.

In this context, advancing and strengthening protective measures is not optional — it is urgent. Instruments such as the Natural Monument designation constitute concrete tools for safeguarding the species, granting it a higher level of protection and highlighting its ecological and social relevance. This process also has significant public support, evidenced by the participation of more than 9,000 people in the associated public consultation.

The challenge is clear: to align science, public policy, and civic engagement to ensure the protection of this emblematic species of the ecosystem it represents.

Protecting the Humboldt Penguin means not only safeguarding a species, but also preserving the health of the ocean and, with it, the well-being of present and future generations.

This letter is signed by:

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on behalf of the scientific community studying the Humboldt Penguin in Chile.*

Endorsed by the citizens who have signed this open letter.