Dispatch from Monday, 7 May 2007

We've had an unbelievably calm ride home. The winds have been less than 10 knots and the seas incredible calm for our crossing of the Drake. a few hours ago we came onto the continental shelf of South America and just before sunset we could see mountains off in the distance. It's hard to believe just a few days ago we were in the land of ice and snow. As they call it "Life in the Refrigerator". One thing about making a trip to the Palmer Peninsula is that the only way there is by ship. So you are committed to a 3-4 day boat ride. It really makes you appreciate where you have just gone or come from. For people working at the other US Antarctic Base at McMurdo Station, you fly in. You get on a plane in Christ Church New Zealand and 5 hours later you are in Antarctica. Not here, you are committed to 4 days on a ship. This makes you really appreciate how distant and far from our normal existence the Antarctic is.

On the trip back we have been reading, on organizing data, files and images. We took some time to make a very simple first cut at the analysis of the data from our trip. A major goal of this project was to compare the foraging patterns of elephant seals and crabeater seals. We had previously tracked crabeater seals in 2001 and 2002 as part of a project called GLOBEC. In 2005, and 2006 we were able to track elephant seals. However, comparisons between the two species were hampered by the fact that they were studied in different years. Now for the first time we have data from both species at the same time. We are also collecting oceanographic data. That is when the seals dive they collect information on the temperature and salinity profile of the ocean. These data are important to understand what drives the currents and climate of this region.

The initial data supports what we saw in earlier comparisons between elephant and crabeater seals. That is that elephant seals dive deep and are primarily feeding offshore of the continental shelf, but occasional come onto the continental shelf. In contrast crabeater seals stay on the continental shelf closer to shore and dive more shallow. In the attached image you can see the tracks of 12 elephant seals that were tagged in January in white and the 8 crabeater and 1 Weddell seal that were just recently tagged in red. The land is in a yellow-green color, while the ocean is blue. The lighter blue region is the continental shelf and the darker blue is the deep ocean. A crabeater seal with our tag is in the upper center and an elephant seal on the lower center.

The final leg of our journal will take us up along the coast of Argentina and through the straights of Magellan to Punta Arenas.

From the seal team, almost home...