



UK OVERSEAS TERRITORIES CONSERVATION FORUM

Annual Report 1997 - 1998

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Chairman's Report on behalf of the Executive Committee 1997/8

As part of the restructuring in 1995/96, the Forum adopted a Business Plan. This year's Annual Report follows its structure, to report progress, and to highlight priorities for the coming year.

Organisational development. The Forum welcomed CAB International as a new member, as well as the rejoining of the National Trust. We continue to seek the support of others who should be involved.

In 1998/99, the Forum needs to complete procedures for the change of name to refer to Overseas Territories. We need to develop the work started on identifying other sources of funding. There is an urgent need to review the load placed on the Co-ordinator; we would like to identify resources allowing some division of duties to make the work humanly possible! The Forum plans to work with its partners in the Overseas Territories and elsewhere to define further the relationship between the Forum and its Associate Members.

Working Groups. During the year, four geographical Working Groups were (re)established. Their reports are given below.

The Forum will give attention to the ways of resourcing their activities, and to the potential for a Europe Working Group.

Relationships and links with Overseas Territories and OT NGOs. The Forum has maintained close working relationships between those based in UK and partners in the Overseas Territories, mainly by telecommunications and of course *Forum News*, but also as far as possible by a programme of regular visits in both directions. We would like to enhance efficiency further by building on the existing e-mail links. Visitors to the Forum network during the year have come from Pitcairn, the Falkland Islands, Tristan da Cunha, St Helena, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, British Virgin Islands, Anguilla, and Montserrat. Forum officers and members have been involved with development programmes and projects with Anguilla National Trust, British Virgin Islands National Parks Trust, National Trust for the Cayman Islands, National Trust for the Turks & Caicos Islands, and Falklands Conservation.

In the last few weeks, many Montserratians have returned to their island, and key players are attempting — in their spare time — to re-establish the National Trust there. We join all the OT National Trusts in the Caribbean in looking to UK and Montserrat Governments at least to reinstate the previous subvention to this Trust, which has proved its ability to move to self-sufficiency in normal conditions.

In conjunction with OT NGO partners, the Forum has also developed further its relationship with some OT Governments, including Falklands, St Helena, BVI, TCI and the Cayman Islands, and the administrations of British Indian Ocean Territories, Tristan da Cunha, Ascension and the Cyprus Sovereign Base Areas. In February, we participated strongly in the London conference of the Dependent Territories Association (of OT governments), and continue to develop links.

The close links with OT NGOs (and in some cases governments) allow for the Forum to provide advice, as well as a voice to represent OT NGO concerns and initiatives to UK Government and others. These proved invaluable in collating OT views on the proposed UK White Paper, on the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), on the special issue of *Ecoss*, and at meetings of CBD and CITES.

In the coming year, the Forum will continue to pursue the conservation priorities in its checklist initiative, published in *Ecoss* (see Box). It will continue to provide links to Forum organisations and their technical expertise, including the preparation for the Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention. It would like to develop further production of an annual list of priority conservation projects for circulation to potential sponsors. This, and other projects, depend heavily on securing funding for its database project. Early indications that this would receive UK Government financial support proved misleading, so far at least.

Relationship with UK Government and government agencies. The half-yearly meetings with UK Government and government agencies, jointly organised with Environment, Science and Energy Department of FCO have continued to provide a valuable regular point of contact, complemented when appropriate with direct contact with desk officers of territorial departments, often through Working Groups. A new procedure has been agreed for incoming Governors to be briefed by the Forum's Chairman, and this was implemented for the new Governor of Pitcairn (the High Commissioner to New Zealand). Meetings with the new Governor of BVI still need to be arranged, and other new appointments are expected.

As part of its support to UK Government, the Forum has commented and advised on the process and individual funding

applications to the Command Programme Budget (CPB, formerly AUSPB); and advised on legislation for OTs, and involvement of OTs in the Ramsar Convention. The Forum, partly under commission from WWF-UK, produced a report highlighting both achievements and gaps in ratification and implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity, *Overlooking Britain's Greatest Biodiversity*. The Forum, RSPB and the Institute for European Environmental Policy have also produced reports on environmental legislation in the associated territories of European Union states. Application has been made to the European Commission and the British and French Governments for support for further work and dissemination; so far, the French Government has responded favourably.

In the coming months, the Forum looks forward to developing strong collaboration with the new FCO Overseas Territories Department, as well as ESED, and the equivalent sections in the Department for International Development and other appropriate Departments. The Forum would like to work with Government to review how well funding systems are tailored to conservation priorities. It would also like to compile information packs for new Governors and Administrators, as well as improve dissemination of information on conventions/agreements, to meet expressed needs. Some of these aspects will have to await funding of the Forum's proposed new linked database and web site. Linked to this may be the identification of means of making UK government funding mechanisms more responsive to the needs of the Forum if it is to deliver further conservation results.

Conservation priorities. Considerable progress has been made in relation to the Ramsar Convention, with the British Government arranging to add British Indian Ocean Territory and Guernsey to its ratification. Forum officers and the Friends of the Chagos have been working with government colleagues to facilitate progress towards Ramsar designations in several OTs in time for the 1999 Conference of the Parties in Costa Rica. The Forum joined the UK national Ramsar group.

The Forum has supported — and will continue to support — OT NGOs in their efforts to prevent damaging or destructive development activities affecting important sites — notably proposed devastation of East Caicos, TCI, by a cruise liner port; destruction of wildlife and habitats on Sombrero island, Anguilla, by a rocket launch site; destructive development at Grand Cayman Central Mangrove Wetland; and risk to Ships Hill Caves, Bermuda, by hotel development.

The Forum has established clear priorities for conservation action (see Box), recently published in *Ecos* and offered to Government as a key aspect of its White Paper considerations. The Forum has agreed to contribute to conservation planning in the OTs by commenting on the environment part of country plans, and awaits receipt of these from UK Government.

Public awareness and publicity. As a key part of raising the profile of UK's Overseas Territories and their importance to biodiversity, the first 3 display boards of a series were produced with support from WWF-UK. These provided the introductory and background material, and have been used at several meetings. A special issue of *Ecos* has been prepared, edited, published and widely circulated, as was a review in *Journal of Applied Ecology*. Initial discussions have been held for a possible TV series.

In 1998/99, the next 3 display boards will be produced, using funding secured for this purpose, from RSPB and the British Ornithologists' Union. These will be the first relating to individual OTs, Falklands, St Helena and Ascension. Support for other boards will be explored. We would like to develop the web-site, with briefing sheets/background material on each OT for general and press enquiries; and expand *Forum News* and its mailing list to include more of target audiences (and increase frequency). All these developments will depend on further funding and management resources.

Information management. The Forum has developed a clear view of information management needs, but has so far been unable to secure the relatively modest funds which would be necessary to implement these. The plan would essentially involve an integrated database and web-site, to make information routinely available with minimal expensive human intervention. This would also ensure that information gathered for one purpose would be available for others, thereby also reducing demands on hard-pressed personnel both at the Forum and in OTs.

Overview. The Forum has had a successful year. It has identified some clear conservation priorities and helped partners move towards these. It has also flagged up major threats in the Overseas Territories and alerted the appropriate or relevant authorities; it will continue to assist responsible action here. The Forum has produced several major analyses during the year, as well as raising the profile of biodiversity in the OTs through various means. Co-ordination and its own internal arrangements have been developed.

What are the most urgent matters? Direct conservation issues have been addressed above. We feel that co-ordination with Government could be improved further. There is so much to do that we ought to be pooling effort, but we still learn about initiatives far too late to be able to contribute effectively. Similarly, a great deal of advice is given by the Forum to Government, but Government remains unable to identify any way of providing financial support to cover this effort. This is particularly critical in that the main limiting factors in the Forum's efficiency at present are the lack of an integrated database/web-site and the overload on the Co-ordinator. This is frustrating because, with very limited paid resourcing, the Forum can deploy a great wealth of voluntary skilled effort. It will be a major challenge in the exciting new world of UK Government's new arrangements to solve these problems in the coming year and beyond.

(Reprinted from 'Paradise mis-filed' by *Ecos* 19(1): 1- 11, July 1998)

The natural environment is easily damaged and its importance is recognised in international agreements, which UK enters on behalf of itself and, where appropriate and agreed, its Overseas Territories. It is the view of the Forum that the sort of attention given in the Government's review to one basis of the UKOTs' economies, financial services, should be given also to another which is of even wider importance, the natural environment.

A first draft check-list for the natural environment in UK Overseas Territories

The Forum and its partners have worked closely with the UK and UKOT governments over the years, and wish to continue to do so. It is in that spirit which I offer a first draft of a check-list on conserving the natural environment. The Forum looks forward to the government adopting this approach so that we can work together on this, which is generally more cost-effective than separate routes.

Each UKOT should have in place, and the UK Government should ensure and assist this:

1. the inclusion of the Territory in UK's ratification of appropriate international conservation conventions, including that on Biological Diversity
2. appropriate legislation, and mechanisms to implement this, which fully meets these international obligations
3. a properly staffed department, headed by a Minister or equivalent, within each UKOT government, with responsibility for ensuring the conservation of biodiversity and the natural heritage
4. an environmental NGO, supported and consulted by government, to provide an independent voice on conservation matters
5. plans for the conservation of biodiversity throughout the land- and sea-areas of the Territory, and the incorporation of biodiversity conservation in the plans for all sectors of the economy
6. clear mechanisms to deliver these conservation plans, and for the provision of adequate funding
7. a requirement for independent environmental impact assessment, open to public consultation and scrutiny, for any major development in the Territory, with expert evaluation to ensure that the common faults of such assessments^{7,8} are avoided
8. a system of site-safeguard for the most important areas for biodiversity, with clear management plans developed and implemented in consultation with environmental NGOs
9. the development of biodiversity targets, including restoration and recovery of damaged ecosystems and threatened wildlife populations, and action plans to achieve these
10. the development of a time-tabled plan to compile existing data, to survey biodiversity and to conduct cross-sectoral reviews of policies that relate to biodiversity use and conservation
11. ecological studies necessary to inform plans for sustainable use and conservation
12. a system for monitoring and reporting publicly (including in fulfilment of international commitments) of the state of biodiversity and any impacts upon it
13. plans for training programmes for key personnel and the integration of biodiversity conservation into education curricula and public awareness programmes.

Report of the UKOTCF Wider Caribbean Working Group

The Wider Caribbean Working Group met three times during the year under the Chairmanship of Michael Gore. Useful conservation work is in hand - but major problems also exist - in all six overseas territories covered by the Group.

Anguilla. A proposal by Beal Aerospace to build a rocket launch pad on uninhabited Sombrero Island would result in the destruction of one of the most important seabird breeding sites in the Caribbean, as well as the only place of occurrence of several other types of wildlife. The secrecy and confused process of the early stages is concerning. An environmental impact assessment is being undertaken; this will go to the Environment Agency in Bristol and will be open for public comment. This is something we must watch closely. WWF UK provided an extra staff post for one year to help the Anguilla National Trust progress some of its most important plans. A Darwin proposal for technical assistance in drafting legislation for national parks and protected areas will hopefully take forward plans by the Anguillan government for marine and terrestrial protected sites.

Cayman Islands. The failure of the Cayman Islands Government (CIG) to revise the Development Plan to include Environmentally Sensitive areas - which would cover the critical Central Mangrove Wetland on Grand Cayman - is causing concern, although there are indications that this subject is about to come up for public comment and review. Very large investments in land, mainly by wealthy Americans, have caused the CIG to hold back on proclaiming this area a Ramsar site; it had been due for designation in late 1995. Advice and encouragement (alongside that of many Caymanians) must be maintained on the Government, which needs to allocate money from the environmental fee paid by all people departing through the airport for the purpose for which it was intended - the purchase of land for conservation. Unless this is closely watched, the funds may be used for purposes other than those for which they were intended. Funds originally allocated by FCO to Montserrat for biodiversity survey, which would have been lost unless a start was made on a project during the last financial year, were reallocated to similar work on Cayman following the intervention of the Forum.

British Virgin Islands. The Forum has provided advice and information on the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, and the Governments of BVI and UK have indicated an intention to designate sites under the Convention in the near future. BVI National Parks Trust, with the support of FFI and Kew, are taking forward a project with Darwin funding. FCO has provided funding for a second stage of the rock iguana project, started by seed money from WWF.

Bermuda. The holiday development above Ship's Hill caves appears to be going ahead. It is unclear how damage to the unique biodiversity is to be avoided. A data management plan and biodiversity mapping of Bermuda's natural sites with funding from WWF and FCO is being taken forward by the Bermuda Aquarium, Natural History Museum and Zoo. Anne Glasspool of this programme met with members of the Forum while on leave in UK in the summer.

Montserrat. A sustainable Development Plan has been produced for public consultation. At the time of writing, there has been little volcanic activity for the last two months. People are beginning to return to the island. Regeneration of vegetation is already evident. A survey carried out by the RSPB has shown that the Montserrat Oriole is not as endangered as was previously feared and that there are several hundred pairs, albeit in a reduced range in the central hills area. A plan to remove some of the birds for captive breeding in Jersey has been shelved while it is not required. Efforts are being made to reactivate the Montserrat National Trust. At present, this depends on the spare time of people working in difficult conditions with other full-time demanding jobs. It is important that Montserrat and UK Governments at least reinstate the former subvention to the Trust.

Turks and Caicos Islands. Joint work with the Forum (and supported by FCO, WWF and RSPB) has enable a re-

focussing of the work of the TCI National Trust. Major challenges remain, not least in relation to the new arrangements for financing conservation work by the environment fund. Joint work with the Forum will continue. It is hoped that a Darwin proposal to enable local people to develop sustainable management of the largest Ramsar site in the UKOTs might this year be successful. A major threat to the Ramsar site and other aspects of biodiversity and sustainable development is posed by a proposed huge cruise-liner port which would destroy much of the island of East Caicos.

General. CITES. A workshop organised by HMG was held in Grand Cayman in June was attended by representatives from all the regional OTs. WWF UK presented a report at the workshop, pointing out some problems in implementation and enforcement of CITES regulations. A clear need for more training and understanding was established - which it is hoped will be taken forward by UK Government.

A **Marine Biodiversity Workshop** will be held in Jamaica in October at the instigation of HMG. Representatives from the OTs, both officials and NGOs, will be invited and it is hoped that this will result in some positive outcome in terms of marine conservation, including coral reefs, fisheries, tourism protocols and marine protected areas.

The Chairman has sent a copy of Vol. 19 issue No 1 of *Ecoss*, the journal of the British Association of Nature Conservationists, which was largely devoted to the Overseas Territories, under cover of a personal letter to each of the Governors. Replies have been received from the Governors of Montserrat and Turks and Caicos who have read the publication with interest.

Report of the UKOTCF Pitcairn Working Group

The Group's main activities continued those described in the 1997 report.

Rat eradication. In November 1997 the team from Wildlife Management International (WMI) returned to the Pitcairn Islands to eradicate rats from the remote atoll of Ducie. The work was completed in 7 days and apparent success was achieved. However it has not yet been possible to make a return visit to confirm that the island is now rat-free.

The optimism expressed in the last report that rats had been successfully eliminated on Pitcairn itself unfortunately proved short-lived. By the turn of the year, rat sign was becoming very evident as rat numbers built up rapidly. Fortunately WMI was able to negotiate an extension of its DFID contract to allow a return visit for a second bite at the eradication cherry from April-September 1998. At the time of writing (mid-September), it appears that Pitcairn is rat-free but some more months must pass before we can be certain. Meanwhile, in the absence of feral cats, single pairs of Herald and Murphy's petrel have laid on Pitcairn, the first time this has happened for many years.

During its 1998 visit, the WMI team visited Oeno and confirmed that, one year on from the 1997 programme, this atoll is rat-free.

Plant conservation. Following the 1997 visit to Pitcairn Island of Dr Steve Waldren of Trinity College Dublin Botanic Garden, the Pitcairn Administration in New Zealand successfully applied to the Foreign & Commonwealth Office CPB for funds to establish a nursery on Pitcairn. The plan is that, as areas of ground are progressively cleared of introduced invasive plants such as rose apple, the native plants raised in the nursery will be available for planting out. Clearly, to achieve success, this process will need to be maintained over many years. Ideally this restoration will be accompanied by the designation of small reserve areas.

The nursery will be maintained by Jay Warren, Island Magistrate and Conservation Officer, who visited England in the summer of 1998 to learn propagation techniques at a Darwin-funded course organised by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. This trip therefore linked several strands of conservation funding. However the replacement of Pitcairn's alien vegetation by native flora is a long-term enterprise, and it is not yet clear how funding can be sustained.

Airstrip. The exciting idea of airstrip on Pitcairn Island is taking shape with support from the Islanders who perceive benefits, particularly when medical emergencies arise. Since sponsors are ready to invest in the project, it may well go ahead. From the conservation viewpoint, there are two principal concerns:

- (i) To ensure that the increased traffic between Pitcairn and the 'outside world' does not bring further alien plants and animals to the Island
- (ii) To ensure that construction of the strip does not damage the few extremely restricted pockets of native vegetation.

Governor. The Chairmen of the Forum and of the Pitcairn WG met the new High Commissioner to New Zealand in his capacity as Governor of Pitcairn.

Report of the UKOTCF British Indian Ocean Territories Working Group

Summary. The year from October 1997 to September 1998 has been a busy one for the Friends of the Chagos, which formally became constituted as a Working Group of the Forum in January 1998.

7 October 1997 Conference. This Conference was organised in conjunction with the Linnean Society, who kindly made available their headquarters as its venue. Presentations were made by key participants in the 1996 Scientific Expedition. The condition of the Chagos reefs was shown to be encouragingly fine, with some problem areas identified. The full Report of the Expedition is to be published in January 1999. The Commissioner for BIOT also made a positive and forward-looking Policy Statement on conservation matters.

Booklets. In the Spring of 1998 the Friends of the Chagos published the first two of a planned series of six booklets. Their purpose is to raise awareness of Archipelago's rich natural history and, over time, to bring in some additional funds for the Association. The two titles issued were *The Seashores of Chagos* and *The Fishes of Chagos*. It is hoped that the next two titles will issue in 1999.

Governance of BIOT. The Chairman attended the Dependent Territories Conference in February, at which Robin

Cook announced plans to bring together responsibility for these widely scattered territories. By August 1998 responsibility for BIOT had been transferred from the Southern African to the new Overseas Territories Department, whose Head, John White, is now BIOT's Commissioner. It is too early to assess the impact of this change.

Seminar. In conjunction with its Annual General Meeting, the Friends of the Chagos are organising a seminar on 6 October 1998, again at the Linnean Society, London. The aim is to establish a checklist of desirable measures for conservation and, so far as possible, their relative priorities. Copies of the discussion paper prepared for this meeting are available free of charge to Forum participants. One issue concerns the advisability of seeking World Heritage Status for the Chagos archipelago, a course favoured by some, but regarded as of very low priority by the Friends of the Chagos.

Report of the UKOTCF South Atlantic Working Group

SAWG was constituted in October 1997 to cover environmental matters in Ascension, St. Helena, Tristan da Cunha, the Falklands and, when appropriate, the other UKOTs in the South Atlantic, as well as to assist the Forum by focussing and reporting on their particular concerns. We have liaised, where possible, with individuals and groups on those islands both by way of obtaining information and giving them support.

At the same time, we have kept abreast of, and contributed to, initiatives taken by the Forum. We have ensured that the needs of the South Atlantic islands are fully in mind in framing those initiatives, and that they in turn are aware of what the Forum is doing. The work of the Forum, in its regular consultative meetings with the FCO in the run-up to the anticipated Government White Paper on the Overseas Territories and the on-going attempt to develop a global internet to support conservation in the Overseas Territories, have both been debated in SAWG. The development of such an internet in the South Atlantic Islands is now being actively discussed with the Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education who have similar plans for the provision of distance learning facilities there.

The **St. Helena** Working Group, which had existed previously, was wound up when SAWG was created. Any apprehension that this would result in a diminution of interest in St. Helena proved groundless. Indeed SAWG's first working meeting was attended by visiting St. Helena Legislative Council Members. This was a valuable opportunity for the Saints to express their concerns and for SAWG to introduce themselves. Cathy Hopkins, the St. Helena Government Representative in London, is a member of SAWG and has been able to report, amongst other things, on the 'St. Helena Environmental Awareness Year' which began on 1 October.

SAWG has been active as regards **Ascension** through Jim Stevenson's involvement in the production of their management plan and their related efforts to obtain funding for the eradication of feral cats, sadly not successful so far. The attitude of the Administrator in Ascension to environmental matters is important and SAWG has been encouraged by Mr. Huxley's positive approach whilst worrying about the lack of funds for environmental projects.

The meeting attended by the St. Helena Councillors was also attended by the Administrator Designate of **Tristan da Cunha**, Mr Brian Baldwin, and Mr Jimmy Glass, the Chief Islander. There was as a result a quite detailed and helpfully informative discussion about conservation issues. There is a surprising amount of ongoing contact and dialogue with Tristan, witness a fax received for the AGM updating us on developments, including the news that a Tristan Conservation Officer will be in the UK for six months in 1999.

The **Falkland Islands** are well served by Falklands Conservation which has active committees and staff both in the islands and in the UK and a happy working relationship between them; Ann Brown, the UK Secretary, is a SAWG member, as is Sukey Cameron, the Falkland Islands Government Representative. We are particularly well informed about Falklands affairs. The Falklands' great present preoccupation is, of course, oil and - to a lesser extent - the effect on bird life of the extensive commercial fishing around the islands. There are numerous surveys in progress. SAWG is discussing with Falklands Conservation putting up a Forum poster display emphasising the special environmental features of the South Atlantic islands at RAF Brize Norton.

This account emphasises the success which SAWG has had in forging links and relationships in its first year. It makes no attempt to describe all the distinguished scientific work done by members of SAWG, and which straddles their own or their institutions' concerns and the work of the Group as a whole. The respect in which SAWG is held is underlined by an invitation for the Group to organise a session on the South Atlantic Islands at the Association for Science Education's annual conference in January 1999. Our contributions in respect of the different territories will vary substantially, reflecting not least the extent of individuals' involvements. Our relationships with the islands and the Forum are evolving.

The **UKOTCF** is a Registered Charity (1058483) - keen to develop partnerships with business or commercial organisations

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