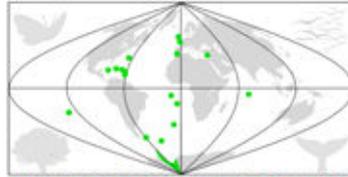




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Saving Our Special Nature of Montserrat

Newsletter 8, April 2019

Foreword



Male Montserrat oriole, Montserrat's national bird on red heliconia, Montserrat's national plant. Photo: Dr Mike Pienkowski

Welcome to the eighth issue of the newsletter about the current joint programme of work by Montserrat National Trust and UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum, in conjunction with the Government of Montserrat. The first two years of this current programme were supported in part by a grant from UK Government's Darwin Plus fund, under the title *Maximising long-term survival prospects of Montserrat's endemic species and ecosystem-services*. At present, the programme is not in receipt of outside funding but this is being applied for. Meanwhile, UKOTCF and MNT are keeping the programme going at a maintenance level using just their own limited resources – because it is important to maintain the excellent momentum built up and support the committed and effective efforts of local partners.

We are very grateful for the many kind and encouraging comments from people welcoming the first seven newsletters. We hope that you enjoy this one too. One comment we received was that the reader liked the newsletter but thought that it was too long. So, we are trying a shorter issue this time. Comments are always welcome.

In this issue, we outline some continuing progress and discoveries by *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* teams, in some cases in conjunction with new partners. We touch on other collaborations, including a continuing initiative with H.E. the Governor. We also bring back the popular series of Did You Know...?

Please feel free to show or forward these newsletters to others. If anyone sees these and would like to be added to the circulation list, please send your email address to cwensink@ukotcf.org. For more information on the project, the main contacts are:

Dr Mike Pienkowski & Mrs Catherine Wensink, UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum: m@pienkowski.org cwensink@ukotcf.org. See also www.ukotcf.org.uk. Mrs Sarita Francis, Montserrat National Trust: mnt@montserratnationaltrust.ms

NEWS FROM ADOPT A HOME FOR WILDLIFE

Tim Orton describes effects of different growing techniques for native plants



(See next page for caption and explanation.)



Above, circled, from left: gumbo limbo grown from broken branch (largely hidden by bush in front, but about the same height; self-seeded; and grown initially in a pot. Previous page: centre grown initially in a pot; left and right self-seeded. Photos: Dr Mike Pienkowski

Tim Orton's *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* site is his area of tropical dry forest (one of the world's rarest and most vulnerable ecosystems). As reported in previous issues (*SOS Nature of Montserrat* 4, 5, 7), under guidance from the project, Tim has been removing alien, invasive plant species from his land and encouraging native ones to grow or, in some cases, planting them from the Montserrat National Trust's native plant nursery.

In the process, Tim has discovered from his work some interesting results on comparative growth rates of the same species, depending on how the individual plants were grown. For gumbo limbo *Bursera simaruba*, three types of growth were available: initially in pots, transplanted to the wild; self-seeded in the wild (and then sometimes transplanted to another location); and grown from a branch detached by Hurricane Maria.

For some other species, the first two types of growing could be compared. After about 18 months to 2 years, the heights of the initially-pot-grown and grown-from-branch were fairly similar, but those self-seeded in the ground (and transplanted in some cases) were several times larger (see

photos). This all adds to the valuable experience in this ground-breaking project.

There is more on the project, including videos (see also below) at <https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/appeal/supporting-vital-nature-conservation-on-montserrat-through-community-engagement>.



Right: a result of transfer of techniques between territories, facilitated by UKOTCF: killing invasive trees by ring-barking, rather than cutting, uprooting and removal. Tim has started using this method in some cases, so that the eventually decaying trees will provide habitat for native invertebrates - which may lack this resource in over-tidied woodland. This method is, of course, inappropriate in public areas where falling trees could pose a health risk. Photo: Dr Mike Pienkowski

Dwayne Hixon's site at Belham River Mouth

Mike Pienkowski was able to catch up with progress with Dwayne Hixon's *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* site in the Belham River Valley near Old Road Bay (see *SOS Nature of Montserrat* 4, 5, 6). The progress at this site also aroused great interest at the Governor's second environmental stakeholder's meeting (see below). Dwayne is now working on his building but continues to make use of native vegetation across this developing golf-course site and keeps the alien, invasive Australian "pine" *Casuarina* at bay, even though this is spreading elsewhere in the valley. *Casuarina* is a problem because it rapidly colonises bare ground, and then shades out native vegetation and even poisons these by chemicals emitted from its roots. The species is also very prone to uprooting during hurricanes and destabilising the ground.



Above: the regenerating grassland in the foreground was previously covered by dense, alien, invasive Casuarina – as still occurs in the background, beyond the land managed by Dwayne. His clearance work and continuing management allows native species of plants and the small animals that depend on them to thrive.

A particular novel feature at Dwayne's site has been his excavation of some of the ash to reveal the historic former quay. This operation has also created hollows which seasonally flood, re-creating some lowland ponds which Montserrat sorely lacks after infilling by volcanic outflow and by inappropriate development at other sites. These ponds restore habitat for resident and migrant waterbirds (see *SOS Nature of Montserrat* 5, 6). They are also rapidly colonised by rich vegetation (see photograph). Dwayne has a programme of scraping vegetation in rotation off some areas, so that areas remain available also for migrating shorebirds. Even in the developing state, Dwayne's historic quay and wildlife ponds are attracting frequent tourist visits.

Below: Dwayne stands on the historic quay that he has excavated, in front of one of the ponds that he has enabled to regenerate.

Other additional elements were discussed, such as encouraging the cattle egrets to move their colony back to this area (it was previously in Salem), and away from the present location at Carr's Bay. This could be beneficial in reducing the reasons for some of the birds to be active near the airport.

Photos: Dr Mike Pienkowski

We are pleased to hear that RSPB has managed to secure some funding for work originally proposed by UKOTCF on wetland conservation in the region. In Montserrat, this will be deployed in consultation with Montserrat National Trust and the Department of Environment, and should allow the work on ponds originally developed by Dwayne under the auspices of UKOTCF's/MNT's *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* initiative to be expanded – so that Dwayne's site can be part of that project while continuing to be a key part of *Adopt a Home for Wildlife*.



Corkhill Reunion Committee

Mike Pienkowski was able to make a quick tour of the Corkhill area, and was delighted to see work on clearing invasive plants from around houses and gardens is continuing. The heavy rainfall of recent weeks had caused damage to the retaining wall around the sports field, and this was being rebuilt by the Committee, with better drainage and water-holding capacity being incorporated into the re-built wall to minimise future such problems. Hewlett Williams (who showed the *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* team around the site previously (see *SOS Nature of Montserrat* 5) told Mike that another major collaborative effort is in planning for next year, in addition to the continuing work around the area.



*Above right: Hewlett Williams (right) and a colleague from the Corkhill Reunion Committee work on the retaining wall.
Below: progressive clearing of houses and gardens in the Corkhill area. Photos: Dr Mike Pienkowski*



Another video about *Adopt a Home for Wildlife*

UKOTCF is delighted to report that another video featuring *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* is now available on its web-site (<https://youtu.be/2YyBY0F31II>). This features a general background to the project as well as Tim Orton's site, restoring tropical dry forest at Garibaldi Hill (see above). This joins other project videos, on Corkhill, Belham River Mouth, and MNT's

nursery at their Botanic Gardens (see <https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/appeal/supporting-vital-nature-conservation-on-montserrat-through-community-engagement>). Ann Pienkowski is editing another video on the Mountain Chicken project, but this was delayed by having to spend time on replacing material lost due to a major error at one of UKOTCF's internet service providers. We hope to catch up soon.

Future of the initiative and the need for a Project Officer

As most readers will be aware, UKOTCF and MNT have been trying for some time to secure funding to restore the position of Project Officer needed to help and advise participants in *Adopt a Home for Wildlife*, and encourage others (some of whom have already expressed interest) to join. In the interim, Mike has been trying to visit Montserrat whenever in the region, in order to try to maintain continuity. The initiative has been very successful and ground-breaking, and was highly rated by the Darwin Initiative's independent assessor. Accordingly, both the team and independent observers have been surprised that the Darwin Initiative has twice declined to contribute to the funding of the logically following work. In the absence of this, UKOTCF has been exploring other

possible funding, as well as other ways to resource this post. One possibility, of which UKOTCF has experience in some other places, is to find a suitably qualified and experienced volunteer who would be interested in donating their services for, say, 6 months or a year to fill this role, in exchange for benefitting from this experience and the pleasure of living for a time in Montserrat. There is a good chance of doing this. However, as the individual would not be paid, we could not expect them to pay for accommodation. We are exploring approaches to this. However, if any reader has any idea or suggestions about this, we would be delighted to hear from them. Please contact Catherine Wensink (cwensink@ukotcf.org) or Mike Pienkowski (m@pienkowski.org) or Sarita Francis at Montserrat National Trust.

OTHER ISSUES

2nd gathering of Montserrat Environmental Stakeholders



Governor H.E. Andy Pearce addresses the meeting. All photos in this section: Annesta Fergus, Governor's Office

The Governor of Montserrat, H.E. Andy Pearce and Mrs Pearce took the opportunity of Mike Pienkowski's visit to Montserrat in March 2019 to hold the second meeting of the Montserrat Environmental Stakeholders Network, again over an informal dinner, this time held at Olveston House.

The Governor reflected on the need for coordination between all the active parties, and the importance of agreeing on the most urgent and important needs for conservation, resource these, and ensure that we checked on the outcome of our efforts.

Mike Pienkowski thanked the Governor and Mrs Pearce for the invitation and thanked all for coming. He recalled that UKOTCF is a confederation of conservation organisations across the UK Overseas Territories & Crown Dependencies, trying to help cooperation between territories, source specialist advice, and help find resources, as well as encourage UK Government about its shared responsibility for UKOT wildlife. It tries to stay in touch with territory partners whether or not it has current projects. Its sole business is the environment in UK's OT & CDs – so there are no competing objectives – and tries hard to ensure that it is the priorities of which UKOTs themselves identify to it that are the ones getting priority from overseas funding bodies, but that is not easy to achieve because these bodies have become increasingly detached from direct knowledge of the situation in territories. This impacts UKOTCF too because, even though most of its work is by volunteers, their costs need to be met and it is necessary also to find some costs including for workers in the territories.

He recalled too that UKOTCF had been involved with Montserrat, and particularly Montserrat National Trust and the Department of



Dr Mike Pienkowski addresses meeting, flanked by MATLHE Permanent Secretary Eulyn Silcott Greaves (left) and Emmy of Scuba Montserrat.

Environment, for over 30 years (and his own first meeting in the mid-1990s was in Plymouth). Apart from its own involvement, it has encouraged other bodies to become involved. Amongst those that UKOTCF has introduced to help Montserrat are RSPB, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Durrell Conservation, the Waitt Foundation, Montana State University, Treweek Environmental Consultants, and others. He drew attention to the guide-book that UKOTCF and MNT had produced (*Birding in Paradise*) and the further information on the website www.ukotcf.org.uk. Some of the UKOTCF/MNT work on Montserrat is mentioned in UK Government's current report to the Convention on biological Diversity.

Noting the Governor's focus for the discussion on stock-taking the environment on Montserrat and looking at future needs, Mike mentioned one activity that UKOTCF does every few years is to collate progress in each territory against the Environment Charters signed between UK Government and each territory in 2001. UKOTCF were heavily involved with the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office in developing the Charters. It facilitated the first Strategies for Action to implement the Charters in some territories. It collated information on progress in 2007, 2009 and 2016, and had just been asked by another territory to repeat this 4-5 years later - this year & next. It was working also to arrange support for its next conference for UKOT conservation practitioners, and hoped to make an announcement soon.

He turned finally to *Adopt a Home for Wildlife*, and looked forward to hearing shortly from some of the local participants. He touched briefly on some of the information on this reported elsewhere in this newsletter and ideas for replacing the badly needed Project Officer. He stressed that UKOTCF remains strongly committed to this and other important conservation work in Montserrat, and looked forward to his next visit, 16th-23rd July 2019.

After Mike's remarks, he invited Dwayne Hixon and Tim Orton to outline their *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* sites – which aroused much interest.

Other contributions included Hon. David Osborne, Minister of Agriculture, Trade, Lands, Housing & Environment, noting the importance of controlling feral animals in the south (as identified as an agreed priority during the series of stakeholder workshops facilitated by UKOTCF). The Minister discussed this and possible interim approaches with James 'Scriber' Daley, the Governor, Mike and others.



Left: Olveston House's Chef Sarah personally serves food to the dinner guests. Below (from left): Dr Mike Pienkowski, Honorable Minister David Osborne and Adopt a Home for Wildlife member Mr Dwayne Hixon discuss.

Veta Wade (Fish N Fins) eloquently raised the issue of providing proper support for people to avoid leaving litter, highlighting particularly the plastics issue, and this was underlined by Lyston Skerritt (businessman and Youth Affairs) and others. Amongst other contributors were Alwyn Ponteen (Fisheries Division) and Andrew and Emmy (Scuba Montserrat).

After a press briefing the following day, the Governor's Office reported: "His Excellency the Governor hosted the second Environmental Stakeholders Networking

evening at Olveston House on 25th March. Our guest of honour was Dr. Mike Pienkowski, Chairman of the UKOTCF, who was visiting Montserrat this week. While many useful discussions were had, some of the strongest takeaways from Monday's event were the desire for the *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* programme to continue reaping benefits for the island and a stronger push for the eradication of single-use plastics on Montserrat. We are looking forward to working even closer with our environmental partners as we seek to promote Montserrat's environment."



Did You Know... Tarantula Hawk Wasp

On an early-morning weekend walk in the Centre Hills, the Governor H.E. Andy Pearce, James 'Scriber' Daley and Mike Pienkowski met a tarantula hawk wasp. This wasp hunts tarantula spiders. The female tarantula hawk wasp stings and paralyzes a tarantula, then drags the prey to a specially prepared brooding nest, where a single egg is laid on the spider's abdomen, and the entrance is covered. Sex of the larvae is determined by fertilization; fertilized eggs produce females, while unfertilized eggs produce males. When the wasp larva hatches, it creates a small hole in the spider's abdomen, then enters and feeds voraciously, avoiding vital organs for as long as possible, to keep the spider alive. After several weeks, the larva pupates. Finally, the wasp becomes an adult and emerges from the spider's abdomen to continue the life-cycle.

Adult tarantula hawks feed on nectar. The consumption of fermented fruit sometimes intoxicates them to the point that flight becomes difficult. While the wasps tend to be most active in the daytime, in summer they tend to avoid high temperatures. Various species (there are several hundred different ones) of tarantula hawks live around much of the world. Tarantula hawk wasps are relatively docile and rarely sting without provocation.



Above: H.E. crosses a tree which has, without permission, fallen across his track. Left: tarantula hawk wasp on the trail. Right: H.E. and Scriber discuss on trail. Photos: Dr Mike Pienkowski



However, the sting is among the most painful of all insects, though the intense pain only lasts about five minutes. Aside from the possibility of triggering an allergic reaction, the sting is not dangerous and does not require medical attention. Local redness appears in most cases after the pain, and lasts for up to a week. So, take care – but you are unlikely to be in danger!