

# FORUM NEWS 52

JULY 2020

www.ukotcf.org.uk

## Championing UK's most special species: the wildlife of the UK's Overseas Territories (UKOTs) and Crown Dependencies (CDs)

The UKOTs & CDs are important parts of UK sovereign territory. Their citizens are UK citizens. Although small in size, economies and human populations, these territories hold staggering biodiversity. This provides many goods and services, e.g. fishing, tourism, storm-protection, renewable energy. 94% of endemic species (*i.e.* those which occur naturally nowhere else) for which UK is internationally responsible depend on UKOTs, rather than Great Britain & Northern Ireland. UK is responsible for these, under international environmental conventions.

The UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum is the only body concerned solely with promoting environmental conservation, environmental education and governance, and the

sustainable contribution of natural ecosystems to the well-being of people across UK's Overseas Territories (UKOTs) & Crown Dependencies (CDs). It is a network, bringing together and working closely with our 30+ member & associate organisations, many skilled individual volunteers, and a wider network of other UK & international bodies, which collaborate with UKOTCF, to direct efforts to the greatest needs. We link closely with the environmental ministries and departments of territories, and UK Government and Parliament.

The UKOTs' status as UK territory means that they are not eligible for most international grant sources – but (unlike overseas territories of other nations) nor are they eligible for most national

UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum

**Championing UK's most special species:**  
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Crown Dependencies (CDs)

FACT-SHEET ON:

**Bird species depending on the Falkland Islands**  
UK Overseas Territory: Falkland Islands

The UKOT of the Falkland Islands is responsible for the conservation of several endemic species and subspecies of birds and very high proportions of the world population of others. Here we give three examples.

**Cobbs Wren *Troglodytes cobbi***

The Cobbs Wren is unique to the Falkland Islands, but has disappeared from most of the inhabited islands due to the accidental introduction of rats, which eat the eggs and young. Up to 2016 it was classified as Vulnerable but this was changed in 2017, because surveys had now located this species on more than 120 islands. While it is only found on predator-free islands, rat eradication programmes appear to have helped this species and the population trend appears to have been stable for some time. Nevertheless, with a total world population (all in the Falklands) of only about 2000 breeding pairs, it is vital that the tiny rat-free islands are protected against infestation – and more cleared of human-introduced rats – if the Cobbs Wren is to survive. It is fragmented into small populations which could disappear if their islands were colonized by rats or cats. The birds' habit of feeding and breeding at ground level makes them very vulnerable to ground predators. Cobbs Wrens prefer boulder or rocky beaches, nesting in crevices or amongst tussock grass stems. Here it is safe from the avian predators with which it evolved, but not from introduced rats. The nest is a hollow ball of grass with an entrance hole, lined with feathers. Three to four eggs are laid from October to December. Adults feed mainly on invertebrates taken from under stones and amongst rotting seaweed, but they also feed on terrestrial insects and grass seeds. Sexes are similar in appearance.

**Falkland Steamer Duck**  
*Tachyeres brachypterus*

The remarkable Falkland Steamer Duck is the other bird species restricted to the Falkland Islands (although some endemic bird subspecies are likely to be reclassified as full species when reviewed). The name derives from its rapid movement across the

*Double Flightless Steamer Duck (or Logger Duck) and its ducklings drink at a freshwater trickle on the shore at Stanley.*  
© Dr Albie Pienkowski, UKOTCF

The birds breed along all types of coast except steep cliffs. Each pair holds a territory comprising of a length of coastline which it guards vigorously. Nests are built behind the shoreline with 5 - 10 eggs being laid during September to December. Young fledge in January to March. Food is mostly shellfish and other marine invertebrates which it collects by dabbling or diving. The Steamer Duck is by far the most numerous of the Falklands marine ducks, with about 30,000 breeding pairs – the entire world population, of course. About 400 pairs, known also as Canvasbacks and nesting around inland lakes, rather than rocky shores, can fly. These were previously thought to belong to one of the 3 continental species of steamer duck, *Tachyeres patagonicus*. However, recent genetic studies show them to be the same species as the flightless type, and quite distinct from the continental species. As there is no proof that flying and flightless Falkland Steamer Ducks interbred, they may eventually evolve into separate (sub)species.

**Black-browed albatross**  
*Thalassarche melanophrys*

*Black-browed Albatrosses over nesting colony on New Island, Falklands.*  
Next page: Part of this colony. © Dr Albie Pienkowski, UKOTCF

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FACT-SHEET ON:

**437 Endemic Invertebrate Species**  
UK Overseas Territory: St Helena

St Helena is home to a third of the endemic species that can be found on British territories around the world. Over the 14 million years since its creation by volcanic action, St Helena developed its unique biosphere of incredible diversity, protected by thousands of km of ocean. But over 500 years ago it was discovered by people who brought goats, cats, rats and other species that had a huge impact on its fragile environment. Despite this – and the undoubted extinction of many species never even named – what remains today is still clearly remarkable and unique and of international significance. St Helena currently has at least 502 endemic species of animals and plant, not including those in the marine environment, probably plus others not yet described and named. Even those which have been named can be very elusive, despite the small size of the island, the 3mm long leaf hopper *Chlorita edithae* was described in 1875 but was not seen again until 2013. A Basilewsky's Crane-fly *Tetroneomomyia basilewskyana*, an endemic species from the High Peaks that had not been seen for 45 years and was thought to be extinct, flew into naturalist Liza Fowler's car at High Peak in January 2016 and landed on her!

St Helena has more endemic species than any other British Overseas Territory. Of St Helena's 502 described endemic species, 437 are invertebrates. We will not attempt to mention all here, but limit ourselves to a few examples.

**Spiky Yellow Woodlouse**  
*Pseudolaureola atlantica* Critically Endangered

Always a fairly rare animal, hiding amongst dense ferns deep in the darkest and oldest patches of vegetation on the Peaks, but they used to be at least a reasonably familiar sight. In the 1990s they were sometimes seen near Diana's Peak, and at High Peak they could occasionally be so abundant that conservationists had to brush them off their clothes after walking through the site of a well-known colony. But they are now in trouble: known at only one tiny site, at High Peak, and even there extremely rare. No one yet knows why this sensitive and unique species has declined so dramatically, but it is possible that introduced predators and diseases have played a part. In particular, mice and rats are likely to have had an impact, as has the voracious 'woodlouse-eating spider', brought from Europe and now spread over the island. Unusually for woodlice, the spiky yellow does not feed on dead organic matter, or forage among leaf litter on the ground, but lives by clambering among fern fronds where it probably feeds on spores. It is critically endangered – only 50 or so survive (one could put the British's entire population in a beer glass). It has been suggested that the Spiky Yellow Woodlouse should be declared St Helena's National Invertebrate. In 2017 it was discovered that the Spiky Yellow Woodlouse fluoresces in ultraviolet light – only the second woodlouse species known to do so; the feature is more commonly seen in scorpions.

*Left: Basilewsky's Crane-fly. © Liza Fowler*  
*Below: Spiky Yellow Woodlouse. © Ed Thorpe.*  
*Bottom: Blushing Snail. © R.S.Tey*

**Blushing Snail *Succinea sanctaehelenae***

This tiny, terrestrial snail is the only indigenous snail still surviving on the island. Prior to the 1850s, at least 20 species of snail had been recorded on St Helena; however, these were drastically reduced by deforestation, the introduction of non-native species and domesticated animals, pollution and over-collecting. Commonly pale amber to golden brown in colour, different populations of the blushing snail vary extensively in their shell shape, size and colour. In general, its glossy shell is made up of a small number of whorls which increase rapidly in size, so that while the aperture is very large, the tip (spire) of the shell is short and pointed. It is 1-1.5 cm in size. The blushing snail is widely distributed around the island, but is particularly abundant throughout the central peaks of St Helena, in habitats which include remnants of native cloud forest, as well as pasture, areas of the introduced alien invasive New Zealand Flax and forestry plantations. It is also found on the more arid plains of the island, and along stream gorges.

Above and next page: a few example profile sheets for some of the species for championing

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FACT-SHEET ON:

**Basking Shark *Cetorhinus maximus***  
 Crown Dependency: Isle of Man



The Isle of Man is a global hotspot for basking sharks, which are Endangered. The population centred on the Isle of Man (including Scottish and Irish waters) is estimated as 10,000-30,000, one of the largest sub-populations.

These are the world's second largest fish and, although they can grow to over 10 metres long and weigh up to 7 tonnes, they are gentle giants. They feed only on tiny plankton which they sieve out of the water by swimming through it with their vast mouths wide open. In the summer, this plankton comes to the sea surface, followed by the sharks, which appear to be "basking" in the sun, hence their name. Between May and August, the Manx coastline welcomes this endangered species to feed on plankton blooms and possibly to mate and give birth in these waters.

Basking Sharks are highly migratory, filter-feeding sharks distributed mainly in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in coastal and pelagic habitats. They occur near the surface in temperate waters and deeper, below the thermocline to 1,264 m, in the tropics. The species has low biological productivity with limited fecundity and late age-at-maturity. Although no longer targeted, it is still caught as by-catch in trawl, trammel nets, and set-net fisheries, and becomes entangled in pot-lines. The large fins are extremely valuable in trade. Across regions, there have been severe historic declines. A global population reduction of 50-79% is suspected over the past three generations (102 years). Therefore, the Basking Shark is assessed as Endangered.

Up to 5 young are born after an estimated gestation of 12-26 months and a likely resting period of two years between litters. Female age-at-maturity is estimated at 16-20 years and maximum age estimated as 50 years; generation length is therefore 34 years. Annual rate of population increase is estimated at 1.3-2.3% and natural mortality is low at 7% per year.

In the Northeast Atlantic, the landings of Basking Sharks declined dramatically during the period 1946-2017 peaking in the mid-1960s and mid-1970s at around 5,000 tonnes (1,000 sharks), declining rapidly during the 1980s to less than 1,000 t [-200] annually, after which there was a peak in 1992 of 1,697 t [-340], followed by a rapid decline. Following the ban on target Basking Shark fisheries in 2006-2007, landings declined to <30 t [-6] annually and have been <0.1 t [-0.2 shark] since 2013. The large catch declines during the 1960s to 1980s are believed to reflect unsustainable fishing levels and a decline in population abundance. Public record sightings and boat surveys around the UK for 1988-2008 suggest population recovery following cessation of targeting in the mid-2000s. However, when current research survey encounter rates are compared with historical target fishery catch rates, the population is estimated to be well below 30% of historical abundance.

Globally, to allow recovery, IUCN recommend that all Basking Shark retention and landings be prohibited, at least as long as the global population is classified as Endangered. Initiatives



Above: Basking shark. © Isle of Man Government.  
 Below: Basking Shark in Peel Bay, Isle of Man © Manx Wildlife Trust. Although they can be seen all round the island, the stretch from Peel on the west coast, south to the Calf of Man is where they can most reliably be found. They can easily be seen from the shore, especially from spots like Peel Castle (see photo), Naarbby, Port Erin and the Sound.



to avoid contact, prevent capture, promote safe release, and improve catch (including discard) reporting are also urgently needed, as is full implementation of additional commitments agreed through international treaties. Basking Shark tourism is managed in some locations but, if sustainable tourism industries are indeed to be developed around encounters with these sharks, they should be legislated, continuously monitored, and enforced with permitting systems to make sure operators and tourists are adhering to best practice protocols and codes of conduct.

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FACT-SHEET ON:

**TCI endemic reptile species**  
 UK Overseas Territory: Turks & Caicos Islands



The UKOT of the Turks & Caicos Islands is responsible for the conservation of at least 9 reptile species and more subspecies which occur nowhere else in the world. Here, we give just 3 examples.

**Caicos Barking Gecko *Aristelliger hechti***  
 Caicos barking gecko



Caicos Barking Gecko, occurring only in TCI, was thought to be extinct until rediscovered by Bryan Nagai Manco during UKOTCF surveys in the early 2000s. © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF

**Importance:** The Caicos Barking Gecko is the Turks & Caicos Islands' largest gecko species, and its rarest lizard. For unknown reasons, it survives only in very limited local habitats throughout the islands. It had been thought extinct until rediscovered in the early 2000s by a project run by UKOTCF with local partners, and support from UK Government.

**Ecosystem:** This gecko is known only from a few sites in the Caicos Islands, including the tall tropical dry forests of western North Caicos, the rocky scrub forests of Big Ansobergs Cay, and the dune habitat of French Cay. The inconsistency of the habitats in which it is found are thus far unexplained, but it is apparently absent from large areas of what seem to be suitable habitat.

**Threats:** This rare gecko is threatened by its already very limited range, but also by clearance of land for human development where it lives and the introduction of non-native invasive species such as cats and rats.

**Needs:** The Caicos Barking Gecko needs further study on its range and population to gauge how rare it is, and it requires protection from invasive species within its range. A lesser requirement, but one that is potentially significant, is the need for protection from the commercial reptile trade and illegal poaching and international trade connected to that. Setting up an *ex-situ* captive breeding conservation population in a *bona fide* conservation institution may be a desirable goal to ensure its long-term survival.

**Caicos Pygmy Boa *Tropidophis greenwayi***



This tiny Caicos Pygmy Boa there, an unusually large one sits in the palm of a hand is found only in TCI. It is the smallest constrictor in the world and feeds mainly on small lizards and frogs. Like all snakes in TCI, it is not venomous and poses no threat to humans. © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF

**Importance:** Believed to be the smallest boa constrictor in the world, adults are roughly the size of a writing pen. They feed primarily on another endemic species, the Caicos Dwarf Gecko *Sphaerodactylus caicosensis*.

**Ecosystem:** Restricted only to islands on the Caicos Bank, these tiny snakes live under rocks in the threatened tropical dry forest habitat. Their favoured ecosystem is also the preferred habitat for farming in the Caicos Islands.

**Threats:** Caicos Pygmy Boas are already rare because of their minuscule natural range and low reproductive rate (five birth of 1-6 young per year per mature female). They are additionally threatened by large-scale land-clearance for agriculture and built development, by predation from introduced non-native invasive species, including cats, dogs, chickens, and rats; and direct killing by humans as they are commonly perceived as dangerous due to religious intuition. (No native snakes in TCI are venomous.)

**Needs:** Caicos Pygmy Boas require large tracts of undisturbed "upland" tropical dry forest habitat, which is increasingly rare in the Turks and Caicos Islands. ("Upland" is the local term for normally dry land on rock, rather than normally wet land on mud; it is, at most, only a few metres above sea-level, and often just centimetres.) They also need protection from invasive species in their natural habitats. A lesser requirement, but one that is potentially significant, is their need for protection from the commercial reptile trade and illegal poaching and international trade connected to that. Setting up an *ex-situ* captive breeding

funding. This places them – and us – in a funding gap. We rely on a network of volunteers, ranging from recent graduates to (semi-) retired professionals. To utilise this major resource and ensure its greatest impact, we need a small support team of several part-time paid personnel. We do not hold large cash reserves

UKOTCF is implementing the concept of species champions (see also below), to raise awareness in the public in Britain and in UK Parliament of the global importance of UKOT & CD wildlife, and reinforce their feeling of shared responsibility across UK. We have worked with our network of some 30 partner organisations across the UKOTs/CDs and others in the UKOTCF network to compile a list of key species well suited to being championed. These species include endemics (*i.e.* occurring naturally nowhere else), those identified by partners as needing more attention locally and internationally, and other flagship species. Flagship species are ones whose conservation benefits other species or the ecosystem itself (especially if threatened) – and often ecosystem services to humans. We have tried to include in this list a cross-section of taxa (not from each territory but across all). Examples of profiles are shown above, and others can be accessed by links below.

Our Council member, Lord Randall of Uxbridge, has started the process of recruiting champions within Parliament. The lock-down due to Covid-19 precautions has paused this process but it is being resumed. We are also looking outside Parliament at other potential champions amongst prominent individuals and organisations. We will also be using the material brought together in this initiative to raise the profile of these species and the crucial environments of UKOTs and CDs.

The Parliamentary aspects of this programme complements an already successful exercise with MPs and Peers started in the previous UK Parliament, called Species Champions. This was initiated by members of the Rethink Nature partnerships (including several NGOs familiar with working in UKOTs, *e.g.* Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (a member of UKOTCF),

Buglife and the RSPB. Whilst there was a good spread of species from across Britain, there were no species from the UK's Overseas Territories (UKOTs) or Crown Dependencies (CDs), for which, under international agreements, UK is responsible. We have consulted with members and partners in the UKOTs & CDs and have developed a list for championing.

The species for championing are listed at [www.ukotcf.org.uk/champion](http://www.ukotcf.org.uk/champion), sorted by region and territories, with links to further information on each.

We have set out some of the main living organisms as groups, not in terms of their true taxonomic classifications, but in a way useful to highlight some of the flagship species. While new discoveries are being made all the time, there is a slight bias towards terrestrial species in this summary in order to attract more attention towards the terrestrial environment. This is because most endemic species are found there. That is not to say that marine species are less important, but the purpose of this exercise is to encourage more attention to the UKOTs and CDs in general and, at present, far more UK resources are being devoted to marine than terrestrial conservation in the UKOTs.

Anyone wishing to explore more on this project should contact UKOTCF at [hello@ukotcf.org](mailto:hello@ukotcf.org).

We would like to thank our partner organisations in the UKOTs & CDs and others in the UKOTCF network for their help in selecting appropriate species, drafting texts and sourcing photographs. For their help in pulling all aspects of this initiative together, we are grateful also to UKOT governments and their London representatives, groups from the UKOT diaspora in Britain, and our volunteers, especially Lord (John) Randall, Joan Walley, Dr Mike Pienkowski, Catherine Wensink, Dr Jamie Males, Ann Pienkowski, Paul Cawsey, Catriona Porter, and of course our champions, including those not yet joined.

## New members of the UKOTCF team

We are pleased to welcome two new members to Council and two other volunteers to become Voluntary Conservation Officers. Here are a few words and pictures about them.

### New Council members:

#### Lord (John) Randall



John Randall (Rt. Hon. the Lord Randall of Uxbridge PC) is a member of the House of Lords. He graduated from University College London in 1979 with a degree in Serbo-Croat Language and Literature, before joining and running the family retail business in Uxbridge. He was elected in 1997 as the Conservative Member of Parliament for Uxbridge.

In 1999 he was appointed Opposition Whip, and at the end of 2005 he was promoted to Conservative Assistant Chief Whip. In 2010 he was appointed the Government Deputy Chief Whip and Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household in the Coalition Government.

He stepped down from his ministerial position in 2013 in order to give more time to issues such as the environment, conservation and modern slavery. During his political career, he firmly opposed the UK's involvement in the Iraq War (he was the first Conservative MP to resign over it), worked to tackle modern slavery, championed marine conservation and fought to end the wild bird trade. He is a trustee of the Human Trafficking Foundation and in 2016 was appointed Special Envoy on Modern Slavery to the Mayor of London. From 2017 until June 2019 he was Special Adviser on the environment to the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, working in No.10 Downing Street. John joined the House of Lords in June 2018.

John is a life-long birdwatcher. He was also an ornithological tour leader for many years and has been a member of the RSPB Council. He has always been passionate about wildlife and he works to help young birders and conservationists gain access to the 'corridors of power'. He has developed a particular interest in the flora and fauna of the UK Overseas Territories and their conservation.

#### Joan Walley DL

Joan Walley is based in Staffordshire. Locally educated, and with an honorary degree from Staffordshire University and membership of the Council of Fellows at Keele University, she studied at Hull University and University College of Wales in Swansea. She went on to represent her home city of Stoke-on-Trent and Kidsgrove in parliament from 1987 to 2015 as a Labour MP. She chaired the influential Environmental Audit Select Committee, from



2000 until her retirement in 2015 when she gave a Speaker's Lecture to hand over the environmental 'baton' to the next parliament. Public health and the environment

were and remain constant threads running throughout her work. She was recognised by the Isle of Man Government for her role in securing protected status for the basking shark. Now retired, she remains active with various environmental and local commitments and is as focused as ever on the need for local and global action to protect our planet.

### New Voluntary Conservation Officers:

#### Catriona Porter



Catriona holds an MSc in Animal Behaviour and Welfare from Queen's University Belfast. Her research interests are focused on the impacts of sensory stimuli on behaviour, and the potential to utilise currently under-researched sensory modalities to improve welfare. Her Masters research examined the impacts of olfactory stimulation upon the activity budget and enclosure usage in zoo-housed Asian elephants. Catriona has a range of husbandry experience with both domestic and exotic animals, from cats and horses to chimpanzees and giraffes. She is passionate about science communication, and has been involved with several wildlife organisations, including RSPB and Ulster Wildlife.

#### Paul Cawsey

Paul graduated with a BSc (Hons) in Agricultural and Environmental Science from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne and a MSc in Conservation and Land Management from Bangor University. His career to date has seen him working for a number of companies and organisations involved in conservation and land management,



from ecological surveying through to a stint as head of department / lecturer at two land-based colleges and even travelling globally to present courses on renewable energy. A passionate invertebrate ecologist, Paul can often be seen wondering round various sites with a net in hand

## Changes at [www.ukotcf.org.uk](http://www.ukotcf.org.uk)

A significant amount of time (donated by UKOTCF Executive Director and Chairman) has been spent before, and especially during, COVID-19 lockdown in preparing the new website using WordPress as the content management system. This replaces the existing platform (and its in-house, non-portable content management system) for which we have to pay a substantial annual fee. To reduce dramatically the costs involved in running a website, the decision was made to move. This was a huge task, but the team is pleased with the results. The new site went live on 6th July, and we regret the inevitable disruption as the new links disseminated around the internet. The cost savings will be significant, but the site carries most of the functions that the previous one did. In fact, we were able to make some improvements and add some functions. Despite this, we did not make major changes in the appearance.

Despite lots of checking, there will undoubtedly be some errors (the most likely are links which do not go anywhere – “404” errors). Please email [hello@ukotcf.org](mailto:hello@ukotcf.org) (our general enquiry email address) to advise of any that you see and, if possible, what you were trying to do and from which page, so that the team can investigate and correct. Thanks. In the meantime, please use the menus at the top of the 404 page to find what you are looking for – it is all there.

## Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease has already caused major destruction to coral reefs in Turks & Caicos and has reached other UKOTs

In *Forum News 51* (November 2019), we reproduced a press release from our partner, the Turks & Caicos Reef Fund. We make no apology for returning to this topic now, because it is perhaps the most immediate and rapid threat to conservation and the economies in several UKOTs and other countries.

This disease, almost certainly bacterial, was first noted in Florida in 2014. It spreads rapidly, is highly contagious and fast-killing; and, once the coral tissue is dead, it does not recover (unlike the possibility of recovery from bleaching). It attacks the structural coral species, meaning that whole reefs are being destroyed.

It was first observed in Turks and Caicos Islands in South Caicos in January 2019, on the reefs of West Caicos in May 2019, in Grace Bay on Providenciales (the main tourist island) in August 2019 and on Grand Turk reefs in November 2019. 90% of the stony corals on the reefs of West Caicos, an extremely popular dive site, are reported to have been affected.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection has spent a great deal of money (approximately \$1.5 million) investigating the best treatment and then treating and monitoring affected corals, present in Florida since 2014. Their results were published in June 2019:

[https://floridadep.gov/sites/default/files/Walker%20MCAV%20Disease%20Experiment%20Summary%20Report%20June%202019\\_final\\_14Aug2019.pdf](https://floridadep.gov/sites/default/files/Walker%20MCAV%20Disease%20Experiment%20Summary%20Report%20June%202019_final_14Aug2019.pdf)

and November 2019:

[https://www.dcbd.nl/sites/www.dcbd.nl/files/documents/2019-20%20FDEP%20SE%20FL%20ECA%20Coral%20Disease%20Intervention%20ProgressReport\\_30Nov2019\\_final%5B2019%5D.pdf](https://www.dcbd.nl/sites/www.dcbd.nl/files/documents/2019-20%20FDEP%20SE%20FL%20ECA%20Coral%20Disease%20Intervention%20ProgressReport_30Nov2019_final%5B2019%5D.pdf)

The two methods used were (1) chlorinated epoxy, and (2) amoxicillin antibiotic in a neutral base, combined in both cases with a firebreak (a cut in the coral separating healthy tissue from dead tissue). The results showed that amoxicillin was the most effective, and easiest to apply. Using the chlorinated epoxy was messy and more time-consuming. The work of the scientists in Florida continues with investigating the use of just a firebreak,

and reduced levels of amoxicillin (even though this antibiotic breaks down rapidly, and the quantities used are tiny compare with antibiotics entering waters and seas from agricultural usage).

The Turks and Caicos Reef Fund (TCRF, an NGO, which had already done a lot of unpaid work for TCI Government) informed the TCI Government Department of Environment and Coastal Resources (DECR) of the appearance of SCTLD in TCI, and the work of the Florida scientists, in summer 2019. They were given a research permit to monitor but not treat the corals (although monitoring does not actually need a permit). They were finally given a permit to treat corals with amoxicillin at 3 sites in January 2020.

The reason for the long gap was explained by Hon. Ralph Higgs, TCI Minister responsible for the Environment. His Ministry for the Environment consulted UK Government, via FCO, who it seems passed the question to Defra's agency JNCC. The advice given was not to use antibiotics. The TCI Ministry and its Department of Environment and Coastal Resources, however, had concerns about the UK advice and authorised TCRF to conduct experiments with the antibiotic.

It is reported that JNCC then commissioned a consultant to conduct workshops in TCI on using chlorinated epoxy, but this did not consider the use of amoxicillin, despite the experimental results from Florida. DECR (with JNCC funding) were tasked with using chlorinated epoxy on 3 trial sites, and TCRF (without funding) amoxicillin on 3 trial sites. The idea being that these sites would be monitored and compared. It is a puzzle to many as to why the extremely well-funded and scientifically rigorous studies in Florida were not used as a basis for dealing with SCTLD in TCI.

Since our last report, UKOTCF has, of course, been liaising with its network. The disease has now spread to the British Virgin Islands and the Cayman Islands, as well as several other Caribbean countries.

Meanwhile, the final report from the 2019-20 part of the US federally authorised study contracted by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection (Neely K. 2020. Florida Keys Coral Disease Strike



Since early 2019, a non-native invasive bacterial infection that kills coral has been sweeping through the Turks and Caicos Islands, destroying what is believed to be the second largest barrier reef system in the Western Hemisphere. The reef is vital to biodiversity, storm defence and the tourism-based economy. UKOTCF partner, the Turks & Caicos Reef Fund, has taken the lead in monitoring this Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease (SCTLD), and investigating ways of stopping it.

The Hon. Ralph Hoggs, Minister of the Environment (above left, with TCRF Chairman Don Stark) authorised TCRF to experiment with an antibiotic,

in a paste applied to individual heads – the only method found to be effective in Florida. The disease appears as small patches of white exposed skeleton on the coral heads and can kill corals in a matter of days to a few weeks from them getting infected. The pictures above show the efficacy of this in TCRF’s work in TCI. The 2 photos on the left show 2 sites of infection treated on 7 March 2020. 2 weeks later (centre pictures), disease progression has stopped, and remain stopped more that 7 weeks later (right photos). Now, permission and resources are urgently needed to extend this work to save TCI’s reefs, and those of other UKOTs to which the infection has also spread. Photos: TCRF

Team: FY 2019/2020 Final Report. Florida DEP. Miami, FL. Pp. 1-17.) provides a convenient summary of the situation.

Its main recommendation, on the basis of many trials, is “Implement large-scale treatment of corals using amoxicillin paste in order to preserve priority corals and also specific sites with high diversity and intact ecosystem structure. Increase capacity by expanding existing strike teams or considering additional partners who could scale-up in-water intervention.”

The experimental evidence is clear. There is an overwhelming consensus amongst those scientists and conservationists actually studying this situation that the bleach (chlorinated) treatment is ineffective, whereas that based on antibiotic trapped in an ointment base specifically designed for this application and applied by trained operatives is 80-90% effective.

The conservationists interested in this understand fully the desire not to use antibiotics in the marine environment – as did the scientists in the Florida study. This is why the antibiotic is trapped in a paste and applied carefully by hand. In fact, the amounts involved are tiny, especially compared with the bulk discharge of antibiotics into the sea via run-off to rivers of the decades-long routine (mis-)use of antibiotics in agriculture in nearby North America. The current rate of destruction of the coral by the disease means that there will not be any remaining corals for resistance-development to be relevant.

The longest and widest ranging studies have been in Florida, where the disease has been recorded for longest. The information from those studies have been available for over two years. This grave situation – the degradation of TCI’s reefs – threatens their vital

blue economies of tourism and fishing, and reduces mitigation against extreme weather events. The situation is critical and must be considered a coral reef crisis, it having already been declared an emergency in the US.

Practitioners in TCI and in experienced advisory bodies UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum and the Marine Conservation Society were unclear as to why JNCC advised repeating the Florida comparisons in TCI; biology does not vary significantly in this regard over such short distances. Nevertheless, even within the Covid-19 restrictions, TCRF were able to confirm the 90% efficacy of the antibiotic treatment in the TCI tests. Unfortunately, DECR & JNCC were not able to monitor the results of the bleach-based tests, although inspections are again possible (and done by TCRF). There is talk of repeating the tests. This seems to lack any sense of the urgency of the situation, especially given the unequivocal results of the Florida studies, as well as studies elsewhere, the amount of time consumed for bleach application and its greater costs than the antibiotic treatment.

Another UK NGO approached JNCC to seek clarification of this, and were told that the matter is devolved to the TCI government. This is legally correct, but that government sought advice of UK government, in view of its limited in-house expertise on this matter and the fact that UK is accountable internationally on such shared responsibility for internationally important features. Once that advice has been given, it becomes difficult for the receiving government to disregard it, although it has to the extent of allowing experiments with the antibiotic.

It would seem preferable to base the advice on clear scientific evidence. The Florida study and the work by the Turks and Caicos

Reef Fund (TCRF) are so clear that another UK Overseas Territory, British Virgin Islands, did not even suggest the bleach treatment but put into use the antibiotic treatment when the disease reached there recently.

One of the best barrier reefs of TCI, that of West Caicos, has already been destroyed and all the other islands' reefs are being severely damaged. The TCI economy depends heavily on tourism, which in-turn places a significant reliance on its natural resources including its reefs. A recent study concluded that TCI's natural resources contribute an economic value of USD 45.5 million annually to the tourism industry, with coral reefs being a critical component here. With reefs of major importance to TCI's fishing industry, they provide also critical defences against hurricanes that are believed to be growing in frequency and intensity. With the disease now having spread to BVI, this also threatens their national economies. An economic study estimated the total economic tourism value of BVI's ecosystems at USD 194 million with coral reefs being one of its most prized assets.

Although TCRF is not currently allowed to apply treatment more widely in TCI than the experimental plots, their expertise is being sought to advise across the region. In keeping with UK government's high ambition on ocean conservation, the UK

government should be welcoming this potential case of a Global Britain leadership; it should update its advice to TCI government and immediately use a small proportion of its Blue Belt funds to support local actors including TCRF in this urgent but unresourced work to save what is left of TCI's – and UK's – coral reefs. Through this, UK Government will maintain its leading position on global marine protection.

It is now well over a year since this disease which is devastating the ecology and the basis of the economically crucial sustainable tourism industry was found in TCI. There is an urgent need (a) to approve widespread use of the antibiotic treatment by TCRF's trained volunteers, and (b) to provide the relatively modest funding to TCRF to cover their costs, including diving boat etc.

The Association of Reef Keepers (the NGO which is leading the attack on the disease in BVI) said: "There are no words to describe seeing corals that have survived decades or even centuries wasting away. We treated 14 corals with antibiotics but our supply will run out pretty quick. Nine dive sites now show outbreaks with nine different coral species affected. Visitors will not want to see a lot of dead coral, and with a rapid increase of algal growth on the surfaces of dead corals, the potential for ciguatera [food-poisoning due to toxins in fish] will also increase."

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## Covid-19 short-term impacts on conservation in the UKOTs

Activities around the world have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the responses that governments with varying degrees of competence have made, but generally involving a degree of "lockdown", starting for UK and its territories in mid or late March, and starting to ease in some respects from about 3 months later - but with other aspects likely to remain in place or be reinstated for months or possibly years while vaccines are developed.

In this article, we review some immediate impacts on conservation activity, collated from discussions in UKOTCF's regional working groups and other discussions with territories. Later in the article, we look briefly at some cross-territory aspects.

### Common features:

Some features common to many territories include:

- Loss of income;
- Delay to conservation actions or research underlying them;
- Loss of volunteers from elsewhere;
- Lax planning etc.

### Wider Caribbean

#### *Bermuda*

Bermuda Department of Environment and Natural Resources are responsible for the nature reserves, and the Parks Department are responsible for the parks. The Nature Reserves and the Parks were closed but, as the Bermuda Government parks and nature reserves do not charge entry fees, there is no loss of income during closure. Staff are working from home, as most people who could do so were, and had been out of the office for 5 weeks.

DENR has produced several plans during lockdown, with several more in preparation. These include policy work on the Ramsar Convention, the Convention on Migratory Species, and Biodiversity Action Plans; also recovery plans for the land hermit crab, the giant land crab, mangroves and sea-horses.

Bermuda National Trust personnel are also working from home. All the Bermuda National Trust properties were closed, with significant loss of income to the Trust. Although Trust properties

are closed, the Teacher Guides can be downloaded from the Bermuda National Trust website, and used at home. These teacher resources focus on nature reserves and historic homes owned and maintained by the Trust. The website also lists other sources of online resources. See <https://www.bnt.bm/education/additional-resources>

#### *British Virgin Islands*

In BVI there was a ½-day curfew – people have to be at home by 1:00pm. All the parks are closed, so there is no income for National Parks Trust of the Virgin Islands (NPTVI). However, park staff are able to do maintenance work using safe distancing protocols. The territory borders were closed until June, followed by restricted access. By mid-May, there had been only 6 cases of Covid virus. Food access was a problem. The Government were looking at ways to boost the economy.

The NPTVI office moved back to its original location in June, having had to vacate due to Hurricanes Irma and Maria in September 2017.

Project work would continue as far as possible, with partners working remotely at present.

NPTVI was very pleased to report that the BVI Environmental Atlas, with some extra funding from the BVI Governor's Office, is in the editing and production phase of an updated printed version. New sections on Climate Change and Renewable Energy have been added. This project was initiated with funding from the Overseas Territories Environment Programme, but the envisaged interactive DVD had not been able to progress past the Beta stage. At a time of lockdown home-schooling, the completion of the Environmental Atlas was very welcome. Resources for digital learning are in demand.

#### *Cayman*

Covid-19: As at 4th May, the Cayman Islands had 74 reported cases, with one death of an Italian cruise-ship tourist who had been brought ashore with a heart condition. Borders were closed in March except for repatriations. There continued to be a slow increase of reported/identified community transmissions (approx. 1 per day). Fairly stringent curfews were still in place



*A silver lining? For some time, UKOTCF has been researching better remote meeting software. Skype served us well some years ago, when it was an independent organisation. In recent years, however, it had become almost unworkable. The Covid-19 situation caused us to accelerate matters. After some comparisons, we managed to acquire a charity-rate licence for Zoom, and first used this for the May Wider Caribbean Working Group meeting (above – at which some of the information collated in this article was gathered.) The software has since been used also satisfactorily by the other UKOTCF working groups, Council and various other meetings,*

other than for designated essential workers: nightly 7pm – 5 am, and all day Sundays. The beaches were closed. A next phase of permitting more people to return to work and businesses to reopen began in early May as economic issues gain more traction. It remains unlikely that inward tourism will return for some time. Resumption of the construction industry is being touted as a key factor for economic recovery; airport runway and road works are also a priority. CI Govt had had budget surpluses and has kept the entire civil service on full pay, mostly working from home, and is supporting many others through various social services.

A committee to advise on single-use plastics reduction is reported to be still working (from homes). A prohibition on the use of one's own re-usable bags at supermarkets has been imposed due to the corona virus. Some conversion to paper had already occurred but a return to single-use plastic is evident. The target for banning single-use plastic bags was now January 2021.

As tourism has collapsed, the source of funds for the Environmental Protection Fund has evaporated. The fund is not legally ring-fenced and there may be a reasonable concern that it may be used for other less appropriate purposes, such as waste management,

Work on the endemic ghost orchid has continued. The World Orchid Conference was postponed to November, but a poster and a written paper were submitted on the results of the first year of the Project-Seeding-funded pollinations and related ecology. There were curfew exemption to continue work with the Botanic Park. Two new *Aegiphila* plants have been discovered in Grand Cayman as a result of the curfew “stay near home” exercising

rules. These are the 4th and 5th known. Samples will be sent to Kew where genetic identification is already underway on the other individuals.

The National Trust had been on lockdown from 20 March, and staff were working from home. An exemption had been given to the blue iguana team taking care of the captive iguanas, but there would be no releases at present. It had been exceptionally dry, and there were concerns regarding the ability to collect enough food for the iguanas in the captive head-start facility.

Another exemption to the lockdown had been granted for bat work, where some teams remained busy.

The lockdown meant that there were no tours, so vital funding from that source had dried up. The Trust were consequently looking for ways to make financial cuts.

The government was looking for ways to boost the economy. Construction works were a source of funds, so there could be adverse consequences for the environment. The next 6-7 months would be very telling.

Regarding lockdown at the Central Caribbean Marine Institute (CCMI), based on Little Cayman, the coral nursery and monitoring work was continuing. An exemption had been given with the restriction of no more than 4 people working together, at safe distancing. Several scientific papers had been submitted for publication, topics addressed being resilience of corals to heat, disease, and genetic work.

With the lockdown, Cayman was in “quiet oceans” mode, which

could be positive for the marine environment. CCMI was looking at ways to measure the environmental consequences of this, for example was there better connectivity between areas.

CCMI was moving forward where they could. However, all their courses had been cancelled and, although CCMI had a mixed revenue stream, the next 6-9 months would be critical.

### ***Turks and Caicos Islands***

Environmental consultants are still being asked to consider undertaking Environmental Impact Assessments, and it was apparent from these requests that the government is concentrating on construction and property development activities.

TCI has been on lockdown since late March, with an evening curfew as one of the regulations. Turks & Caicos Reef Fund (TCRF) had not been able to get out on the water for 6 weeks. Despite this, by visits before and eventually authorised well into lockdown, monitoring has shown that the amoxicillin treatment was being effective in controlling the rapidly destructive Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease (SCTLD) (see article on pages 4-6).

Re SCTLD, TCRF was running Zoom training courses regarding survey work, coral identification, disease diagnosis, and how to conduct surveys. These would be available online, and would be presented at a virtual meeting. In addition to SCTLD work, TCRF had not been able to visit the coral nursery sites for 6 weeks, or continue the mooring buoy work.

By mid-May, there had been 4 Covid-19 cases and one death, all restricted to Providenciales. Strict lockdown restrictions were in place, and travel between islands was for emergencies only, until late June. International travel from certain countries is scheduled to recommence in late July.

During the period of lockdown there had been an increase in violations relating to fish, with increased poaching, and 5 boatloads of illegal immigrants. There had been an upswing in violent crime. Certain Department of Environment and Coastal Resources (DECR) officers had been seconded to the Marine Police, and extra UK military forces had arrived to help deal with internal security issues, and to secure TCI borders.

There had been no drop in the requests for development proposals and EIA assessments.

UKOTCF personnel visited TCI in March and had useful meetings with many partners, including the fairly new Executive Director of TC National Trust, Winema Sanders-Penn. However, a few meetings had to be cancelled as the COVID-19 situation developed. The planned UKOTCF visit to Montserrat which was to have followed the TCI visit in March had to be cancelled because of sudden Covid-19 lockdown in Montserrat. UKOTCF was able, however, to answer remotely some requests for advice from various partners in Montserrat.

### ***Montserrat***

The Government of Montserrat initiated partial and full lockdown of the island from March 21. This means that all non-essential businesses were closed. The Montserrat National Trust (MNT) falls into this category. The Director was able to conduct some work at home using various media platforms and her own internet, phone and computers.

The following services offered by the Trust were adversely affected.

1. Tours of Garden, Exhibition Room, Gift Shop and Museum
2. Garden and Plant Sales. Many plants have died as we are into a long period of drought and workers were unable to water gardens, also impacting the native species forming part of the

*Adopt a Home for Wildlife* joint initiative with UKOTCF

3. Trail maintenance and guiding and wildlife monitoring
4. Woodland Beach rentals
5. Project management and implementation
6. Use of volunteers who assist in archiving, gift shop and Museum work
7. Launch of book on the Archaeological History of Montserrat
8. Outreach programmes
9. General administrative work.

From early May, MNT experimented with staggered days working out of the Trust to clean and follow-up on some work on budgets. They hope, with the report of no known cases on island, that they will be slowly get some more work done using social distancing protocols.

### **Southern Oceans**

We have less complete information from Southern Ocean territories – several of which are fairly isolated anyway. It is undoubtedly the case that conservation bodies will be suffering total removal of income due to closing of buildings and natural sites, as well as lack of tourists.

At least one major project has been postponed for at least a year. This is the restoration of Gough Island, possibly the most important seabird site in the southern oceans, if not the world. This is a well-planned project, led by RSPB, to remove the introduced rodents, which (among impacts on other species) famously eat albatross chicks alive. Some of the team reached the island but others could not, due to Covid-19 restrictions in various countries *en route*. The project managers had no alternative to postponing and getting the team home in a rather complex operation and round-about route. We note too that British Antarctic Survey had similarly complex detours in removing its summer team from British Antarctic Territory before the southern winter.

### **Europe Territories**

#### ***Alderney***

By mid-May, there were no cases of Covid-19 on the island, so most activities could continue. Several surveys were taking place and some boat-work was continuing. Staffing was inevitably an issue as Alderney Wildlife Trust rely mostly on seasonal workers and those expected to arrive for summer work would probably not be able to. Although, with additional survey work, baseline data will be improved (especially in the marine environment), conservation activities will be reduced as a result of the pandemic.

#### ***Cyprus Sovereign Base Areas***

There has been a serious impact on work. Most fieldwork has halted and so it has provided an opportunity for desk-based work. It has accelerated management planning, although it would not be possible to conduct a full consultation - this will be reviewed at a later date. When the pandemic began, the spring bird migration had just about ended but the turtle nesting season had just started. There had been 30 loggerhead turtle sightings, nesting both on the normally quiet beaches and on the most popular tourist beach, Lady's Mile on Akrotiri, which they usually avoid. People are allowed to go swimming but are not allowed on the beaches. This was expected to change over May-June as the beaches reopen but, for a time, turtles were using areas they otherwise did not.

#### ***Gibraltar***

In terms of fatalities, Gibraltar had not been hit hard by COVID-19 due to an early lockdown. It appears that southern Spain had also



been spared the worst of what the country was experiencing. They were still in lockdown, in mid-May but there was some easing of rules. GOHNS had had to cancel outings and postpone their AGM.

Local bird ringers were covering as much as possible, as help which was usually provided by volunteers from outside of Gibraltar had not been able to get there.

People have been recording anyway during their permitted exercise and from their homes. It was possible to count four species of vultures from the comfort of a sofa. Some rescues had taken place with the help of the police. Interestingly, there had been no reports of macaques, so maybe they were enjoying the nature reserve with no people in it.

Government were focusing on Covid-19. With apparent links between atmospheric pollution and effects of coronavirus, they had taken the opportunity to close several streets, which would become pedestrian only.

### **Jersey**

As a result of Covid-19, there were a lot of walkers enjoying the outdoors, but there were reports of them entering protected areas, which could have a negative impact, particularly on ground-nesting birds and vegetation.

When Covid-19 started, Jersey Seascope were in the middle of an educational outreach programme. A large part of this included a touch-tank where children (and adults) could get up close to marine wildlife. This had to be curtailed and there are doubts over when it would resume, given that social distancing and extra hygiene are going to be imposed for some time to come. The touch-tank is about contact and pupils crowd around it. They had been at schools and reached over 300 students. The team was thinking about other ways to carry out educational work and had been looking at potential educational opportunities, particularly for those being home-schooled, e.g. models of rock-pools and marine wildlife including limpets.

Sam Blomped, a PhD candidate at Plymouth University, had to cancel a lot of planned work over the summer. She had not been able to get back on water to do survey work, which included video baiting etc. Other researchers from Plymouth would not be able to come over this summer.

A Ramsar Site management meeting had taken place via Zoom. They were starting to think about ways in involve other Channel Islands with Ramsar sites in the group as a way to exchange information.

The fishing industry had been impacted as they are unable to land their catch in France. Lobster-pots and nets had been left out and come loose in bad weather, which could have an impact on marine life.

### **Guernsey**

Guernsey is to host the annual Inter Island Environment Meeting in September, and has announced that it will take place remotely .

### **Sark**

The impact of Covid-19 was much the same as the others. There had been no visitors and they were not expected to return for a while. The AGM of La Société Sercquiais has been cancelled, but overall many of the island residents were enjoying the peace.

## **Cross-territory**

### **UKOTCF**

As noted above, UKOTCF's plans for meetings with some territory partners and planning future work has been disrupted, but work continues remotely. In fact, UKOTCF personnel have noted

– and tried to deal with – an increase in requests for information and advice, probably a result of people having more time to think while locked-down.

Our new initiative on Championing UKOT/CD species (see pages 1-2) has started less rapidly than planned because elements of it depended on personal meetings in UK Parliament, which has Covid-19 restrictions in place. However, ways around this are being developed.

There are impacts on other work, which are being managed as much as possible.

### **UKOT/CD government meetings**

The Joint Ministerial Council (JMC) is the annual meeting of UK ministers with the Chief Ministers (or equivalents for those territories without ministerial systems) or their deputies. It is normally held in London in November. However, it was postponed at short notice in 2019 due to the calling of the UK general election. A replacement was planned for late March, but this was cancelled at short notice due to Covid-19 restrictions. Several other meetings which take place in the days around this (such as the Pitcairn Environment Group) were also cancelled because travel is combined, to economise on costs and time. It is expected that the next meeting will be in November, two years after the previous one.

The UKOT/Environment Ministers Council meeting (for which UKOTCF provides the secretariat) normally aims to meet annually. However, the 2018 meeting decided to plan for a little over a year, in the hope that the post-Brexit situation would be clear by then and there are major consequences of this for the territories. (It seems that even other politicians could not believe that the lack of decision would persist for so many years.) Seeing the situation, Gibraltar anticipated hosting a meeting (together with a wider one on the Blue Islands Charter) in spring 2020. However, this had to be postponed to late in the year or possibly 2021. Meanwhile, a remote meeting is being investigated.

### **General**

As this issue of *Forum News* is being prepared, UK Government is trying to extract itself from the rather curiously timed quarantine arrangements it imposed in June on people arriving in UK. The Department of Transport has issued (for England) a list of countries and territories for which this will no longer apply. Meanwhile, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office has issued a list of those to which its recommendation against travel (which means that insurance is invalid) is suspended. It is slightly confusing that these two lists overlap but do not coincide. It is good to see that UKOTs have not been totally forgotten in these lists, although, for some, travel remains impracticable as existing routes from some go via countries not on the list.

UKOTCF Council member Iain Orr (outside his UKOTCF role) has been working with others on collating up to date figures on the Covid-19 situation in UKOTs, CDs and other islands. This can be accessed by a link on the home-page at [isisa.org](http://isisa.org).

The European Union has recently announced that there will be a call for proposals in September 2020 under the BEST 2.0+ Programme; a follow up to the BEST 2.0 Programme which funded many projects across the UKOTs. It has been created in order to assist local bodies deal with the consequences of Covid-19. It aims to provide support for small-scale actions on the ground carried out by local stakeholders. Funding will be available for projects up to 60,000 euros and lasting 18 months. IUCN Europe, who acts as secretariat for the scheme, has indicated to UKOTCF that UKOTs will be eligible to apply when the call opens on the 10th September 2020. More information is available at [www.best2plus.org](http://www.best2plus.org).

# Cyprus Sovereign Base Areas fight to eradicate illegal bird-trapping

*For many years, the problem of illegal catching in the Cyprus SBAs of songbirds on migration between Europe and Africa has featured in Forum News and many other publications and meetings. Addressing this issue has been a major challenge to the authorities, with many complications to address. There has, however, been remarkable progress in the last few years, and UKOTCF is pleased to add its congratulations to those of others (see end of article). The situation is described in the articles below, which have been reproduced, with permission, from the Ministry of Defence's Sanctuary Magazine (Edition 28, 2019).*

*The authors are Davy Reynolds (DIO Overseas, Environmental Advisor Defence Infrastructure Organisation) and Kristian Gray (Media Advisor/News Editor Media Operations HQ BFC).*

The British Eastern Sovereign Base Areas (ESBA) of Cyprus has long been a location of environmental significance for the past 10 years, authorities have been battling to overcome one of the islands's most controversial traditions – bird trapping. The illegal trapping of migrating birds, including blackcaps 'Ambelopoulia', sees birds lured into mist-nests and on to lime-sticks by trappers using imitating devices, before they are killed barbarically and either sold for profit by organised groups, or consumed by individuals.

The problem of bird-trapping is an island-wide issue, with 10 areas known to be rife with the activity. Unfortunately for the Bases authorities, two of those 'hot-spot' areas happen to fall within the ESBA: Cape Pyla, which is used as a training area for forces personnel and Ayios Nikolaos.

In 2014, the Hon. Chairman of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), His Royal Highness (HRH) The Prince of Wales wrote a letter raising concerns that the Bases authorities were not doing enough to tackle the problem of illegal trapping. HRH's letter was linked to claims that close to one million birds were being captured and killed annually. In 2016, a report released by Birdlife Cyprus estimated that 800,000 migrating birds were killed during the autumn season. Following the public and political outcry in the UK, Bases authorities took decisive action and set about eradicating the problem within the SBAs. This is an extremely challenging task as the hunters believe that the traditional method of using lime-sticks to trap birds is part of their cultural heritage – indeed it is not so long ago that the use of lime-sticks was legal in Cyprus. The cultural perception in Cyprus remains that 'Ambelopoulia' is the meat provided by God. This should not be disguised by the fact that the primary motivation



*Indiscriminate and illegal capture of birds using mist-nets.  
Photo: SBA Police*

for the trappers has nothing to do with 'culture' or 'traditions' and everything to do with financial gain!

Superintendent Andreas Pitsillides from the Sovereign Base Areas Police's Dhekelia Division, has been working on the bird-trapping problem for many years and describes the action Bases authorities took to combat the problem. "With the start of the 2016-2017 migration season, Commander British Forces Cyprus, Maj Gen James Illingworth, the SBA Administration and the SBA Police Chief Constable, Chris Eyre, made bird-trapping one of their priorities and developed the appropriate strategies to effectively tackle the problem."

One of those strategies was to form what has become known as the Community Action Team (CAT), which is effectively a dedicated group of officers working around-the-clock to capture the perpetrators of the illegal activity. Superintendent Pitsillides continued "working alongside the newly-formed CAT team, led by our high integrity officers, we undertook what seemed to be in the eyes of the public, partners and colleagues, an impossible task to achieve. Our strategy was to prevent bird-trapping in our areas, pursue bird-trappers and protect the environment and, with that strategy in place, a robust approach was adopted by the team to enforce a zero-tolerance attitude towards offenders."

Bases authorities were quick to realise that this monumental task could not be achieved alone, and a partnership approach was quickly identified as the way forward. Fortunately, support was forthcoming and CAT are now able to work closely with members of the British Military, the SBA Administration, the Defence Lands Estates, Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO) and environmental non-government organisations, including: Birdlife Cyprus, RSPB and the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS).

Their support meant that, in the past two years, the SBA Police has been able to introduce a wide-range of technological upgrades and improve the efficiency of patrols. This, coupled with the removal of 80 km of illegal irrigation pipes which are used to water acacia plants, an invasive species which provides ideal camouflage for mist-nests, has been the reason for the success according to Superintendent Pitsillides. "Many incremental and new radical changes have been introduced which have improved the efficiency of the policing team and our partners by working closely to achieve the strategic objectives."

The new methods introduced have included; enhanced communication with community leaders, embarking on a long-term programme of cultural change, education in schools promoting the protection of wildlife and biodiversity and the distribution of leaflets highlighting the strategic intentions to tackle effectively the problem to the hunting associations and the wider-community. Other highlights included a most-wanted 'Hot Net' list of offenders, DIO revoking the leases of known trappers on Ministry of Defence and Crown land, exclusion orders, heavier sanctions to EU farming subsidies for convicted trappers and the increase of sentencing thresholds to include much heavier financial penalties and prison sentences.

However, some of the most effective methods employed, according to Superintendent Pitsillides, have come through a technological evolution. "In 2017, we began using Police drones deployed to capture evidence of trappers which led to more intelligence-led, targeted operations, that could be effective from 2 km away and up to 1 km in the air. The RSPB also supported us with the use of covert surveillance cameras deployed in trapping areas and now DIO have been able to provide funding for the Police to buy their own."



SBA Police using drone technology to combat illegal bird-trapping.  
Photo: Davy Reynolds

The implementation of these methods quickly proved a success and the amount of bird trapping taking place within the SBAs began falling sharply, with Police intelligence confirming that trappers felt they were no longer safe.

In 2018, Defence Minister, Mark Lancaster, visited the EBSA and said “today we are here to mark a success story.” The success the Minister alluded to has been a culmination of three years tireless work and it is now reported that there has been a 75% decrease in the bird-trapping cases and an 85% drop in mist-net seizures between 2016-19, clearly demonstrating the effectiveness of targeted operations by officers and the new methods employed.

The obvious success however has not been easy and, for many of the officers deployed on CAT, it has made them a target for organized crime and individuals whom stand to lose thousands of Euros as a result of the work. “Police CAT officers, on numerous occasions, have been received threats against their lives and their loved ones. However, not even that was able to deter them from the operations against the organised bird-trappers. The integrity, motivation and courage exhibited by the CAT officers, supported by their leadership, was enough to prevent, intercept and minimize, the illegal activities of the bird trappers and achieve these outstanding results” said the Superintendent.

The report from BirdLife Cyprus released in 2019 has confirmed that there remains a continued decrease in bird-trapping levels in Cyprus. The analysis of the field-data for autumn 2018 has shown a 90% decrease in trapping levels with mist-nets within the survey area when compared to 2002.

But despite the widespread acclaim for the Police and the wider-Command within the SBAs and the various partners involved,

Superintendent Pitsillides said there would still be no let-up. “We are committed to continue with the same zeal and enthusiasm on a partnership approach in the years to come until we eradicate the problem of bird trapping within the SBAs once and for all.”

### Environmental Project Award Winner – Silver Otter Award

*The Sanctuary Awards have been recognising outstanding conservation efforts across the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) Estate since 1991, when the Commandant of the Otterburn Training Area donated the ‘Silver Otter Trophy,’ to be awarded annually to the best Conservation Group led project, or best individual conservation effort, on MOD land. The 2019 Silver Otter Award winner was the Bird Trapping Steering Group, Cyprus SBAs We reproduce the notification from Sanctuary below.*

Cyprus, including the Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) is recognised as a hotspot for illegal bird trapping in the Mediterranean. Consumer demand drives the use of non-selective trapping methods, resulting in the indiscriminate killing of millions of migratory birds. In 2016, it was estimated that 800,000 birds were killed during the autumn season in the SBAs using mist-nets. The UK Government and the SBA Administration had come under significant political and media criticism in their dealing with the problem. Under the direction of Commander British Forces, the ‘Bird Trapping Steering Group’ was established to combat the problem. Chaired by SBA Police and working alongside military colleagues and other internal and external stakeholders, including, the RSPB, BirdLife Cyprus, Committee Against Animal Slaughter and local communities, anti-poaching strategies and action plans have been developed.

Set against the 2016 figures, considerable effort has been made to combat poaching activities, including increased enforcement and improved cooperation with stakeholders. During the previous two seasons, 21 individuals were successfully prosecuted; some receiving fines as high as € 6,600 and seven receiving jail sentences, suspended for three years.

BirdLife Cyprus’ latest report on autumn trapping shows a positive and continuing decrease in bird-trapping levels in Cyprus. Their trend analysis programme has been in place for almost two decades. The analysis of the field-data for autumn 2018 has shown a 90% decrease in trapping levels with mist-nets within the survey area compared to 2002.

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## Changes in UK Parliament and Government

In December 2019, the UK general election resulted in a new Parliament and the re-election of the Conservative government, which had been in power for 9½ years, the most recent 4½ without a coalition partner. Despite this being a re-election, there were many changes in all parties, and in the ministers who were then appointed. Some of those most relevant to UKOTs/CDs are listed below (as posts stand in early July 2020 after further changes).

### UK Government Ministers

#### Prime Minister

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP

#### Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO)

Secretary of State: Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP

#### Department for International Development

Secretary of State: Rt Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP

(Note that, with the exceptions of the Secretaries of State [the most senior ministers], all FCO and DFID ministers appointed in December held office in both ministries. In June, it was announced that the two ministries would be merged in September 2020, to form the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), under the Foreign Secretary.)

Minister of State (Minister for Pacific and the Environment): Rt Hon Lord Zac Goldsmith (also a Minister of State in DEFRA)

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for the Overseas Territories and Sustainable Development): Baroness Sugg CBE

#### Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)

Secretary of State: Rt Hon George Eustice MP

#### Ministry of Defence (MOD)

Secretary of State: Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP

#### Ministry of Justice (MOJ)

Secretary of State: Rt Hon Robert Buckland QC MP

**Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and Minister for COP 26** [of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change]

Secretary of State: Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP

### Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition

Following a leadership contest in the Labour Party in April 2020, Sir Keir Starmer MP became Leader and therefore also Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. Other key members of the Shadow Cabinet, in posts most relevant to UKOTs/CDs are:

Lisa Nandy MP, Shadow Foreign Secretary

Preet Kaur Gill MP, Shadow International Development Secretary

Luke Pollard MP, Shadow Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary

Ed Miliband MP, Shadow Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Secretary

John Healey MP, Shadow Defence Secretary

David Lammy MP, Shadow Justice Secretary

### Select Committees of Parliament

There are a number of Select Committees of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The two that have involved themselves most with UKOT/CD matters are the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (which examines Government's approach across all ministries) and Foreign Affairs Committee (because the lead on UKOT policy lies with FCO, whose work this Committee examines).

Current memberships (with party and constituency) are:

#### *Environmental Audit Committee (EAC)*

Philip Dunne MP (Chair) ...Labour ...Ludlow

Duncan Baker MP Conservative ...North Norfolk

Sir Christopher Chope MP ...Conservative ...Christchurch

Feryal Clark MP. Labour ...Enfield North

Ian Levy MP ...Conservative ...Blyth Valley

Marco Longhi MP ...Conservative ...Dudley North

Robert Goodwill MP ...Conservative ...Scarborough and Whitby

Jerome Mayhew MP ...Conservative ...Broadland

Caroline Lucas MP ...Green ...Brighton Pavilion

Kerry McCarthy MP ...Labour ...Bristol East

John McNally MP ...Scottish National Party ...Falkirk

Claudia Webbe MP ...Labour ...Leicester East

Dr Matthew Offord MP ...Conservative ...Hendon

Nadia Whittome MP ...Labour ...Nottingham East

Shailesh Vara MP ...Conservative ...North West Cambridgeshire

Alex Sobel MP ...Labour (Co-op) ...Leeds North West

*(For the report on an inquiry in the previous session, see page 23.)*

#### *Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) - see also next page*

Tom Tugendhat MP (Chairman) ...Conservative ...Tonbridge and Malling

Chris Bryant MP ...Labour ...Rhondda

Neil Coyle MP ...Labour ...Bermondsey and Old Southwark

Alicia Kearns MP ...Conservative ...Rutland and Melton

Stewart M. McDonald MP ...Scottish National Party ...Glasgow South

Claudia Webbe MP ...Labour ...Leicester East

Andrew Rosindell MP ...Conservative ...Romford

Bob Seely MP ...Conservative ...Isle of Wight

Henry Smith MP ...Conservative ...Crawley

Royston Smith MP ...Conservative ...Southampton Itchen

Graham Stringer MP ...Labour ...Blackley and Broughton

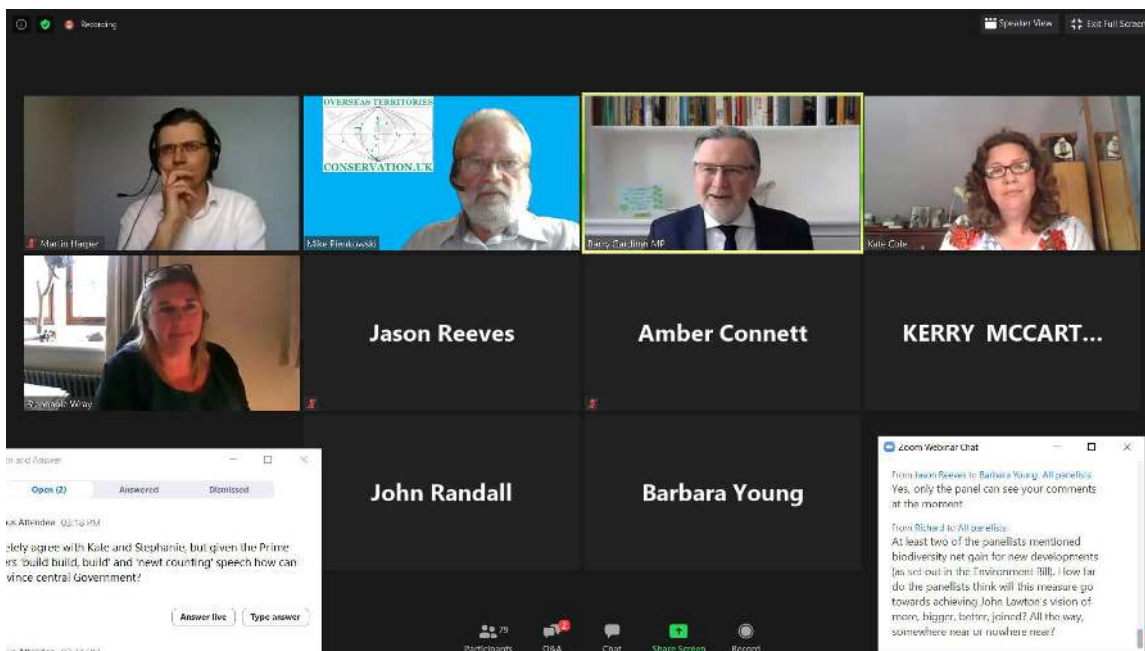
### All-Party Parliamentary Groups

All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) are informal cross-party groups. They are run by and for Members of the Commons and Lords, though many choose to involve individuals and organisations from outside Parliament in their administration and activities.

There are APPGs on UKOTs generally and for some individual territories. The former APPG on Biodiversity took considerable

interest in UKOTs and CDs. It has, in some ways, been replaced in the new Parliament by the APPG on Nature, with Barry Gardiner MP in the Chair.

*APPG for Nature's webinar on Global Deal for Nature and the Green Recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic; the panel (from top left) were: Martin Harper (Global Conservation Director, RSPB); Mike Pienkowski (Chairman, UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum); Barry Gardiner MP (Chair, APPG); Kate Cole (East Sussex County Council and representing*



*the Association of Local Government Ecologists); Stephanie Wray (Managing Director of RSK Biocensus Ltd and Chair of CIEEM's Strategic Policy Panel); with (in sound only), from APPG's secretariat CIEEM, Jason Reeves & Amber Connett; and Parliamentarian members of the APPG: Kerry McCarthy MP (Shadow Minister of Transport); Lord (John) Randall of Uxbridge; and Baroness (Barbara) Young.*

## FAC Inquiry on Environmental Diplomacy

UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee launched a call for evidence on environmental diplomacy (see: <https://committees.parliament.uk/call-for-evidence/100/environmental-diplomacy/>). The deadline for written submissions was 29th May (since extended to 26th August because of the postponement of UNFCCC CoP to 2021). UKOTCF's response was submitted before the original deadline and is being published on Parliament's website. The key recommendations put forward were as follows:

- Recommendation A: FCO environmental diplomatic strategy should involve considerable consultation with UKOTs, ensuring that NGOs are involved, and address major global challenges, including those issues tackled by the UK Parliament's Environmental Audit Committee.
- Recommendation B: FCO should provide legal draftspersons to expedite or ensure legislation does not stall, especially

where these relate to international commitments.

- Recommendation C: Liaison with and support to environmental NGOs experienced in working in UKOTs must be provided as these have been shown to strengthen HMG's work.
- Recommendation D: UK Government should facilitate and expedite any UKOTs requesting to join international agreements, including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).
- Recommendation E: UK Government should continue to take a global role in climate-change policy through its UK Overseas Territories, in which marine protected areas already cover 4 million square kilometres.
- Recommendation F: UK Government should continue to ensure UKOTs and CDs are represented in COP meetings.

## Asian Hornets - The Battle Continues in Sark

*Asian hornets Vespa velutina are alien invasive species in Europe and pose a major threat to bees and other wildlife. They are believed to have reached France in boxes of pottery from China in 2004, and have now spread to Spain and Italy. Every year queens spreading to form new colonies arrive in the Channel Islands. Peter Cunneen and Jo Birch bring us up to date with the latest news on Asian hornets on Sark.*



*An Asian hornet - note the yellow legs and face, and the black abdomen apart from the fourth segment that is yellow.*

Sark's spring queening programme began island-wide in early spring but did not trap its first queen until April. There was a flurry of trappings at the end of May and, by the first week of June, when trapping ceased, the total had reached eleven. A phoney war existed throughout summer until August when worker hornets began to be spotted at the top of Harbour Hill. Working on location with Francis Russell and Damian Harris from the States of Guernsey, who had kindly supplied our traps and advised throughout the season, we spent a day tracking the flight direction of multiple sightings.

In the few weeks that followed, the focus was on weakening the nest by trapping, as much as trying to locate it. It was finally spotted at the end of October hidden within brambles on some waste-ground in La Forge area by Pat Cunneen. (This is the second to be found on Sark. The first was high up in a tree on Harbour Hill.) Francis and Damian came over to kill and remove the nest for forensic examination in Guernsey and, at the time of going to print, we await those results. Without a doubt, many queens were caught in time, before they managed to mate, hibernate and become a problem for next year.

We are at the frontline of learning how hornets behave and in developing methods for combating their spread. Next year,



*Asian hornet nest. Photos in this article: Peter Cunneen & Francis Russell*

hibernated queens might emerge, plus there is the additional threat of migrations from France or more probably, Jersey. Apart

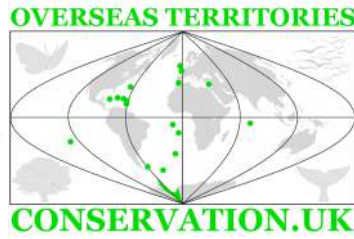
from asking the island as a whole to be on the lookout for primary nests in sheds and outbuildings, there will be a more intensive spring queening programme using trap adaptations that reduce the by-catch of indigenous species.

Other than each hornet worker taking 50 pollinating insects a day, there is a very real danger to life for anyone who disturbs a nest. They are not always at the top of a tree, but can be hidden in scrub, bushes and walls. Thank you to those who helped this year - next year we will be asking everybody to play a part.

If you see what you think is an Asian hornet in Sark, take a photo if possible, note the location and its flight direction then contact Jo Birch or Peter Cunneen. Elsewhere in the Bailiwick of Guernsey contact [asianhornet@gov.gg](mailto:asianhornet@gov.gg) and in the UK, use the Asian hornet app or report it to the National Bee Unit.



*Hornet expert Damian Harris removing the nest.*



UK Overseas Territories  
Conservation Forum



## Saving Our Special Nature of Montserrat: update

As noted in *Forum News 51* (pages 6-9) and *50* (pages 4-9), the first two years of this current programme (see *Forum News 45-49*) of Montserrat National Trust, UKOTCF and the Government of Montserrat 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 applications are being made to various potential sources. 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, especially in the *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* component of the work.

Dr Mike and Ann Pienkowski arranged again (at their own expense) to spend a few days in Montserrat in March, to help with this. While they were in the preceeding UKOT of their trip (Turks & Caicos Islands), the Governor of Montserrat emailed to explain that, unfortunately, Montserrat had had to close down from that week. This was because some of the many current visitors (including Montserratians returning for the traditional family reunions of St Patrick's Week) had been exposed *en route* to persons with Covid-19. Thus, Mike and Ann had to divert directly back to UK from TCI.

Nevertheless, they and UKOTCF colleagues have been able to provide advice remotely to several enquiries for NGO and governmental partners in Montserrat, and continue to work remotely on future plans.

We were delighted to receive, a few days after when the visit should have been to Montserrat, an email from one of our most active local partners in the *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* initiative, Tim Orton. We are pleased to quote from his email and include his photos of trees and bushes blooming in the globally threatened tropical dry forest on his land. As part of the project, Tim has been removing invasive vegetation from the forest and planting or encouraging native species.

Tim reports: "The dry forest is starting to bloom, interestingly 6 weeks earlier than last year, and is absolutely full of bees."



*Views of Tim Orton's tropical dry forest in bloom on 4 April 2020. The invasive plants are being removed from among the native ones in this forest and native species being encouraged and, in some cases, planted. This is part of the Adopt a Home for Wildlife initiative of UKOTCF and Montserrat National Trust. Photos: Tim Orton*

# Loved to death: Turks and Caicos' battle to save the queen conch

This article by Gemma Handy, based in Providenciales, TCI, first appeared in [www.bbc.uk/news](http://www.bbc.uk/news) on 2 February 2020.

From a staple food to its use as a musical instrument, few things epitomise the culture of the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI) like the queen conch.

And, for tourists, pulling up to a beachside restaurant to sample the freshly caught marine snail is a bucket-list feature, the creature having been omnipresent in the islands' shallow translucent waters for centuries.

Except, for several days in January, there were none to be found.

Overfishing is being blamed for plummeting ocean stocks which saw conch off the menu at several restaurants across Providenciales.

Fears are now rife that the beloved mollusc, which even appears on the British territory's coat of arms, is being loved to death.

## National symbol



Conch blowing is part of TCI's cultural heritage.  
Photo: TCI Department of Culture

"Conch is a national symbol and a huge part of our heritage," explains TCI's former culture director David Bowen.

"When I was a kid, every time we got in the ocean we could see conchs. I had friends visit for Christmas and they went to a restaurant to try conch and were told there wasn't any."

Mr Bowen blamed a lack of action from the government, which still permits conch to be exported, along with watersports operators who allow holidaymakers to take home live juvenile conchs as souvenirs.

"They assume conch is unlimited but environmentalists have been warning about this for years," Mr Bowen added.

Conch has at times been the islands' biggest export. Florida, which is just 600 miles (965 km) away and which has itself banned conch fishing for decades due to its own shortages, is a prime customer.

Turks and Caicos' annual conch exports have topped one million



Conchs can be found in shallow waters. Photo: Brilliant Studios



Conch shells. Photo: Brilliant Studios

pounds (453,600 kg) of meat in years past, equating to roughly 200,000 animals.

## Something special

Many argue the practice is no longer sustainable.

"Conch is a delicacy and should be preserved," said John Macdonald, owner of Da Conch Shack restaurant in Providenciales.

"People take it for granted but we believe it's something special to try, not to be eaten for every meal. If we'd stopped exports years ago we'd never have had these problems," he continued.

Mr Macdonald said the restaurant's sea-based crawls which catch wild conch had been empty for several days.

Michael Stolow, owner of Bugaloos restaurant, told the BBC his fishermen were being forced to hunt further and for longer to find conch.

He said the eatery was receiving several calls a day from hotel concierges inquiring if conch was on the menu.

"Many tourists have already been to other restaurants and found none available, so now they're calling before they even get in the cab," he added.

The shortage is echoed across the Caribbean with one study in neighbouring Bahamas suggesting the country could lose its conch industry entirely within a decade without urgent action.

Last year, Jamaica implemented a ban on all conch fishing amid a dramatic decline in stocks.

## Call for blanket ban

TCI does have an annual three-month "closed" season on exports but environmentalists say it falls far short of what is required.

Kathleen Wood, of research body SWA Environmental, has been calling for tighter controls for years and now thinks a blanket ban is the only way to save the species.

"It's horrific that we've reached this stage. If fishing persists, it might be too late to do anything," she said.

Conch's importance to Turks and Caicos dates back to the pre-Columbians who not only ate them but fashioned their shells into tools.

Later, islanders used them as musical horns while the shells' beautiful pink colours have seen them displayed in jewellery for centuries.

There has even been a long-running festival devoted entirely to the meaty mollusc, featuring a host of innovative dishes and a lively "conch knocking" contest in which participants race to remove the creature from its shell.

The queen conch has been under the protection of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) since 1992 which offers some levels of protection regarding trade.

### **Under pressure**

Conchs are particularly vulnerable to overexploitation, due to their slow mobility, habitat in shallow, accessible water, and slow growth and reproductive cycles.

By grazing on algae which can smother coral reefs, they play an important environmental role too.

But their numbers have to be at a certain density to enable them to reproduce, explained Chuck Hesse, who founded the islands' erstwhile Conch Farm in the 1980s.

"The female conch, like a cat, gives forth a pheromone to attract the males. If there are no males downstream to smell it, mating will never occur," he said.

Environment Minister Ralph Higgs acknowledged conchs were "under pressure".

He said measures being taken included reducing the number of fishing licences granted, along with slashing export quotas.

An ocean stock count is currently underway, after which final decisions will be made on carving a path forward, Mr Higgs added.

That cannot come soon enough for many islanders.

"Once conch have gone they don't come back; that's what's happened everywhere else," warned Mrs Wood, adding that Florida's long moratorium on conch harvesting had done little to bring numbers back to a commercially sustainable level.

"For Turks and Caicos, the biggest impact is the loss of an iconic cultural species. For a country to lose a piece of its national identity is tragic."

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## **BVI petition protests dolphinarium's return**

*This article by Rebecca Bird first appeared in The BVI Beacon on 22 October 2019.*

An online petition to halt the return of captive dolphins to the Virgin Islands has amassed more than 4,000 signatures, with supporters calling the practice "inhumane" and "cruel."

Tortola resident Neil Day created the petition in response to Premier Andrew Fahie's recent announcement that the government is in talks with Dolphin Discovery to return to the territory.

The premier said a new agreement is likely to be signed within months and government plans to work "feverishly" with the company to have the Prospect Reef park up and running next year. He added that the facility, which was destroyed by Hurricane Irma in 2017, previously attracted hundreds of cruise ship passengers on a daily basis and is a "significant boost to our offerings."

Mr Day, who works for a yacht charter company, told the Beacon that these plans will not go unchallenged, and he will present his petition to the government at the end of the month.

"I know a lot of people here share my views, and public opinion worldwide is turning against these swim-with-dolphin programmes," he wrote in a message to the Beacon, adding, "I hope the government will see that it's not a popular decision and reconsider."

### **Swimming with dolphins**

For 16 years, Dolphin Discovery operated a facility in Tortola where visitors paid to swim with dolphins and take part in activities such as "belly rides" and "dorsal tows."

After the facility was severely damaged by Irma in September 2017, the company evacuated its resident 15 bottlenose dolphins to Jamaica and the Dominican Republic.

"Very little good news came about as a result of Hurricane Irma, which decimated our Virgin Islands in 2017," Mr Day wrote on the change.org lobby site, where his petition is posted. "One bit of positivity, however, was the destruction of the captive dolphin facility and tourist attraction run by Dolphin Discovery."

He said the attraction provided an "outdated form of entertainment" which many travel companies have stopped promoting.

TripAdvisor announced this month that it would not sell tickets to attractions that breed or import captive whales and dolphins used for public display.

"The practice of exploiting these intelligent, social animals is out

of step with the modern world, basic decency, and increasingly the law, as countries, most recently Canada, continue to ban this vile exploitation," Mr. Day wrote, adding that reopening the Tortola dolphin park would "bring shame on all of us who call the BVI home."

On 4 October, Premier Andrew Fahie, who also serves as minister of tourism, told reporters that a new agreement to have Dolphin Discovery operating back in Tortola is being finalised.

He said he hoped it would be signed within the next few months and that the park would be reopened in time for the height of the cruise ship season in 2020.

Mr Fahie described the park as a "significant boost to our offerings to the cruise liners" and said up to 500 people per day previously participated in the attraction.

"Most of the cruise liners and their passengers have insisted that they want the return of the Dolphin Discovery," he said. "So we will be working on that feverishly."

### **The petition**

As of press time yesterday, Mr. Day's petition, titled, "Stop the return of captive dolphins to the British Virgin Islands," had gathered 4,022 signatures, according to change.org.

The website does not verify the identities of signatories, but hundreds of people from around the world reportedly wrote comments on the site opposing the use of captive dolphins for entertainment.

Petitioner Lucy Woodford wrote, "No animal should be used for human entertainment — it is inhumane. It is not an answer for tourism, it's cruel and should be illegal! Don't waste your money on this disgusting project."

Natasha Ruscheinski, a VI resident who founded the non-profit organisation Promoting Animal Welfare, posted, "Keeping dolphins in captivity is extremely cruel. The BVI has so much to offer tourists without stooping to animal cruelty simply to make a profit."

Kay Reddy added that the territory should encourage wild dolphins — which she pointed out can swim at 25 miles per hour and dive to 300 metres — to play freely in the Sir Francis Drake Channel.

"BVI would be a world-class attraction," she wrote on the petition page. "What dolphins do not do is belong in shallow steaming stagnant ponds forced into false behavioural displays for entertainment."



And signatory Cathryn Hempel wrote, “There are plenty more humane ways for the BVI government to make money off tourists. We don’t have to resort to capturing intelligent animals and force them to drag overweight tourists around a swimming pool. Let’s rather see these creatures in their natural environment.”

Neither Dolphin Discovery representatives nor Mr Fahie responded to requests for comment.’

### Hurricane damage

In September 2017 Hurricane Irma tore through the Prospect Reef Dolphin Discovery centre, but all the 15 resident dolphins survived unharmed.

The company later released a statement explaining that an “evacuation-of-species protocol” had been activated at the site before the storm’s arrival “due to the trajectory and the imminent impact.”

Forty-eight hours before the storm arrived, a support team from Dolphin Discovery’s corporate offices transported the mammals to the hotel pool as a “first refuge,” according to the company.

“When the hurricane passed, the specimens and all the staff were in perfect conditions,” an October 2017 press release stated. “Unfortunately, their habitat, as well as the entire island, suffered damages in the structure.”

The dolphins were transported to other marine life centres in Jamaica and Dominican Republic.

“All of them arrived in an excellent state of health as they remain until today,” the company claimed at the time.

Meanwhile all staff members who suffered damage to their homes were relocated to other islands with Dolphin Discovery habitats.

### Previous petition

Shortly after the 2017 storms, a change.org user posting under the name Lisa Pisani created another online petition demanding the closure of all Dolphin Discovery sites across the Caribbean, which racked up 1,820 signatures.

In her post, Ms Pisani wrote that she was motivated to push for change after struggling to get information on the animals held at the “dolphin prisons” following the storms.

“My mission is to NEVER allow Dolphin Discovery to open again, ever, in the Caribbean. This is the chance to shut them down for good,” she wrote.

She had planned to send the petition to dolphin-trainer-turned-animal-welfare-activist Richard O’Barry, who in 1970 founded the Dolphin Project, a United States-based group that aims to educate the public about captivity and free captive dolphins.

However, Ms. Pisani’s target of 2,500 signatures was never reached.

Luis Cabrera, then the general manager of Dolphin Discovery in Tortola, at the time told the *Beacon* that he was aware of Ms. Pisani’s petition, but said that no one had directly contacted the centre regarding the welfare of the dolphins.

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## Threat of extinction to Cayman rock iguanas

*This article first appeared on caymannewsservice.com on 3 March 2020.*

Fred Burton, manager of the Department of Environment Terrestrial Resources Unit who was fundamental in bringing Grand Cayman’s endemic blue iguana back from the brink of extinction, is warning that the Cayman Islands needs to act now to save the Sister Islands rock iguana on Little Cayman before it, too, faces extinction. A recent survey on the island revealed that the population on that island has halved in the last five years, killed by drivers and feral cats.

The current population could be lower than 1,500, according to the latest survey, after a decline of over 39% in the numbers since the 2015 count.

“These are deeply worrying losses for the Sister Isles Rock Iguana population on Little Cayman,” said Burton. “The causes of the decline are already known: the rock iguanas are being struck by vehicles and their young are falling prey to feral cats. The rock iguana population now consists mainly of mature adults, with the young age classes very scarce due to the unnatural and extreme predation pressure.”

Burton explained that addressing the problem now will be easier than trying to repeat the significant and costly effort that went into the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme.

“Road kill and feral cats are challenging issues to address, but there are solutions, and it makes much more sense to address these now than to wait until the rock iguanas are on the brink of extinction requiring a multi-million dollar rescue operation like we had to do with the blue iguanas on Grand Cayman,” the iguana expert warned.

He said the DoE has long advised Little Cayman and Cayman Brac motorists to drive more slowly and cautiously, particularly during the spring and summer rock iguana breeding season when



*Sister Islands rock iguana. Photo: National Trust for the Cayman Islands*

the large reptiles tend to venture into the roads more often. But despite the calls for caution, around 40 iguanas are being hit and killed each year on Little Cayman’s roads.

As the road surfaces are improved on the island, driving speeds have increased and roadkill rates are far beyond what the rock iguana population can sustain. On top of that, the feral cat predation on the endemic species has been a long-term, serious concern throughout the Cayman Islands, affecting not only the indigenous rock iguanas, but also nesting seabirds, such as the brown and red-footed boobies.

All over the world, feral cats are posing a problem to endemic and native species of various animals and birds. They have been named among the world’s 100 worst invasive species by the Invasive Species Specialist Group. In one 2011 study, scientists found that feral cats are causing 14% of the modern-era bird, amphibian and mammal extinctions in island countries.



*A feral cat preys upon a young rock iguana on Little Cayman.  
Photo: National Trust for the Cayman Islands*

Here in Cayman, addressing the problem has proved troublesome as charities have taken legal action against government to prevent

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## South Georgia's new £11million wharf facilities completed in 108 days

Surrounded by spectacular scenery, dominated by mountains and glaciers, construction has completed on a new £11million wharf and slipway to serve the King Edward Point Research Station (KEP), in South Georgia Island.

The new wharf was commissioned by the UK Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI). The sub-Antarctic research station is owned by the GSGSSI and operated on their behalf by British Antarctic Survey (BAS).

The structure was completed on time for Shackleton Day, a special bank holiday in South Georgia. The commemoration marks explorer Ernest Shackleton's historic 1300 km journey in an open-top boat across the Southern Ocean from Antarctica to South Georgia.

Over two years of meticulous planning meant the wharf was completed in just 108 days – three weeks ahead of schedule. This is a remarkable achievement, as constructing on this sub-Antarctic island means that every nut and bolt had to be sent in a single shipment from the UK. The nearest builders' merchant is thousands of miles away.

The new wharf represents an essential upgrade to the station's infrastructure. It enhances both safety and efficiency of ship operations for the new polar research vessel, the *RRS Sir David Attenborough*, and the GSGSSI fisheries patrol vessel, the *MV Pharos SG*. The expanded capability will ensure that BAS and GSGSSI are able to continue their world-leading interdisciplinary research and monitoring, vital to the sustainable management of this globally important wildlife haven.

Protecting the environment was a key consideration at every stage of the planning and construction process. To minimize the footprint on the seabed, the new wharf was designed as an extension to the pre-existing wharf. A new retaining wall wraps around the former structure. The new mooring platform enables much larger vessels to dock and brings resilience against sudden weather changes. The refined layout maintains safe berthing and mooring operations for vessels up to 130 meters in length. Slipway upgrades facilitate the launching of

the cull of feral cats. In 2018, the Cayman Islands Humane Society and Feline Friends sought and secured an injunction against a planned cull. It is not clear where that legal action stands now but the government's hands remain tied.

Burton said this legal case has hamstrung the efforts of both the environment and agriculture ministries to resolve the threat these cats pose to the unique and now extremely threatened indigenous species.

According to the results of the survey, which was completed at the end of last year, the population is in serious jeopardy. The survey data put the estimate of the mean number of rock iguanas at 1,786 (averaged between a low of 1,474 and a high of 2,098) according to the latest survey, showing a decline of over 39% in the numbers since the 2015 count. But it also represents a worrying 54% decline from 2014, when the estimated population was 3,847.

DoE scientists are planning the department's first distance sampling survey of the Cayman Brac rock iguana population later this year. But the same key threats are prevalent on all three of Cayman Islands.

small boats in a wide variety of tidal conditions.

As Technical Advisor to BAS, Ramboll provided the initial concept design and was onsite to supervise the construction, while BAM developed the detailed designs and constructed the new facility. Turner & Townsend also provided cost management for the project.

To limit weather delay, the team developed innovative solutions such as a bespoke conveyor to backfill the new mooring platform from the shore. The construction also necessitated the close collaboration of a wide range of experts, including a specialist dive team from Marine Civil Solutions; they inspected the seabed, removed obstructions and placed precast concrete slabs and burning sheet piles underwater.

Joe Corner, Project Manager at British Antarctic Survey said: "I am really proud to be involved in managing this project, and of everyone in the team who worked so hard to create this facility. With just a single summer season to complete the full works under challenging environmental conditions, meticulous planning and execution was required; the breeding cycle of native wildlife restricted the start date to January. With support from the UK, Holland and the Falklands Islands, the team developed detailed environmental management plans and applied innovative solutions to the challenges faced."

Alan Roper, Site Supervisor at Ramboll said: "Like most remote projects, this unique setting brings extremes in the way of engineering challenges. Working collaboratively with the



Government of South Georgia, project team and the research station's science and operation staff, we were able to deliver the project successfully, minimising disruption to local wildlife and the everyday operations at the station."

Daan Aldenberg, Project Manager at BAM said: "The KEP project has been a true collaboration between the employer, GSGSSI, scientists, designers and the construction team. I'd like to acknowledge my thanks to all involved, for the support and commitment they have provided, in working together to achieve the successful construction of this infrastructure.

Everyone should take great satisfaction in completing these works safely, ahead of programme and within budget, whilst ensuring there was no impact on the environment of this unique remote location."

Helen Havercroft, CEO of the Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands said: "Whilst I had complete trust in the onsite construction team, I had real concerns about the unpredictable weather and gusting winds that can suddenly sweep in. The safety of personnel on site was a constant worry.

"It is a credit to the skills and determination of the project management and construction teams that we are able to announce

the completion of the wharf ahead of schedule."

The new wharf and slipway will be used to operate Government harbour patrol boats, rigid inflatable hull boats, scientific survey boats and workboats. As well as accommodating the *RRS Sir David Attenborough*, the wharf will be compatible with the GSGSSI fishery patrol vessel, *MV Pharos SG*, and Royal Navy ships *HMS Protector* and *HMS Forth*.

*The above article is based on a statement by the British Antarctic Survey. One conservationist who has worked in the South Atlantic commented that this is great for South Georgia, and we welcome it. If this can be done for South Georgia, with no permanent inhabitants, we hope that something can be done soon for Tristan da Cunha, with several hundred permanent inhabitants. There, the tiny dock, which can accommodate only small boats but not ships, is often out of action and needs frequent repairs. If a larger and more reliable dock were available, this would allow more complete fisheries protection and conservation actions as well as a more reliable income from sustainable tourism, as tourists would have a much better chance of actually being able to land.*

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## Cayman Cruise Dock update July 2020

We reported in *Forum News 51* that the Cayman Government had declared that a referendum on the cruise dock development would be held on 19 December 2019.

A judicial review was sought by a member of the Cruise Port Referendum (CPR) campaign group, and supported by the National Trust for the Cayman Islands, to have the referendum postponed until all relevant information, including an updated environmental impact assessment, became available.

In January 2020, while the court hearings continued, an environmental assessment scoping update on the \$200 million cruise-berthing and cargo project was submitted to the Environmental Assessment Board (EAB). The Department of Environment Director, Gina Ebanks-Petrie, confirmed that she had received this document in her capacity as chair of the EAB. This was the first time since the department was removed from the steering committee for the cruise port project in 2018 that the experts at the DoE were able to be involved with the process. More information on this aspect can be found at <https://caymannewsservice.com/2020/01/cruise-scoping-update-given-eab/>

On 20 February 2020, the Grand Court ruled that the Constitution required the legislature to enact a "general law" governing the conduct of people-initiated referenda, rather than a specific law that it can tailor to suit its agenda in any particular referendum. This was hailed as a success for the Cruise Port Referendum Campaign and the National Trust for the Cayman Islands. However, the Government declared that they would appeal this ruling, on the legal question arising from the judgement – that the constitution requires a general framework law for the conduct of referenda, particularly people-initiated referenda.

On 16 April, the Premier, answering enquiries into the scheduling of their judicial appeal, stated that the port project was shelved and that the referendum would be a matter for the next administration. Elections are due in May 2021. The Government appeal started in the courts on 6 May.

The appeal decision was announced on 2 July, and was a disappointment for the CPR and the National Trust for the Cayman

Islands, as the court ruling in February was overturned. However, Mrs Shirley Roulstone, for CPR, said that the objectives of the legal action had largely been achieved. The main objectives of the CPR legal action were to:

- Ensure there would be a general framework law passed to govern the process for future referenda. The Attorney General's Chambers accepted in the course of the proceedings that they would do this, irrespective of the outcome of the appeal.
- Expose the inequality and unfairness of the process that the Government put in place to govern the petition process and referendum on the proposed cruise berthing process. That inequality and unfairness was exposed by these proceedings and acknowledged in the judgment of the Grand Court and the Court of Appeal.
- Ensure the referendum on the proposed cruise berthing project would not take place on the date originally proposed by Government, being 19 December 2019, which would have disenfranchised many voters.

Taken as a whole, the work of CPR Cayman, including bringing the legal challenge, has also had the effect of delaying progress on the port project. Were it not for these efforts, there is every chance that George Town Harbour might already have seen the start of construction work on the cruise berthing project and damage to the coral reefs.

Since the Cayman Cruise Port referendum campaign began, Covid-19 has stopped cruise ship activity, and it remains uncertain what the cruise industry future is.

The very positive outcome of this campaign is that Government has agreed to passing a framework law, the potential threat to the harbour has been temporarily halted and the CPR still has the right to press for a people's vote on this issue if the issue re-emerges.

## UKOTCF visit to TCI

Mike and Ann Pienkowski organised a self-funded trip to TCI in March, which would have been combined with a visit to Montserrat. Sadly, due to travel restrictions coming into force in Montserrat following exposure to Covid-19, this trip had to be cut short, after the TCI visit, cutting out Montserrat, although responses to some subsequent enquiries from Montserrat have been addressed remotely.

While in TCI, Mike and Ann were able to meet with Turks and Caicos National Museum personnel at both of this UKOTCF associate organisation's locations. They were able to check on the wise-water-use garden (created by some funding UKOTCF received from Royal Bank of Canada some time ago), which was going well. While on Grand Turk, they were able to check on the

trails recently refurbished jointly with the Museum and supported by a grant from the Governor's Office, as well as extend their long series of wetland bird counts.

They met with the fairly new Director of the Turks and Caicos National Trust, UKOTCF's longest standing associate organisation in TCI. Some interesting project ideas were discussed, particularly on rehabilitating the old trails and research/education centre on Middle Caicos.

Other meetings included with: the Director of the Department of Environment; associate organisation, Turks and Caicos Reef Fund; Dodley Prosper, a local guide and student; a former Department of Environment officer, now working as part of a whale watching guide company; and business owners in Provo and Salt Cay.



*Monitoring changes in wetlands in TCI. Black-necked stilts start feeding in the pre-dawn at their roosting pond at Wheeland, Providenciales during our visit (left). Unfortunately, most other wetland birds were no longer using these previously highly used pools because public services had misguidedly cleared natural vegetation along the whole of one side of the pond (centre). Particularly unfortunately, the site is the subject of a conservation management grant from Darwin Plus to RSPB. Happier news at the old salt-pans in central Grand Turk, where the effects of the pollution of a few years ago (which vastly reduced bird usage because most of their food animals had been killed) were at last wearing off. Wetland-bird numbers had built up again, including this belted kingfisher fishing successfully (right). Photos: Dr Mike Pienkowski*

## UKOTCF Database of UK Overseas Territory and Crown Dependency Projects (proposed, in progress or completed)

As reported in *Forum News 51*, participants in UKOTCF's Wider Caribbean Working Group meeting at the BirdsCaribbean conference in Guadeloupe in July 2019 had asked UKOTCF to increase accessibility of data-entry to its projects module on its online database. This has now been done.

### Background

UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum's regional Working Groups identified in 2019 the need for a means of both sharing the information in the outputs of projects and also collaborating to avoid the duplication of projects which seems to have increased in recent years with some bodies now controlling funds having little background knowledge. UKOTCF noted that it had, some years ago, developed a database system to fulfil this need. It had been well used, initially around the turn of the millennium and later provided a service to UK Government's former OTEP grants programme for UKOT conservation, which UKOTCF carried forward on a voluntary basis for some time into the Darwin Plus projects. However, its usage declined when an unintended consequence of changes in UK Government funding was increased competition (and confidentiality) between organisations and reduced co-operation between them. It is pleasing that some of the organisations involved have, despite this, seen again the advantages in collaboration. Such a system would also give others a chance to pool together if there are projects they want to do, but would be better served by collaborating with others. Accordingly, UKOTCF agreed to review the suitability of the database for

present needs.

To view the UKOTCF Projects Database, go to <http://www.ukotcf.org/infoDB/infoDBnewForm.cfm?appln=projects>. This page allows you to select the categories on which to search. Please note that the database contains projects data from various periods of time, depending on when partners decided to supply information. To select additional categories from each box, use Control-Click. Control-Click can be used also to deselect a selected item. Please note that, because of when this database was developed, it is best viewed on a computer and is not well suited to phones or tablets. Apart from this, the database does indeed seem to be useful for present needs.

The database was originally designed for data-entry by partners – indeed, 20 years ago, it was a pioneer in multi-access data-entry. However, the format is not familiar to more recent electronic data users. Therefore, in the first instance, UKOTCF officers will input data sent by users on a MS Word form (available at [https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/UKOTCF\\_Database\\_of\\_Projects\\_Form06.docx](https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/UKOTCF_Database_of_Projects_Form06.docx)) as email attachments to emails sent to [hello@ukotcf.org](mailto:hello@ukotcf.org). Please use a new blank copy of the form for each project and save the file named as the first part of the project name. We will review this, as data are received, to consider whether a return to direct entry is practicable. Please note that this work is currently not resourced, but UKOTCF volunteers will do their best to keep pace with any material sent on copies of the form.

# Prioritising management of established non-native species on Caribbean UKOTs

This article was written by Prof. Helen Elizabeth Roy, UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology.

Invasive alien species are identified as one of the main drivers of biodiversity loss worldwide. They are a particularly significant problem for the UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs) because they comprise mostly small, isolated islands and have high levels of rare and endemic biodiversity.

Professor Helen Roy, a co-chair of the IPBES Invasive alien species assessment, and Dr David Roy, both of the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, were among international experts taking part in workshops on two UKOTs in the Caribbean in January and February 2020.

Islands, such as the UKOTs in the Caribbean, are considered particularly vulnerable to the devastating consequences of biological invasions, which can lead to dramatic changes in biodiversity and ecosystems. I was part of a small team of experts, led by Olaf Booy and Jill Key from the Non-Native Species Secretariat, invited to Anguilla and the Turks & Caicos Islands (TCI), two of the Caribbean UKOTs, to prioritise management of some of the established invasive non-native species.

In both Anguilla and TCI, we were privileged to work with regional experts from government departments, the Anguilla National Trust, the Turks & Caicos National Trust, other NGOs and interest groups including representatives of the local farming community on Anguilla. We shared expertise through structured approaches to gather the necessary information to achieve the goals of the workshops.

Anguilla and TCI have many established invasive non-native species – some could be eradicated before becoming too problematic. Brazilian jasmine *Jasminum fluminense* a popular plant within hotel landscapes, has just begun to form small populations on Anguilla and eradication is considered possible. In TCI, this species has spread more extensively and eradication is unlikely to be feasible but the spread to currently uninvaded islands could be achieved.

Through our workshops, we identified the islands within the two UKOTs most at threat from the spread of invasive non-native species already established somewhere within the territory. We heard about the diverse ecology of the small islands and cays that form these UKOTs. Some are relatively inhospitable. Sombrero, part of Anguilla, is a rocky island which is home to many important seabird colonies. Invading small mammals pose a major threat to the breeding seabirds but many other invasive non-native species would not survive there. In contrast, Prickly Pear is an uninhabited island to the north of the main island of Anguilla and is rich in wildlife. Invasive ants could easily be introduced,

hitchhiking with day visitors, and would almost certainly establish with devastating consequences for the resident birds and reptiles.

The green iguana *Iguana iguana* is a major concern across the Caribbean. There are many endemic species of iguana across the Caribbean, and the green iguana, native to South America, threatens them through disease transmission, hybridisation and competition. In TCI, we visited Little Water Cay to observe the endemic rock iguana *Cyclura carinata*. There have been a few isolated sightings of the green iguana in recent months on TCI but it is not considered established. In Anguilla, the green iguana has established and there are concerns for the Lesser Antillean iguana *Iguana delicatissima* which is restricted in range to Anguilla and other islands within the Lesser Antilles.

These remote islands are unique. They are home to many species found nowhere else in the world. The threat of extreme weather events is always present but the resilience of the communities inhabiting these UKOTs is inspiring.

During our visit, we had the immense privilege of working alongside many people living on the territories – their commitment to protecting the incredible wildlife and habitats on these idyllic islands is simply exceptional. Their desire to share this knowledge will play a major part in reducing the threat posed by invasive non-native species. I am looking forward to continuing collaborations and seeing the next steps in this prioritisation process unfold.

## Visiting experts

Olaf Booy and Jill Key – Non-Native Species Secretariat, UK

Tim Adriaens – INBO, Belgium

Danielle Frohlich - SWCA Environmental Consultants, Hawaii

Wolfgang Rabitsch – Environment Agency, Austria

Trevor Renals – Environment Agency, UK

Peter Robertson – University of Newcastle, UK

David Roy – UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, UK

Helen Roy – UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, UK

Alan MacLeod – Defra, UK

Advising from the UK: overall project lead, Niall Moore - Non-Native Species Secretariat, UK

With thanks to the many experts on Anguilla and TCI who contributed so much to this work and made us so welcome within the UKOTs. Thank you to the Non-Native Species Secretariat for inviting me to participate in this exciting study and to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Conflict, Stability and Security Fund for making our visit possible. Finally thanks to Linda Raine at the Non-Native Species Secretariat for making all the complex travel arrangements.



Workshop teams at Anguilla (left) and TCI (right). Photos: CEH

# UK Government's Call for Evidence on funding in UKOTs

In March 2019, UK Government's Defra launched a Call for Evidence on the needs for future funding by UK Government of conservation in UKOTs. The Forum spent a significant amount of time working on a response to this and encouraging others also. Analysis of these responses was delayed initially by overload on hard-pressed UK officials due to Brexit, and then by the UK general election (as Government cannot publish materials in the lead-up to this). The summary of evidence received has now been published at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/safeguarding-the-environment-in-british-overseas-territories-call-for-evidence>. UKOTCF's evidence is at: [https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Defra\\_Call-for-evidence\\_UKOTCFresponse.pdf](https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Defra_Call-for-evidence_UKOTCFresponse.pdf).

[org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Defra\\_Call-for-evidence\\_UKOTCFresponse.pdf](https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Defra_Call-for-evidence_UKOTCFresponse.pdf).

It seems that, as a result of this exercise, UK Government has made several changes to the way it funds biodiversity conservation in the UKOTs. In May 2020, it announced 22 new projects to be funded under the Darwin scheme with funds of £5.2million (see Table below). There were also indications that Darwin Plus will have an annual budget of £10million from 2021, although the first reports of this give rise to some concerns as to how available much of this funding will be to the NGOs and territory bodies which have kept conservation going in the UKOTs through the

## Darwin Plus grants awarded in 2020 in Round 8 (applications in 2019): Awards coloured according to type of lead recipient:

UK government agency or university; UKOT government; Consultancy; UKOT NGO; UK NGO.

Ref	Project Name	Project Leader	Organisation	Territory	Darwin funds
DPLUS101	Fellow: Ioanna Angelidou	Helen Roy	CEH	Cyprus SBAs	£29,060.00
DPLUS102	Saving Tristan's only native tree and its associated unique buntings	Andy Schofield	RSPB	Tristan da Cunha	£306,653.00
DPLUS103	Saint Helena Climate Change and Drought Warning Network	Murray Henry/ Darren Duncan	Saint Helena Government/ Connect St Helena	St Helena	£298,337.00
DPLUS104	Conserving St Helena's endemic invertebrates through invasive invertebrate control	Tara-Jane Sutcliffe	St Helena National Trust	St Helena	£298,965.00
DPLUS105	Building capacity to make Montserrat a mountain chicken refuge	Mike Hudson	Durrell WCT	Montserrat	£265,923.00
DPLUS106	A Marine Turtle Action Plan for Montserrat	Nicola Weber	University of Exeter with Gov of Montserrat	Montserrat	£268,741.00
DPLUS107	Community supported multispecies invasive vertebrate control on St Helena	Tara-Jane Sutcliffe	St Helena National Trust	St Helena	£312,019.00
DPLUS108	Caribbean Overseas Territories Regional Natural Capital Accounting Programme	Jake Kuyer/ Ian Dickie	Eftec	Montserrat, Cayman Islands, BVI, Anguilla, TCI	£254,700.00
DPLUS109	Initiating monitoring support for the SGSSI-MPA Research and Monitoring Plan	Philip Trathan	BAS	SGSSI	£283,417.00
DPLUS110	Recognise, protect, restore: driving sound stewardship of Falklands peat wetlands	Andrew Stanworth	Falklands Conservation	FI	£265,889.00
DPLUS111	Building Resilient, Participatory Management of Marine Biodiversity in Hurricane-prone BVI	Peter Richardson/ Shannon Gore	Marine Conservation Society	BVI	£241,553.00
DPLUS112	Capacity building in fisheries evidence, networks and management (Virgin Islands)	Louise Rhoden	Cefas	BVI	£317,282.57
DPLUS113	CRACAB- Climate Resilience and Conservation of Ascension's Biodiversity	Diane Baum	Ascension Island Government	Ascension	£261,894.00
DPLUS114	Tropical Important Plant Areas and Important Plant Species in TCI	Martin Hamilton/ Michele Sanchez	RBG Kew	TCI	£304,743.00
DPLUS115	Unlocking Falkland Islands Marine Management: Key Biodiversity Areas for seabirds	Andrew Stanworth	Falklands Conservation	FI and all OTs	£79,130.00
DPLUS116	Falklands wetlands and aquatic habitats: baselines for monitoring future change	Tara Pelembe	SAERI	FI	£210,072.00
DPLUS117	Cayman Islands Coastal Education Guide	Dylan Skeffington/ Martin Keeley	Mangrove Action Project	Cayman Islands	£43,503.00
DPLUS118	BVI Amphibian Conservation Programme	Susan Zaluski	Jost Van Dykes BVI Preservation Society	BVI	£84,148.00
DPLUS119	Technical assistance programme for effective coastal- marine management in the TCI	Megan Tierney	JNCC	TCI	£324,297.00
DPLUS120	Spatial segregation and bycatch risk of seabirds at South Georgia	Victoria Warwick-Evans	BAS	SGSSI	£269,233.00
DPLUS121	Strengthening biosecurity to protect Turks & Caicos' Iguana Islands	Sarah Havery	RSPB	TCI	£299,603.23
DPLUS122	Biodiversity discovery and the future of South Georgia's seaweed habitats	Juliet Brodie	NHM	SGSSI	£245,841.00

lean years of UK Government funding.

At present, the Darwin Initiative is divided into several elements. The Main fund aims to “assist countries with rich biodiversity but poor financial resources to meet their objectives under the Convention on Biological Diversity.” Darwin Plus is the dedicated funding scheme for biodiversity in the UKOTs. With the announcement of a call for Round 27 of the Main Darwin awards this month, there have been several changes.

First, from this round, proposals relating to those UKOTs (Montserrat, St Helena, Tristan da Cunha and Pitcairn) eligible Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) will apply through Darwin Main. All other UKOTs will continue to apply through Darwin Plus (the next round is expected to open later shortly). The guidance does not appear to address the handling of any proposals which relate to both categories of UKOTs.

Second, there is an opportunity to build partnerships between organisations that are working towards a full Darwin bid. This is under the Darwin Partnerships Project Funding. More information can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/darwin-initiative-partnership-projects>. This seems to resemble what used to be called scoping projects, but seems to suggest that it in some way matches the model of the EU in its LIFE funding which offered operating grants to consortiums in order to work up bids, although there are some differences to the model for this suggested by UKOTCF.

Finally, a call for projects between £1m and £3m under the Darwin Extra scheme may open in October 2020. A separate guidance will be issued if this takes place. However, they note that no further funding is guaranteed at this stage and Defra reserves the right not to open any such call. The conditions of such grants seems likely to exclude most of the bodies which have been active in UKOT conservation in the past.

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## EAC inquiry on invasive species – final report published: “a citizen army” and “resources for UKOTs needed”

The Environmental Audit Committee launched an inquiry in 2019 to consider the impact and threat to biosecurity from invasive species. The report has now been published and is awaiting a Government response see: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cmselect/cmenvaud/88/88.pdf>.

In the report, the Chair called for a “citizens army” to deal with the threat from invasive species. It also included recommendations for greater support to the UKOTs.

The report notes UKOTCF’s input particularly on the question of funding. Some excerpts:

*“Catherine Wensink from the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum highlighted some of the key challenges UKOTs face: Most of the territories are small islands with small*

*populations and small economies, which often lack the technical expertise to make decisions on forward planning in terms of invasive species. There are also resource issues with funding.”*

*“Catherine Wensink told us that “the Overseas Territories are not able to access many funding streams because of their unique relationship with the UK, so they have very few funds to access. Big projects involved in invasive species cost a lot of money”. Also: “We heard that given their unique status, the OTs have relied heavily on EU funds. EU LIFE funding provides a ‘significant contribution’ to reducing the threat of invasive species in OTs. EU BEST is another funding stream for environment projects in the OTs, which operates on a competitive bidding basis. Catherine Wensink was concerned that it ‘has a question mark over it now’.”*

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## Jersey International Centre for Advanced Studies

In 2019, Jersey International Centre for Advanced Studies (JICAS) welcomed their first cohort of postgraduate students.

JICAS is “an independent, non-profit institution that promotes Jersey as an international focal point for research relating to islands and island communities”. They aim to “design a unique programme of niche postgraduate degrees in Island Studies as an embryonic University of Jersey, not only bringing the cultural and economic benefits of a university to Jersey, but also exporting knowledge and expertise around the world.” They believe that Jersey is “set to become the key global academic hub in all aspects of islands and island life.” They host a “consortium of internationally renowned academics, intellectuals and politicians to help raise the intellectual capital of the island of Jersey and elevate the island’s standing within the global academic community.”

Their first course is an MSc in Biodiversity and Conservation, with a focus on islands, and is accredited by the University of Exeter. Other courses in development include Climate Change and Island Archaeology

Working together with UKOTCF, the Marine Conservation Society and SAERI, they have forged partnerships with UKOT governments and non-government organisations, many of which are UKOTCF member and associate organisations. This is both to encourage uptake of the MSc courses, and to develop partnerships and research projects and to develop course modules for future courses. JICAS aims to support students from the UKOTs and, in doing so, has been able to offer a reduction in fees of 50%. In addition, several bursaries have been developed with partners

in the UKOTs for students to carry out important research. In addition, Forum associate organisation, the Turks and Caicos National Museum, has been involved in a summer short course on island archaeology. Their website is at [www.jicas.ac.je](http://www.jicas.ac.je).



Photos of BVI from JICAS’s notice of an MSc project placement opening at H. Lavity Stoutt Community College, BVI

# UKOTCF needs your help

UKOTCF's only focus is on helping achieve effective conservation, environmental education and sustainability in UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies. This has a great advantage in that we always follow the priorities of the territories for conservation, rather than having to decide whether their priorities or those from other places, such as domestic Britain, need our attention.

It also has disadvantages, too. Organisations with wider involvement have income streams relating to those activities, potentially giving some buffering at times when funding for UKOT conservation is limited. As well as focussing on particular projects requested by territories, much of UKOTCF's work is coordinating across territories and pushing for their interests in with UK Government. Indeed, the UK Government funds for UKOT conservation (Environment Fund for Overseas Territories, Overseas Territories Environment Programme, and the Darwin Initiative's earmarking some funding for UKOTs) all resulted in part from UKOTCF working with UK Government and Parliament. The same applies in relation to European Union institutions in the setting up of BEST, following years of lobbying by UKOTCF and its equivalent French and Netherlands equivalent umbrella bodies for their territories. All this coordinating work is not amenable to fund-raising, as most funders like to focus on local issues and particular projects.

We know our work is valued. For example, two comments we received from UKOTs this month were: "Thanks so very much for keeping us all informed about what's happening across the territories" and "Great meeting... it shows the value of UKOTCF and its WCWG to bring folk together to tackle issues."

This increased current difficulty in raising funds for non-profit organisations providing wide support for others was brought home to us early this year. We were shocked when *Arkive* closed down due to lack of funding. This made available still and moving images of wildlife provided by photographers, and was much used by many organisations, including IUCN's Red-List (which now lacks images). This loss of funding was despite the high profile of *Arkive* and its support by names such as Sir David Attenborough.

UKOTCF tries to keep its costs very low. Personnel work from home, absorbing office costs (thanks to understanding spouses!). Council members and advisers are unpaid. The Chairman works full-time for UKOTCF but is unpaid for this core work, and his wife donates almost as much. Currently, four others routinely donate large amounts of time to UKOTCF core roles, and many others donate time to projects. In addition, our small paid personnel donate extra unpaid time.

However, some things still need paying for. This was well recognised by UK Government officials in the early part of this millennium, when they recognised that UKOTCF provided support for UKOT conservation that UK Government might be expected to provide (and is done by some other states with overseas territories) but which it could not and still cannot, despite some increase by its agencies in work in the UKOTs.

However, at the time of the financial crisis, in 2009, UK Government's average annual funding support for UKOT conservation paid via UKOTCF fell by 76%, and never recovered. Although it is said that this financial crisis is now over, this funding has not been restored – and, in fact fell further, so that the decline

in UK Government support via UKOTCF for UKOT conservation has now declined by an average of 100%: zero in current years.

Of course, UKOTCF has looked, and continues to look, for other sources of funding – but there are limited opportunities in respect of funding for conservation in UKOTs and CDs. We are grateful for a very generous annual donation from a Council member which helped hugely in four recent years before that had to end.

## How you can help

Clearly, if you have links with funding institutions, an introduction would be welcome! Please contact Catherine Wensink ([cwensink@ukotcf.org](mailto:cwensink@ukotcf.org)) or Mike Pienkowski ([m@pienkowski.org](mailto:m@pienkowski.org)). However, even if you do not, there are several ways in which you could help:

### *Friends of the UK Overseas Territories*

Friends was initiated some 20 years ago, at the request of individuals who wished to contribute to UKOTCF's work. If you would like to join, there is a form on the back of this issue of *Forum News* – but most people will find it easier to do this online at <https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/become-a-friend-of-the-ukots/>. The minimum annual contribution remained unchanged at £15 for some 20 years, but larger contributions are welcome, and existing Friends may like to consider an increase. Please note that, if you are a UK tax-payer, UKOTCF can increase the value of your contribution by 25% by reclaiming the tax you have already paid as Gift Aid; the forms include an option for this. There is also a version for corporate supporters.

### *Other donations*

Other donations are probably most easily made via our website (<https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/donate/>) or contact Catherine (see above).

### *Donate while you shop - at no cost to yourself*

UKOTCF is a charity registered with [easyfundraising.com](https://www.easypfundraising.com). This means that, if you buy from a wide range of traders, a small contribution (at no cost to you) is made to UKOTCF. All you need to do is to register UKOTCF as your chosen charity at [easyfundraising.org.uk/ukotcf](https://www.easypfundraising.com/ukotcf). Then, when you are shopping, start at [easyfundraising.com](https://www.easypfundraising.com) and select your trader through that site, rather than going directly to the trader's site. There are various settings that you can adjust as to whether or not you want to receive emails from [easyfundraising.com](https://www.easypfundraising.com)

Amazon is no longer in that scheme, but has its own, *Amazon Smile*. On your first visit to [smile.amazon.co.uk](https://smile.amazon.co.uk) you need to select UKOTCF to receive donations from eligible purchases. Then, when Amazon recognises you, it will offer to transfer you to Amazon Smile when you enter their site. The same choices and prices are on Amazon Smile.



*Reddish egret in its characteristic hunting poses hunts fish in Red Salina, central Grand Turk, March 2020.*

*Photos: Dr Mike Pienkowski*



# Friends of the UK Overseas Territories

You can also subscribe online at <https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/become-a-friend-of-the-ukots/>

## Four good reasons to become a Friend:

1. You know how valuable and vulnerable are the environmental treasures held in the UK Overseas Territories.
2. You understand that the only way to guarantee their protection is to build local institutions and create environmental awareness in the countries where they are found.
3. You care about what is happening in the UK Overseas Territories and want to be kept up to date by regular copies of *Forum News* and the Forum's *Annual Report*.
4. You understand that the UK Overseas Territories are part of Britain, and therefore are not eligible for most international grant sources - but neither are they eligible for most domestic British ones, so help with fundraising is essential.

EITHER: I wish to become a Friend of the UK Overseas Territories at the annual support level:  £20  £50  £100  £.....

OR: I wish my company to be a Corporate Friend of the UK Overseas Territories at annual level:  £200  £500  £1,000  £.....

Name of individual Friend or contact person for Corporate Friend: .....

Company name of Corporate Friend (if relevant) : .....

Address: .....

Telephone: ..... Fax: ..... Email: .....

**Please complete one of options 1 to 4 below. UK taxpayers are requested to complete section 5 also; this will allow UKOTCF to benefit from the tax you have paid, at no additional cost to you.**

1. **UK cheque:**  I enclose my UK cheque made out to UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum for this amount.

2. **Standing Order form:** To: The Manager, Bank Name: ..... Branch Sort-code .....

Bank address: ..... Bank postcode: .....

Please pay: UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum at NatWest Bank, 9 Bank Court, Hemel Hempstead HP1 1FB Sort-code: 60-10-33 Account number 48226858 the sum of £..... now and a similar sum thereafter on this date annually.

My account number: ..... Name .....

Address: ..... Postcode: .....

Signature: ..... Date: .....

3. **Standing Order instructions sent:** I confirm that I have sent instructions directly to my bank for a standing order as per option 2 above.

4. **Credit or charge card:** Please charge the amount indicated above to my card now \*and thereafter on this date annually. [Delete the words after \* if you wish to make only a single payment] (If you are based in another country, your card company will handle the exchange and include the equivalent in your own currency in your regular statement.)

American Express,  Delta,  JCB,  MasterCard,  Solo,  Switch/Maestro,  Visa Expiry date: / (month/year)

Card number:    Security number (3 digits, or 4 for Amex) .....

If used: Start date: / If used: Issue number: ..... Signature: ..... Date: .....

5. **UK taxpayers** are requested to sign the following section to allow UKOTCF to recover tax paid:

I want this charity to treat all donations that I make from the date of this declaration until I notify you otherwise as Gift Aid donations.

Signature: ..... Date: .....

**Send to UKOTCF, Icknield Court, Back Street, Wendover, Bucks. HP22 6EB, UK;  
if using options 3 or 4, you can fax to +44 2080 207217**

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