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CHAGOS ENVIRONMENT NETWORK

www.protectchagos.org

MEMBERS

The Chagos Conservation Trust
The Linnean Society of London
Marine Conservation Society
Pew Environment Group
Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew
The Royal Society
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
The Zoological Society of London
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THE CASE FOR THE CHAGOS PROTECTED AREA



Photos: Anne and Charles Sheppard

- The Chagos Islands, an archipelago of 55 tropical islands near the centre of the Indian Ocean, total 55 square kilometres (21 square miles) of land.
- As part of the British Indian Ocean Territory, the islands and their surrounding waters form a vast oceanic Environmental Preservation and Protection Zone/Fisheries Conservation and Management Zone of 544,000 square kilometres (210,000 square miles)—an area twice the size of the UK’s land surface.
- The waters around the Chagos Islands are by far the richest marine ecosystem under UK jurisdiction. They are a special and rare place: relatively unpolluted and undisturbed reefs and ocean teeming with life. We have the opportunity to keep it this way.

The oceans play a critical role in sustaining life. However, the unrestrained toll of human activity—pollution, overfishing and carbon emissions, to name the obvious—is forcing fundamental change of a global scale upon the world’s seas.

Fortunately, a few areas remain largely unspoilt. The Chagos Islands and their surrounding waters are one such place. They exist in a relatively undisturbed part of the Indian Ocean, which elsewhere is seriously depleted and damaged. Because of their remoteness, the islands have some of the cleanest seas in the world. These waters contain up to half of the healthy reefs in the Indian Ocean, making them one of the most ecologically sound reef systems on the planet. Teeming with life, they enrich and replenish the whole ocean with ecological services on which millions of people rely.

The Chagos Protected Area would shelter these islands, reefs and ocean ecosystems, conserving marine life there and ultimately the sustainability of the Indian Ocean.

Why Protect the Chagos?

Marine life almost everywhere—including fish, invertebrates, mammals, seabirds and turtles—is suffering massive losses as a result of over-exploitation, bycatch and pollution. These threats, combined with the effects of ocean acidification from rising carbon dioxide emissions, put the survival of many marine species in doubt. But in protecting the Chagos, we have an opportunity to establish a different future, creating a protected area where marine ecosystems could thrive and recover to the benefit of ourselves and future generations.

The gemstone of the Chagos is its remarkable coral reefs. Remote and relatively undisturbed, these waters are some of the cleanest in the world, giving coral an exceptional resilience to ocean warming that elsewhere has killed many tropical reefs. While climate change and ocean acidification affect all reefs, the absence of pollution, fishing, shoreline construction and direct human impacts has enabled the Chagos’ corals to remain highly resilient, recovering quickly from the effects of climate change compared to reefs elsewhere. These reefs account for about half of those still thriving in the Indian Ocean. If coral is to remain the foundation of ocean ecosystems, not only must carbon dioxide emissions be reduced, but the best remaining reefs, such as those in the Chagos, must also be protected.

In addition to corals, the waters surrounding the Chagos contain reef fish found nowhere else in the world, along with at least 60 Threatened Species on the Red List of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. Here, dwindling populations of turtles and hundreds of thousands of breeding seabirds find a haven.

These waters also include an exceptional diversity of deepwater habitats formed by the separation of tectonic plates, fracture zones, sea-floor spreading, seamounts and ridges, 6,000-metre-deep trenches (about four miles) and vast, deep-sea plains. Although these deepwater habitats have not been investigated or mapped in detail, research elsewhere has shown a close connection between a physically diverse sea-floor and high diversity among species.

Threats Facing the Chagos Islands

The remoteness of the Chagos offers some protection from extractive activities, yet legal and illegal fishing have had an adverse impact. There is considerable poaching, for example, of turtles and other marine life. Sharks, which play a vital role in balancing the food web of tropical reefs, have suffered sharp declines from illegal fishing for their fins and as bycatch in legal fisheries. Sea cucumbers, which cleanse sand, are also poached to feed Asian markets.

There is no question that the loss of tens or hundreds of thousands of large ocean predators such as tuna and sharks from the Chagos seas will have a major impact on the wealth and diversity of life in the archipelago, but the exact nature and extent is unknown. Beyond the harm to populations of species themselves, there may be indirect consequences to the function of the ocean bed, reefs and island ecosystems.

A terrestrial threat lies in the long-term rat infestation on islands previously inhabited by humans. These rodents damage bird colonies, vegetation and the nesting sites of turtles.

Finally, there is potential damage from mineral extraction from the seabed. The deep waters around the Chagos are likely to be rich in minerals, and they may become of commercial interest.

The primary purpose of the Chagos Protected Area would be to keep and preserve an important and healthy ecosystem—in its entirety—from degradation and to maintain it as a reference site for future scientific research and study.

Such an area could have an added benefit: an increase in the populations of commercial fish beyond the borders of the reserve. To be certain the Chagos is preserved as a fully functioning and undamaged ecosystem, we must stop removing tens of thousands of fish, halt wasteful bycatch, (more than 100,000 non-targeted fish—and probably other species as well—are caught before being thrown back into the sea, many of them dead or dying) and allow healthy and diverse populations of species to perform their vital roles in this ecosystem.

Recent UK and International Efforts To Protect the Chagos Islands

Successive UK governments, both Labour and Conservative, have supported conservation of the Chagos. They have committed to treat the whole area as a World Heritage site. In 2003, the UK government established an Environmental Protection and Preservation Zone under Article 75 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. This zone extends 200 nautical miles from the islands. On eastern Diego Garcia, the largest island of the Chagos and the site of a UK–US military facility, Britain has designated the very large lagoon and the eastern arm of the atoll and seaward reefs as a “wetland of international importance” under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (the Ramsar Convention). These and other laudable efforts can be made much more effective by declaring the entire ecosystem a fully protected area.



Photo: Anne and Charles Sheppard

Creating a Chagos Protected Area

As a protected area, the Chagos Islands could sustain the conditions necessary to support an important global reference site for research on topics such as acidification of seas, coral deaths, sea-level rise, fish stock decline and climate change. Safeguarding the populations of fish and other marine species in a no-take protected area would also contribute to food security and sustainable livelihoods throughout the wider Indian Ocean by aiding in the recovery of its drastically reduced fish stocks.

Currently, less than 1 percent of the world's oceans are truly safe from extractive uses. Designating a Chagos protected area encompassing the archipelago and its Environmental Preservation and Protection Zone/ Fisheries Conservation and Management Zone would create the largest marine protected area in the world, achieving significant gains on global and UK targets for marine environmental protection.



Photo: Anne and Charles Sheppard

Benefits of Protecting the Chagos

There are eight compelling benefits to be gained from declaring the Chagos Islands a protected area:

Ecosystem function: A safe refuge and breeding site for migratory and reef fish, marine mammals, birds, turtles, corals and other marine life, enabling them to play their full part in a vibrant ecosystem.

Global scientific value: Most attempts at reef restoration elsewhere in the world have failed and continue to fail partly because we no longer know what a healthy system looks like. The Chagos can help recover this knowledge.

Coral survival: Corals may become the first global ecosystem to collapse and disappear because of climate change. Maintaining the Chagos' pure and unpolluted waters would make an important contribution to the survival of coral reefs while nations work to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and lessen the effects of ocean acidification and warming.

Coral science: We may have only limited time and decreasing opportunities to understand how a "natural" tropical reef system behaves, in a world where such systems have been largely lost. The reefs of the Chagos show the highest densities of rejuvenating corals known anywhere, demonstrating 10 to 100 times more resilience than most locations that suffer pollution and overfishing. Discovering the conditions that allow such resilience is not only crucial to reef conservation over the entire tropical world, but is also critical to sustainable development and ecosystem-based management approaches to conserve the world's oceans.

Improved climate monitoring: A protected Chagos could fill an enormous gap in global climate monitoring of atmospheric gasses and ocean acidity across the Indian Ocean. This would ultimately assist in separating the effects of climate change from alterations in habitation. Currently, this is not possible.

Improved oceanic monitoring: Understanding the changes to ocean systems caused by pollution and over-exploitation of fisheries is only possible if these effects can be compared with an unpolluted and unexploited fishery. Such studies are difficult given the scarcity of unspoiled areas. A Chagos protected area could provide a vital "control site" on a global scale.

Food security and sustainable livelihoods: Preliminary research indicates the Chagos provides a crucial stepping-stone and reservoir for many species of marine life in the Indian Ocean. Its protection would reduce the regional loss of biodiversity and protein productivity, and it would also facilitate the dispersal of larval fish and coral species from the islands' ecosystem, replenishing populations depleted elsewhere.

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Important UK contributions to global environmental targets: Protecting the Chagos would contribute to a number of globally agreed targets, such as halting the decline of biodiversity by 2010, establishing a representative marine protection network by 2012 and restoring depleted fish stocks by 2015, where possible.

Support for the Protection of the Chagos Islands

The Chagos Environment Network (CEN) is a collaboration of nine leading conservation and scientific organisations seeking to protect the rich biodiversity of the Chagos Islands and its surrounding waters. CEN members are: The Chagos Conservation Trust; The Linnean Society of London; The Marine Conservation Society; The Pew Environment Group; The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; The Royal Society; The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; The Zoological Society of London; and Professor Charles Sheppard of the University of Warwick (on behalf of many of the visiting scientists).

Because of the unquestioned importance of these ecosystems, a growing number of scientists and organisations support protection of the Chagos. It is set to end 12 February 2010.

The UK government has opened a three-month public consultation about conservation management of the Chagos Islands and its surrounding waters (www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/21153320/mpa-consultation-101109).

Whilst the members of the Chagos Environment Network are fully aware of the legal challenges brought by Chagossian groups against the UK government, we believe these islands need conservation now and that this will be beneficial under all future scenarios. We believe that the Chagos Islands and their surrounding waters should be protected today to secure the well-being of their existing resources and the diversity of marine life. That is why we are urging that the Chagos Islands and their surrounding waters be designated as a no-take marine reserve "without prejudice" to the outcome of the legal process. This designation would mean that the Chagos Islands and their resources would remain healthy no matter what the future holds and that conservation arrangements could be modified if necessary in the light of new circumstances.

Among the three options under consideration, CEN urges support for Option I: "Declare a full no-take marine reserve for the whole of the territorial waters and Environmental Preservation and Protection Zone (EPPZ)/Fisheries Conservation and Management Zone (FCMZ)." This option would provide the best means to preserve one of Earth's last unspoiled tropical island, reef and deep-sea ecosystems. Only this option would guarantee full protection for the archipelago, its reefs, lagoons and waters. Complete protection also would underpin its value as an important reference site for a wide range of ecological and climate studies, as well as its continued benefits to humans in the future.

This action would establish the largest marine reserve in the world, a conservation legacy almost unrivalled in scale and significance. It would also establish the United Kingdom as a world leader in marine conservation for the benefit of all nations for the foreseeable future.

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Photos: Anne and Charles Sheppard