

Chagos Environment Network Welcomes the UK Government's Public Consultation on Protecting the Marine Biodiversity of the Chagos Islands

November 10, 2009

LONDON — The Chagos Environment Network (CEN) welcomed the UK government's announcement today of a three-month public consultation on extending conservation protections for the Chagos Islands and its surrounding waters.

As part of the British Indian Ocean Territory, the Chagos Islands and its surrounding waters comprise about 55 islands and spread over 544,000 square kilometres -- an area twice the size of the UK's land surface. Due to their remoteness, the islands have some of the cleanest seas in the world and contain as much as half of the Indian Ocean's remaining healthy reefs, making it one of the most ecologically-sound reef systems on the planet.

"The Trust welcomes this initiative and consultation," said William Marsden, chairman of the Chagos Conservation Trust, which is a member of the CEN. "Britain has a rare opportunity to protect this marvellous, yet fragile, natural environment, by creating a conservation area comparable in importance with the Galapagos Islands or the Great Barrier Reef and of great benefit for people. We hope it will be very widely supported."

The creation of a Chagos Protected Area, which is currently under consideration by the UK government, would prohibit extractive activities, such as fishing. Its establishment would be an important contribution to the UK's international conservation commitments, which include halting the decline of biodiversity by 2010, establishing global marine protection networks by 2012 and restoring depleted fish stocks by 2015.

The waters around the Chagos Islands, within its 200 mile oceanic exclusive economic zone (EEZ), contain the world's largest coral atoll, at least 1,000 species of fish and endemic corals and reef fish found nowhere else in the world. At least 60 species listed in the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Endangered Species live in these waters. The islands provide a safe haven for dwindling populations of turtles and hundreds of thousands of breeding sea birds, as well as an exceptional diversity of deepwater habitats, such as trenches reaching approximately 6,000 metres in depth. While these habitats have not been explored or mapped in detail, scientific research has shown a close linkage between great physical sea floor diversity and high species diversity.

"The Chagos Islands are a very special and rare place," said Alistair Gammell with the Pew Environment Group, which is a member of the CEN. "Establishing a large-scale protected area for the Chagos Islands and its waters would be a conservation legacy almost unrivalled in scale and significance anywhere in the world's oceans. The UK has the unique opportunity to protect an entire ecosystem and its marine life."

Marine reserves provide a safe refuge for migratory fish, marine mammals, turtles and other marine life, allowing them to play their vital part in the operation of the ecosystem. For the Chagos Islands, such an area would also provide an important global reference site for research in crucial areas such as acidification of seas, coral deaths, sea level rise, fish stock decline and climate change. Food security and sustainable livelihoods throughout the Indian Ocean can also be enhanced through marine reserves by aiding in the recovery of its drastically reduced fish stocks.

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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 Warwick University. For more information, please visit: www.globaloceanlegacy.org/chagos/ or www.chagos-trust.org

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Background Note:

- Additional information about the UK government's announcement of a three-month public consultation about the future conservation management of the Chagos Islands and its surrounding waters is available here: <http://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 cannot predict the future. We believe that the Chagos Islands and their surrounding waters should be protected for the resources and values they have today. 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.