

Chagos News

*The Periodical Newsletter of the
Friends of the Chagos*

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EDITORIAL

AGM

The Annual General Meeting was a great success and a full report is in this News. There are two significant changes in the Committee.

Nigel Wells

Nigel was British Representative from July 1980 to March 1982 and used to refer to Diego Garcia as 'his island'. When the idea of Friends of Chagos was first mooted, Nigel immediately became an enthusiastic and valuable supporter, taking on that most onerous task of initial Treasurer. He has spent 10 years as Treasurer undertaking all the work and responsibilities of starting and running accounts including those for the very successful 1996 Chagos Expedition. He has given greatly of his time and been put to personal expense travelling from his home in Hampshire to committee meetings in London. All this while he has been doing a full time job and attending to his family aside from other charitable activities. It was a great comfort to me as first Chairman to know that we had an honest, trustworthy man running our accounts. I am most grateful to Nigel for all his support and personal friendship.

Nigel Wenban-Smith

Nigel has been our Chairman for 6 years. Nigel is highly intelligent with a wide ranging mind. As a former BIOT Commissioner he knew all about Chagos.

Most importantly he has used his diplomatic skills not only in his relations with former and current colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office but also with other organisations such as the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum. He wrote a valuable 'way ahead' paper and has broadened the scope of the Friends with flair and imagination. He has also with great tact and patience made and maintained contact with a wide variety of people from politicians and lawyers to historians and Chagossians. He has made an enormous contribution to the success of the Friends and I am glad to report that he is remaining on the committee where his wit and wisdom will continue to be appreciated.

10 Years

Friends of Chagos have now completed 10 successful years. More has been achieved than I ever dared expect when I first dreamt up the idea. That success and those achievements are entirely due to the many people who have given their time, skills and resources. They are all volunteers whether on the Committee or helping in many other ways. We warmly welcome our new Chairman, William Marsden, sometime Commissioner, BIOT and more recently HM Ambassador, Buenos Aires, and our new Treasurer, Genevieve Edis who will lead us to yet further success.

John Topp

AGM 2002

Item 1. Minutes of Annual General Meeting held on 4 October 2001.

The minutes of the Annual General Meeting previously distributed, copies of which were made available at the meeting, were approved *nem con*.

Item 2. Treasurer's report.

The Chairman tabled the Treasurer's annual report noting that the Association was solvent and had enjoyed a larger than usual income due to the successful production and sales of the CD by Cable and Wireless in Diego Garcia.

It was pointed out by the Chairman that the accounts ended at the end of August 2002 to facilitate the handover of the accounts to the new Treasurer. The annual accounts will in future end at the end of August in order for them to be checked and amended where necessary in good time for presentation at the Annual General Meeting in early October, something that had not always been possible in the past.

The Chairman thanked Nigel Wells, not only for keeping the accounts for so long, but also for extending his duties for a year longer than he wished while a new Treasurer was recruited.

The Chairman then warmly welcomed Genevieve Edis as the new Honorary Treasurer.

Item 3. Chairman's report.

The Chairman gave his annual report a copy of which is below.

Item 4. Election of Committee Members and Officers

In accordance with the Memorandum, and Articles of Association one third of the Executive Committee Members need to stand; Paul Pearce-Kelly, Mark Spalding, Nigel Wells and Nigel Wenban-Smith therefore stood down. The Secretary had received nominations for the election of Genevieve Edis, Paul Pearce-Kelly, William Marsden, Mark Spalding and Nigel Wenban-Smith. There being no other nominations and there being sufficient vacancies on the Committee, there was no need for a ballot and these five were duly elected.

Again in accordance with the Articles of Association the Chairman, Treasurer and Secretary need to be elected each year. The Secretary had received nominations to elect William Marsden as Chairman, Genevieve Edis as Treasurer and Simon Hughes as Secretary. There being no other nominations they were duly elected.

The full Executive Committee now consists of: William Marsden, Chairman, Genevieve Edis, Treasurer, Geoff Hilton, Richard Martin, Mark Spalding, Paul Pearce-Kelly, Charles Sheppard, John Topp, Nigel Wenban-Smith, Simon Hughes, Secretary.

Item 5. Commissioner BIOT's report

The Commissioner tabled his annual report, which is below.

Item 6. Other business

- a. **Structure of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.** Iain Orr reported on a change in the bureaucratic structure of the FCO in that representation at the International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI) would now be led by John Roberts of the Marine and Waterways Division rather than by DEFRA.
- b. **Feral cats.** Paul Heaton enquired about the extermination of feral cats in the Chagos and John Topp was able to report that there remained on Diego Garcia about five cats and the American authorities were vigorously pursuing them with a view to their death.
- c. **Rats.** In answer to a question about rat extermination, the Chairman pointed out that the Association was trying to mount a project to exterminate the rats on Eagle Island, one of the larger islands roughly in the middle of the uninhabited part of the Grand Chagos Bank. The difficulty of raising the money needed was noted. It was also noted that it was important to point out the biodiversity dividends when applying for biodiversity funds whereas economic dividends should be highlighted when applying for developmental funds. From the FCO's point of view the Friends of the Chagos needed

to realise that there were other Overseas Territories with competing demands in this field. The BIOT Commissioner (Alan Huckle) observed that this matter would be covered in the Conservation Management Plan being worked on at this moment.

Item 7. Date of next Annual General Meeting.

It was proposed that Tuesday 7 October 2003 be provisionally set for the next Annual General Meeting.

Chairman's Report for 2002

It has been a good year for the Association. We have, I believe, shown that we are relevant. By focussing on and extending the available knowledge of the Chagos ecology we have been able to comment usefully on developments affecting the Archipelago's environment. In this connection, it is a pleasure to report on the constructive relationship we currently enjoy with both Team BIOT and Team BIO in the Foreign Office. The issue of a special set of BIOT stamps to mark today's tenth birthday of this Association is the best possible indicator of that relationship.

2002 has also been a busy year. In highlighting the main points, I'll stick to our seven traditional objectives. These emerged from the strategy we devised for ourselves and reported to the 1995 AGM. Last year I described the headings as getting a bit dog-eared. I can now let you know that William Marsden has been looking afresh at our strategy and we expect to have completed our review pretty soon, once we have absorbed ideas emerging this evening, whether from this AGM or from the symposium downstairs. We are keen to have as many new ideas as possible, so please let us have them. Back then to 2002: –

1. **Monitoring the environment.** Scarcely sat down after the last AGMN, when the new Commissioner undertook to see to drafting of a Conservation Management Plan for the archipelago. We are looking forward to a positive progress report on this. We understand that the Americans are putting in hand a new version of their Natural Resources Management Plan for DG – hopefully this time in an accessible format.
2. **Promoting scientific visits.** Nothing undertaken by FOTC or under our auspices this year, but a good deal of work done externally, by Charles Sheppard, as we shall learn later this evening. Also some scientific investigations were made as part of the second stage of the BIOT Government's Feasibility Study into resettlement. Copies of the Executive Summary are available. The summary obviously does not tell the whole story; for example, the full report includes useful ideas about the requirements for an environmental monitoring programme, which will be needed whether or not resettlement happens. No doubt other elements in the Report will require follow-up or more detailed examination as the Management Plan is put into effect.

In parenthesis, it may be useful to restate what most of you already know about the Association's position on resettlement. We neither support nor oppose it. We consider that the issue is one for governments to decide. What does concern us is that the environmental considerations - which are critical to this valuable and vulnerable ecosystem - be given their full weight, both in reaching policy decisions and in relation to any specific projects that may be put forward. It is good to see that members of Chagossian organisations, whom we welcome here today, are also concerned with the environmental challenges which pre-occupy us.

3. **Links with other students of reef ecology.** This year, thanks largely to initiatives by Mark Spalding, we have entered into arrangements for sharing information with conservationist bodies in India, Mauritius and Seychelles. This is over and above the continuing contacts with individual scientists in specialist forums.

4. **Monitoring the research carried out in other parts of the Indian Ocean.** As usual, our resources don't allow for the Association as such to do much in this line, but we shall surely learn more from the links with other Associations I've just referred to.
5. **Promoting and undertaking historical research.** This year, in addition to the fascinating contributions of Donald Taylor, we have continued the process of obtaining first hand accounts from various individuals who have lived or worked in the Chagos Islands. We hope that this effort will lead to a new range of contributions to Chagos News.
6. **Expansion of membership.** I am glad to report that our membership remains over one hundred, 108 to be precise, with 3 Honorary Life members and 18 Complimentary members. But we would still like to have more. I hope you will tell all your friends what excellent value for money your modest subscription represents.
7. **Promotion of education about the Chagos.** This activity proceeds steadily, not least through the subjects tackled in Chagos News. Our booklets continue to sell. Our CDs, Charles Sheppard's brilliant brainchild, enjoy continued success. Both booklets and CDs are on sale tonight. Our symposium this evening will also, we hope, contribute significantly to extending knowledge of the Chagos to a wider audience.

THE FUTURE

So much for the year just past. Turning to the future, we continue to work on projects already planned, for example to rehabilitate Eagle Island's indigenous fauna and flora and to have the Chagos reefs displayed electronically in Bristol. We will persevere with our efforts in the wider and more important objective of having the Great Chagos Bank designated a Ramsar Site, even if formal World Heritage status only shimmers in the distance. And we will do all we can to ensure that the Conservation Management Plan now in gestation proves a basis for sustained conservation activity and research; not a few of the problems faced by the BIOT Government in protecting the environment in the places where it is most at risk could be eased if there were a permanent scientific presence. It is not indeed too soon to start planning for a further major expedition in 2006, ten years after the last one. I very much hope that such an expedition will receive the same whole-hearted government support that Charles Sheppard benefited from last time round. Let us see what the Prime Minister's recent commitment to increased spending on biodiversity means in practice!

ENVOI

Now it is time to sit down. Also time to step down. John Topp, our first Chairman, set an excellent example by doing so after five years and I've snatched an extra year because it was such fun. Not only fun though; the longer I've been involved, the more clear I am that the Chagos Archipelago really is an unique repository of uncontaminated marine biodiversity, which it would be madness to destroy by carelessness. Let us see what is done to act on the fine words of the Johannesburg Summit concerning the importance of the marine environment. But it is high time you had a fresh mind to face the next set of challenges. I know you will all give my successor the same support I have enjoyed. It merely remains therefore to thank all of you and to invite you to approve this report of your Committee's work. Then we can proceed to elections, under the chairmanship of someone who is not standing down or up.

ANNUAL ENVIRONMENTAL SUMMARY

A Report delivered at the AGM by Alan Huckle, Commissioner BIOT

Chagos Conservation Management Plan

The BIOT Government has commissioned Dr Charles Sheppard and Dr Mark Spalding to write a desktop management plan for the territory. Work is well under way and the final report is expected to be available by the end of the year. It will summarise existing policy and regulations for the protection of the environment and examine the need for changes bearing in mind the impact of climate change and the limited facilities available.

CITES Legislation

CITES implementing legislation, regulating trade in endangered species, was enacted in the territory on 21 December 2001 (Ordinance No. 3 of 2001). This will help us protect CITES listed species such as certain corals and clams as well as the marine turtles. In time, other species may be added to the CITES appendices. As advisory bodies we have appointed the Joint Nature Conservation Committee as Scientific Authority for fauna and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew for flora. DEFRA still assists with the issue of CITES permits.

Expedition of the Odyssey

The scientific research vessel RV Odyssey from organisation The Ocean Alliance, based in Lincoln, USA, was granted a licence to conduct research on sperm whales in BIOT waters for 6 weeks in the summer of 2002. The scientists recorded high cetacean abundance and species diversity. Apart from sperm whales, they encountered bottlenose, striped, pan-tropical spotted and Risso's dolphins as well as pilot whales, orcas and 2 unidentified species from the rarely seen Beaked whale genus, Mesoplodon. Their exploits are recorded on the Odyssey website at www.pbs.org/odyssey. The voyage continues in the Indian Ocean as they explore the waters of Seychelles, the Maldives, Mauritius and Sri Lanka.

Turtles

In March 2002, the UK signed the Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation and Management of Marine Turtles and their habitats of the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia.

The DG turtle population continues to be healthy with the island education programme improving awareness. November continues to be turtle awareness month. Highlights usually include a turtle trivia quiz and a 41 mile clean-up of the beaches to rid them of non-biodegradable waste such as plastics and nets brought in by the ocean current which pose risks and potential harm to nesting turtles. We are hoping that activities will reawaken interest in the turtle survey work. A proposal to erect a viewing platform at Turtle Cove is currently being considered to protect turtles and immature sharks from over-eager observers.

Brown Tree Snake

Due to an increase in flights from Guam, care needs to be taken to reduce the risk of accidental importation of this invasive species. An island wide education programme has raised awareness and the seriousness of the issue was raised with the USAF Authorities at our annual talks. They

agreed to maintain rigorous searches of aircraft. A possible sighting of a snake of unidentified species on Diego Garcia was reported in late July and action was taken to catch and eliminate the creature. Despite the deployment of Jack Russel dogs from Guam, intensive searches failed to track it down. The small area of shrubbery where the snake was last spotted was burnt in an attempt to capture it, but no remains were detected. A specialist, flown in to assist, doubts whether this was a brown tree snake. No further sightings have been reported since then, but this episode has served as a reminder to all to maintain stringent checks. The US authorities are now considering building a snake-proof wall to encompass the apron areas. A paragraph has been added to the US pilots' guidebook advising them to safeguard against importation of the snake. Ms Terry Moore, who has been in charge of operating the cat eradication programme, is to attend a 2 week course in Guam and will become a focal point for brown tree snakes on the island.

Feral cats

The eradication programme, which has been extended for another year, has continued to be successful. Dr Lawrence Pinter of the US department of Agriculture is currently on the island to monitor the situation. 175 cats have been removed to date and at present there are believed to be no more than 5 mature cats remaining, one of which is a spayed female. There have been no reported sightings of any kittens. Moves have been taken to encourage people to catch the last few which are proving elusive. The contract workers in particular have been targeted as they are believed to be protecting the animals.

Rats

Due to the continued presence of cats, the rat bait eradication programme on Diego Garcia has still not started. It will start immediately on completion of the cat eradication. Controls are still made using box traps and the downtown area is relatively free of vermin. Tent City and the villages, however, continue to suffer from infestation. A study of the lagoon mouth islands showed a healthy ecology overall with no evidence of rats.

Fisheries

There was only a small uptake of inshore fishing licences during the season. Two Mauritian flagged vessels were licensed for 150 days, spending 113 days fishing within the FCMZ and taking a combined total of 222.5 tonnes of reef species.

Longliner activity remained steady with vessels primarily catching yellow fin tuna. Catches outside the main season have been sporadic and this, combined with long spells of poor weather, meant that many of these vessels frequently moved in and out of the FCMZ.

Offshore, purse seine vessels also took good catches of yellow fin tuna at the start of the year and early indications are that licence applications from this sector will be high again for the main tuna migration.

There continues to be a high level of fishing vessels transiting BIOT waters to fish on the banks of the high seas. This year, no transgressions have been noted, but the discovery of a long line on the Pitt Bank and a similar marker buoy found in the Salomon Atoll indicates that some illegal practices continue and heightens the need for constant vigilance. STOP PRESS - An Indonesian vessel was arrested by the Senior Fisheries Protection Officer on 30/9 for fishing illegally in BIOT waters. The court case is due to be heard next week.

The BIOT Government continues to participate in all relevant meetings of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission and the British Seychelles Fisheries Commission.

Recreational Fishery

Data continues to be collected from the Mako, Ocean Master and LCM sectors of the recreational fishery at Diego Garcia. Returns have been of an acceptable standard due to the efforts of the marina staff. Shore based angling activities have not been so closely monitored due to the constraints on the Senior Fisheries Protection Officer's time, but personal observation suggests that these fishing activities are of low impact. Returns from visiting vessels have been disappointing. The SFPO and the BIOT Civil Administration are working closely together to educate would-be anglers. The volunteer environmental officer has placed fish identification guides into the log sheets at the issue point in the hope of increasing returns. The shark and billfish catch and release policy established on Diego Garcia continues to be successful.

DG Museum

The popularity of the museum continues. The new museum curator has been keen to make improvements and has been rotating displays to keep the museum fresh. New displays include the skull of what is believed to be a male Cuvier's Beaked Whale which was discovered by yachtsmen on Takamaka Island and reported to the fisheries protection vessel "Pacific Marlin". The skull was identified by the scientists with the scientific expedition "Voyage of the Odyssey" who have taken a DNA sample from its tooth to a renowned expert in the species. The Odyssey team has also provided excellent information sheets on the find.

NRMP Meetings

Natural Resource Management Meetings continue to take place at regular intervals and are taken very seriously. The Diego Garcia facility has won a US Navy award for their efforts in conserving the flora and fauna of the island in competition with two other such facilities. The 1997 US Natural Resources Management Plan was being updated and we have asked the Americans if it can be made public. It will include a survey of the dredged reef area. A new waste disposal site has been approved; the incinerator is to be upgraded and a composting facility provided. Oil spill recovery continues, albeit more slowly than would be hoped; however, the US side is considering the introduction of portable bio-slurping devices.

Conservation Legislation

The BIOT Administration is currently considering strengthening our existing conservation legislation giving stronger powers of arrest and stiffer punishments for offenders.

Guidance for Visitors

We have recently updated the notice giving guidance to visitors on conservation matters.

BIOT ADMINISTRATION

Editors Note. The draft CCMP was given to the BIOT Administration in October after review by several people. It's final version could be available within a month of receiving feedback from the BIOT reviewers.

CHAGOS SEA SLUGS

By

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Sea slugs may not have the most appealing of names but they are certainly among the most attractive of all marine creatures. Many are flamboyantly coloured, often with brilliant stripes or other startling patterns. In the same way as land slugs are snails that have lost their shells, so sea slugs are shell-less marine snails. Instead of using shells for protection, many contain toxic or noxious chemicals. Their bright contrasting colours act as a warning to deter would-be predators.

Despite their wonderful colours, which make them a favourite with underwater photographers, sea slugs are easily overlooked. They are not especially common and most are rather small (fully grown members of many species being less than 3 cm long). Nevertheless, they are ecologically significant, being major predators of sponges, corals and other bottom dwelling animals and plants.

Little is known about the sea slugs of Chagos. There has been only very limited research before, as part of larger studies of shelled molluscs. During the 1996 Chagos Expedition, my wife Sue and I studied these fascinating creatures, collecting some 128 individuals, and photographing many more, of over 50 different species. A scientific report of 41 of these species has now been published:

Yonow N., R.C. Anderson and S.G. Buttress (2002) Opisthobranch molluscs from the Chagos Archipelago, Central Indian Ocean. Journal of Natural History, 36(7): 831-882.

Several of the species we collected turned out to be very rare, and consequently difficult to identify. Four have been identified only to genus so far, and may still prove to be new to science. Several species of the family Phyllidiidae are not dealt in this paper, but will be described in a later review of the family. Despite the difficulties, several outstanding taxonomic problems have been resolved.

In addition, the first analysis of biogeographic affinities of the Chagos sea slug fauna was attempted. In our sample of species, 59% have an Indo-West Pacific distribution, while 25% are confined to the western Indian Ocean. We still have a lot to learn about the sea slugs of Chagos, but a start has been made on which future students of these intriguing creatures can build.

We are most grateful to the organizers of the 1996 Chagos Expedition, for facilitating our participation and for providing a grant to Dr. Nathalie Yonow to work up our specimens. Sincere thanks also to all the Expedition members who assisted with collection of specimens, especially Frank Stewart, Mark Spalding and Alastair Jolliffe.

"Editor's note: Some will probably be featured in a forthcoming set of BIOT postage stamps."

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