

Illustration: www.juniperblue.com

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
Professor Charles Sheppard, University of Warwick

THE CHAGOS PROTECTED AREA: A Unique Scientific and Conservation Opportunity for the UK

Few opportunities exist today for scientists to observe and monitor environmental change in an area that is relatively undisturbed by human impacts. A striking exception is the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean and their surrounding waters.

The Chagos Islands are a globally significant site for understanding biodiversity and marine ecosystems. The waters around these islands provide an uncontaminated, largely unexploited reference site for a wide range of ecological studies. This is one of the very few places in the tropics where the effects of climate change can be isolated from the consequences of pollution, overfishing and other effects of resource use, along with coastal development. Research here can also fill a large gap in global climate-monitoring programmes. Establishing a large and well-protected marine reserve in the Chagos therefore would be an important contribution by the United Kingdom, to which the islands belong, to global ocean and climate change science.

Creating a large Chagos Protected Area to safeguard these relatively unspoiled shallow and deepwater ecosystems and their species would also provide an invaluable reference site for reef and fisheries research. As such, it would be of great value to the nations of the Indian Ocean, other tropical areas and indeed the world. It would provide both a legacy site in an ocean subjected elsewhere to substantial environmental degradation and would provide a flourishing refuge and nursery area for species that are in decline in other parts of the Indian Ocean.

Location of the Chagos Islands

The Chagos Islands form an archipelago of 55 tropical islands located in the Central Indian Ocean. The islands total approximately 55 square kilometres (21 square miles) and are spread over an Environmental Preservation and Protection Zone/Fisheries Conservation and Management Zone of 544,000 square kilometres (210,000 square miles). This is an area about twice the size of the United Kingdom. The islands and surrounding waters are also known as the British Indian Ocean Territory.

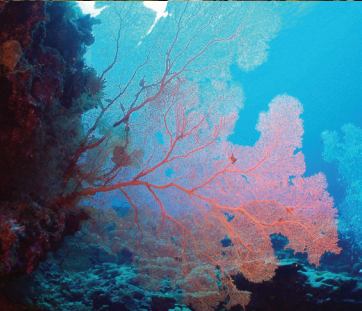
Condition and Value of the Chagos

About 80 percent of coral reefs in the Indian Ocean are destroyed or damaged to varying degrees. Of the remainder, about half are in the Chagos, and the rest are scattered in small patches across territorial waters of several other countries.

The islands and reefs of the Chagos are also surrounded by an exceptional diversity of deepwater habitats. These areas have been poorly mapped, but research elsewhere has shown that such a physically diverse seafloor strongly indicates a high diversity of marine species. Full protection for this area would ensure increased safeguards for ocean species, enabling them to play their natural role in and around the Chagos ecosystem without threat from fishing or other extractive industries.

A Chagos Protected Area in the Central Indian Ocean could provide important baseline information on atmospheric gases, seawater acidity and marine pollutants, sea-level rise and biodiversity, especially of coral reefs.

- While most islands in the Chagos Archipelago were heavily modified for coconut production, they contain 10 globally Important Bird Areas, according to Birdlife International.



Photos: Anne and Charles Sheppard

- The Chagos reefs retain a high resilience to the effects of climate change, evidenced by the exceptionally high rate of coral recovery and recruitment following several recent global warming events; Chagos reefs have recovered from all of these, whereas those in most other areas of the Indian Ocean have not and remain degraded.
- As one of the most important remaining large areas of coral reef in the Indian Ocean, the archipelago performs invaluable services as a nursery and refuge for many species, especially those exploited elsewhere.
- The waters surrounding the Chagos Islands present a unique opportunity to strengthen conservation of vital resources in a region with a rapidly growing human population. Protection of the Chagos would also reduce the regional loss of biodiversity and promote the sustainability of regional fisheries.
- The surrounding waters of the Chagos Islands are already a valuable reference site for scientific work and for remediation of the world's reefs, providing a baseline for understanding a healthy ecosystem in a world where such information is all but lost.
- The Chagos reefs are one of very few locations where effects of climate change can be measured without being confounded by localised and direct human influences such as shoreline alterations, sewage, industrial pollution and extensive overfishing.
- Pollutant concentrations in plants, animals and seawater of the Chagos have been analysed in several locations. For all chemicals assessed, these waters appear to be the cleanest so far reported in the world.
- Previously the global monitoring network for carbon dioxide and ocean acidity has lacked information from the Indian Ocean. Improved scientific information from the Chagos can fill this need.

Support for Protection of the Chagos Islands

The Chagos Environment Network (CEN), a collaboration of nine leading conservation and scientific organisations, seeks 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; Marine Conservation Society; Pew Environment Group; The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; The Royal Society; Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; Zoological Society of London; and Professor Charles Sheppard of the University of Warwick (on behalf of many scientists conducting research in the Chagos).

Because of the unquestioned importance of the Chagos ecosystems, a growing number of scientists and organisations support the protection of these islands and surrounding ocean.

The UK government opened a three-month public consultation to end 12 February 2010, about the future conservation management of the Chagos Islands and its neighboring waters (see www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/21153320/mpa-consultation-101109).

Of the three options for protection, 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 provides the best means to preserve one of the Earth's last remaining unspoiled tropical ecosystems of islands, reefs and deep sea. Complete protection also underpins the Chagos' value as an important reference site for a wide range of ecological and climate studies, as well as its continued benefits to humans into the future.

Contact: CEN Secretary Simon Hughes,
29 Champion Hill, London SE5 8AL
info@protectchagos.org