

Chagos News

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EDITORIAL

Chagos News reports on the past, present and future of the Chagos Archipelago to inform Friends and others today and historians in the future. Chagos News provides a permanent record in the British Library under the designated ISSN number at the top of this page. Where is your contribution to Chagos News? Your visit, your memory, your impression is of interest to other people now and in the future. We are all footprints in the sand and unless a record is made, knowledge is lost for ever. Please send your contribution, whether short anecdote or longer article to johntopp@btopenworld.com

NEXT ISSUE

We are preparing a special Spring issue of Chagos News to reflect on the possible populating of the Salomon and Perhos Banhos atolls in the north of the Chagos. We have no political views. We do have a charitable

responsibility to educate. We hope this special issue will stimulate discussion on the future for Chagos and its unique environmental importance. The contract for the second series of studies examining the feasibility of populating the northern atolls has been let and consultants are in the field. We hope the Government will publish the results in the summer. Meanwhile the Commissioner has signed, together with Baroness Amos, the FCO Minister, the Environment Charter for the British Indian Ocean Territory. The Commissioner has also undertaken to complete the development of an action management plan for the environment of the whole archipelago and its conservation during his term of office.

John Topp

AN EARLY VISIT BY A LICHENOLOGIST TO DIEGO GARCIA

Mark Seaward

In 1884, the Rev.F.R.M.Wilson paid a very short visit to Diego Garcia; his account of this is published in *The Victorian Naturalist* under the title “An hour on a coral island - by a student of lichenology” and was based on a paper he read before the Field Naturalists’ Club of Victoria on 10 December 1888. Unfortunately, I was unaware of the existence of this article when I prepared my lichenological papers based on the collections I made during the 1996 Chagos Expedition. Although Wilson’s visit provides only a few tentative names to generic level, it should be acknowledged that he, not I, was the first lichenologist to set foot on the archipelago.

Francis Robert Muter Wilson was born on 15 March 1832 at Low Waters, near Hamilton, Scotland. He studied at Edinburgh University and the Free College of Divinity in Edinburgh, after which he was licensed to preach in Scotland; however, he chose to offer his services in the colonies, sailing to Australia in 1857. He accepted a call to the Presbyterian Church in Camperdown where he was inducted and ordained. In 1877 he became the Minister of Kew Church near Melbourne. Wilson was hampered by ill health throughout his life, and in 1883 he was allowed to take nine months’ leave of absence, when he returned to Scotland. On the advice of a friend there he took up lichenology, and it was therefore at this early stage of his new field of study that he viewed the flora of Diego Garcia on 16 October 1884 during a stopover by the Orient Line steamer to take on coals.

The following extracts have been gleaned from *The Victorian Naturalist* article, with my textual annotations in squared brackets.

“Alongside the ship is a boat which belongs to one of the white men, an Englishman, living on the island. Some of the passengers wish to get on shore and they are crowding about the gangway. Two of us wish to explore the island botanically. I wish to see what it has in the way of lichens. My companion, a Victorian clergyman and member of this club, takes special interest in mosses; but he does not expect much in that line. [He was right in this respect, since although mosses are often abundant on the Chagos islands, the diversity is very low. It would be interesting to know who is being referred to, if he collected any mosses, and if so, where they are now located.]

A motley crew we are: three young Roman Catholic priests, two Presbyterian ministers - no longer young, a rollicking Irishman, who is an inn-keeper in Australia; one or two wild young Englishmen, with a fowling-piece among them; two Victorian musicians, and a few others, of whose nationalities and occupations I know nothing. The Irishman takes an oar; but after catching crabs several times and fouling the oars occasionally, he is deposed, and one of the priests is promoted to his place. The oars are in rather better hands; but the passengers are excited and restless. Fortunately the water is comparatively smooth. When we get about half a mile from the ship, and see the land so apparently far off, say a mile, and the waves pretty high, I begin to think

that, if I had known what an unsailorly and careless lot we were, I would have perhaps — but here we are, and in due course we get safely to land.

The shore is composed of broken and water-worn pieces of coral of various sorts; and, where we land, it slopes up to about 4ft. or 5ft. high. Bushes are growing close to the water's edge, and trees of several kinds rise beyond them. I leap on shore. As I look round I feel my ignorance very deeply. Not only the species, but the very families of some of the plants are quite strange to me. It is all as unlike Victorian vegetation as it can be. Instead of the narrow, drooping frondage of Australia, the leaves here are large, broad, and umbrageous [shade-giving]. The majority of the trees are cocoanut [*sic.*]. I step forward to them, and am soon in a deep shade, which is very pleasant after rowing under the tropical sun. The green tinge which is cast upon everything by the light coming through the cocoanut [*sic.*] leaves is remarkable and very refreshing after the glare of the open sea.

But I am in a hurry to study the vegetation, for I have only an hour on the island. I gather a few cocoanuts, and a few flowers, some of them remarkable and interesting. Among them I gladly recognize the well-known form of the convolvulus [*Ipomoea*]; but the leaves are new to me, and the seeds are very large and very hard. Lichens, however, are what I am after. And here they are! What a beautiful one on that tree — the colour a splendid greenish blue, the shape circular, and about 6 in. in diameter. How regularly the narrow divisions of the thallus are arranged! And the black apothecia scattered round the centre add to the beauty of the plant. It is evidently a *Physcia* [This description fits several taxa, but most probably *Physcia solediosa*]. I select one or two smaller specimens, and, taking out my knife, cut off the lichens along with the very thick bark of the tree, and wrap them up in newspaper, with which I came plentifully supplied [It would be interesting to know what became of these and other collections he made on the island — see below.] I come out of the deep shade and find another, apparently the same *Physcia* [perhaps another species, or even another genus, eg. *Dirinaria* or *Pyxine*], it is white, doubtless from the action of the sun. However, I cannot stop to examine closely. Hah! what is it that gives such vivid colours to the stems of these cocoanut [*sic.*] trees? — yellow and orange, rich brown and snowy white. [These orange and brown colorations were almost certainly due to *Pyrenula ochraceoflava*.] Lichens, I see; and apparently *Verrucarias*. [No, but another pyrenocarpous species are frequent.] Here are some *Graphidea* [several *Graphina*, *Graphis*, *Opegrapha* and *Phaeographis* spp. are present on the island]; and there are some other forms new to me. I get excited, I collect largely of each kind, pushing on through the grove of cocoanuts, but keeping my eye on the direction I am going; for I have not been a traveller in the Australian bush without learning prudence. My carefulness, however, is vety much thrown away; for I soon come to the other side of the island, which seems to be no more than half or three-quarters of a mile across at this part.

It seems to be characteristic of the phanerogamous plants growing here that the seeds are in every case, so far as I have seen, defended by a thick episperm, sometimes hard and glossy and sometimes tough and stringy. They are thus well suited to float on the sea from one shore to another. And this is the only apparent means of their transportation; for there are very few, if any, frugivorous birds on the island. Those young Englishmen have evidently not found many birds, for I have scarcely heard a shot from their fowling-piece; and it is very likely that the report or two which I have

heard was not from their shooting at a bird, for I guess that, failing a bird, they would shoot at any mark, just for the pleasure of shooting.

The hour has flown by far too rapidly, and with regret I return to the ship, leaving many species of lichen ungathered, and a most interesting botanical field unexplored.”

In this paper, Wilson also comments, often inaccurately, on large [i.e. coconut] crabs, hermit crabs, the suitability of coconuts for growth on coral islands, coral, coral soils, ants, Malagasy labourers, and pumice (which he attributes to the volcanic eruption of Krakatoa the previous year). Although of only slight scientific importance, this paper contains some interesting observations, and should his lichen collections from Diego Garcia ever come to light, then they would certainly add to its value.

When Wilson returned to Australia he added considerably to our lichenological knowledge through his work and publications, not only on the flora of Australia, but also that of Fiji, New Hebrides, New Caledonia and Kerguelen, describing many taxa new to science. He died in Melbourne on 18 February 1902. His main lichen collection was donated to the National Herbarium of Victoria, Melbourne, but unfortunately the bulk of it, sent on loan to Messina University, Sicily, was lost in transit at sea or landed at a wrong port —perhaps his Diego Garcia specimens were also lost at this time? However, some of his material is still to be found at Melbourne and a large collection (c. 20,000 specimens) of his is in the National Herbarium of New South Wales, Sydney; other Wilson material, some of it unnamed, is scattered throughout the world, as he corresponded widely with leading lichenologists, particularly Johannes Müller Argoviensis in Geneva. One day, we may be fortunate in finding the treasures, he so carefully wrapped in newspaper that captured his imagination.

I am most grateful to Dr Patrick McCarthy for drawing my attention to Wilson’s article, to Dr Patrick Armstrong who obtained a copy for me, and to Dr Kathleen Ralston for biographical information in advance of her paper on Wilson to be published later this year.

Mark Seaward is Professor of Environmental Biology at Bradford University. He was also a member of the 1996 Chagos Archipelago Expedition, co-author with John Topp of *Plants of Chagos* published by Friends of Chagos and co-Editor, with Charles Sheppard, of the *Ecology of Chagos* published by the Linnean Society of London.

Peter Lewis has been relieved as BIOT Commissioner’s Representative (or Britrep as the post is often called), Royal Navy Liaison Officer, Diego Garcia and Commanding Officer, Naval Party 1002. He offers some reflections on his tour.

REFLECTIONS PETER LEWIS

Nostalgia isn't what it was and 4 months and a war since I left, the memories of my tenure as BRITREP now have a somewhat surreal shape. I keep in touch of course, like a separated parent, and most of this readership will understand how difficult it is to cast off such an experience. My little brush with paradise is indelible and I have yet to accept that I shall probably never go back.

Stuart Watt's "haul down" article last August outlined the main areas of the environmental agenda and I would like to think that my team managed to make progress on some of those topics, and added a few of our own. We sailors, part time diplomats and enthusiastic amateur ecologists pass through and leave our little marks but it is the extraordinary Linda Corpus and her team that make the real difference, and deserve huge credit. I am pleased to report that thanks to their efforts, awareness of environmental issues is high, underpinned by educational initiatives such "Earth Month", Turtle Buddy and so on. The memory of people from every part of the community digging holes for the "I planted a tree on DG" event will stay with me. Thank you Linda, Nestor and the team for your patience in dealing with yet another part timer.

Highlights, there were a few: Campaign against topiaried ironwoods is now part of DG folk law and you won't find a single one. A failed trial to girdle the rest. Some 200 acres of land returned to natural vegetation, whatever that turns out to be. Unfinished projects to perpetuate coconut crabs in those areas without any and I never did pin down the three species of bird of prey spotted between November and February. Where did they come from, does anyone know. The red footed booby survey for the RSPB, which clearly shows that the colony is increasing. The final solution on the cat front, but not quite, hardly a rat to be seen in the north west and a consequential rapid increase in ground/low nesting birds. Especially my all time favourites, the fairy terns.

My visits to the pristine outer islands reinforced my view that their preservation is of such world environmental importance, that their future must be put beyond the political and social issues that currently threaten them. On a more down to earth note, the majority of people that visit the islands in yachts (note my political correctness) are sensitive to the environment. Good on them. However, the selfishness and arrogance of some that clearly don't care have disappointed me. I can only hope that the sensible majority helps "police" the others. A life ban for those that break the rules would seem reasonable.

No doubt priorities have changed since that dreadful day in September and my successor, Adam Peters, will have his hands full of things other than coconut crabs. Under such circumstances, environmental issues can become relegated but perhaps, when things have settled down, the importance of our fragile little paradise will remain in sharp focus and attract the resources required to pay nature the rent.

Man hath all which Nature hath, but more
And in that More lies all his hopes of good
Mathew Arnold

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Nigel Wenban-Smith prefaced and concluded his remarks with comments on the relationship between the Association and the governments of UK and BIOT, which had been a major theme of the Committee's work during the year. The Court decision to invalidate the 1971 ban on the return of the Ilois had led to increased parliamentary interest, to a second round of feasibility studies on the practicability of resettlement and, seemingly, to a blight on implementation of previously given environmental commitments. In particular, the proposed designation of the greater part of BIOT as a Ramsar site had been reduced to the actual designation of part of Diego Garcia alone. He hoped that there would be increased management of that area, including eradication of rats, once the American scheme to deal with feral cats had been completed. More generally, he hoped that the BIOT Government would turn its long-standing pledge to treat the Territory no less carefully than places actually nominated as World Heritage Sites into an overall plan for managing its ecological heritage. Welcoming the new Commissioner, Alan Huckle, he noted that his responsibilities included the care of 2% of the world's reefs, mainly accounted for by BIOT.

Turning to the seven traditional objectives of the association's work, Nigel made the following main points:-

Monitoring the Environment

The BIOT Government had agreed to fund an assessment of the effects of the 1998 coral bleaching event by Charles Sheppard and Mark Spalding. The executive summary of their findings had already been printed in Chagos News, but nothing was known of the government's response. On the other hand, the terms of reference for the new feasibility studies included a requirement to design a monitoring programme for periodic or continuous assessment of the environmental conditions of the islands and waters to 40m deep.

Promoting Scientific Visits

Apart from lobbying for Charles' and Mark's survey, the Association had pursued its project to prepare for the eradication of eagle Island's rats, but was held up in securing a suitable vessel for the expedition. The same problem had affected Dr Chas Anderson's plan to survey the cetacean populations in Chagos waters.

Links with other students of reef ecology; monitoring others' work

Many contacts were maintained, mostly by Charles and Mark, whose pioneering work in Chagos had contributed to the growing recognition of this area's importance. The World Atlas of Coral Reefs, edited by Mark, had just been launched and served to demonstrate this point. The UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum, with which the Association continued to work closely, helped extend understanding of the Chagos; its rapidly developing web site (www.ukoftc.org) was becoming increasingly useful as a source of information, including information about the Chagos supplied by John Topp.

Promoting and undertaking Historical Research

Recent issues of Chagos News bore witness to Dr Donald Taylor's interest and insights; and there was more to come.

Expansion of the Membership

Our current membership was a little over a hundred and we hoped that growing awareness would lead to further growth. All members could assist this expansion. The Committee were seeking to attract Ilois participation, though these efforts had yet to bear fruit.

Promotion of Education about the Chagos

Sales of Charles Sheppard's excellent CD picture library were thriving, thanks to the promotional efforts of Mike Fleming, Cable & Wireless manager in Diego Garcia, to whose generous assistance Nigel paid warm tribute. Progress was also being made on the Association's collaborative project with Wildlife@Bristol ; the aim was to use video footage of Chagos reefs and foreshore as the basis for an interactive display for educational purposes, including the production of booklets aimed at school children.

Nigel hoped that there would be worthwhile developments to report on all these fronts by the time of next year's meeting.

BIOT COMMISSIONERS REPORT

Alan Huckle, who is the new Head of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Overseas Territories Department and BIOT Commissioner, attended the Annual General Meeting and gave a brief overview of political developments since the last AGM.

Key points were:

- The Court judgement in November 2000 which had overturned the section in the 1971 BIOT Immigration Ordinance requiring the Ilois to obtain a permit to visit the territory: legally the Ilois may now visit the outer islands (but not Diego Garcia) although none has done so, except as crew members on Mauritian fishing vessels
- The possibility of HMG facilitating a visit, which is under consideration (but has been set aside temporarily because of the security situation following the 11 September terrorist attacks against the USA)
- The continuation of BIOT Government-funded feasibility studies to help determine whether or not it will be practicable for the Ilois to resettle the outer islands permanently
- The decision to extend the Overseas Territories Bill (which grants British citizenship) to include Ilois holding British Dependent Territories citizenship.

On environmental protection, Alan Huckle said that he had been impressed with the range and number of environmental issues crossing his desk. He agreed to disagree on the designation of the Chagos islands as RAMSAR sites. The designation of most of Diego Garcia had gone ahead but both HMG and the BIOT Administration had decided to postpone the designation of sites in the outer islands pending the outcome of the feasibility studies.

One of the successes of the Overseas Territories Consultative Council (24-26 September) held annually with UK Ministers had been the agreement (and signature) of Environmental Charters for most of the UK Overseas Territories. As BIOT Commissioner, he had signed the Charter applying to the territory. This committed the

BIOT Administration to the development of an action or management plan: he undertook to ensure that this was completed during his tenure.

ANNUAL ENVIRONMENTAL SUMMARY

The following are extracts from the BIOT Administration Annual Environmental Summary.

Fisheries Again there was only a small uptake of inshore fishing licences during the 2001 season and early indications are that catches remain well within sustainable limits. Licensing for the offshore tuna fishery returned to the higher levels of the 1998/1999 season, but only a handful of purse seine vessels actually entered the zone and made catches. Longliner activity remained steady. There has also been a marked increase in fishing vessels *transiting* BIOT waters to fish on banks on the high seas, particularly targeting sharks. Our fisheries patrol vessel keeps a close track on these vessels and two have recently been arrested as they stopped to fish illegally in BIOT's waters. The BIOT Government continues to participate in all relevant meetings of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission and HMG has attended the most recent meeting of the South West Indian Ocean Fisheries Commission. This Commission is not yet up and running but by engaging in early discussions in its creation we hope to ensure that it is a responsible one.

Recreational Fishery The recreational fishery-monitoring programme has been in place since 1999 following the 5-month pilot study in 1998. From the available data it would appear that the fishery is exploited within sustainable limits. The catch and release policy for billfish and sharks at Diego Garcia continues to operate successfully.

Feral Cats/Rats The feral cat eradication programme has continued. It is estimated that there are about 15 feral cats remaining on Diego Garcia which are proving very hard to catch. The US Government have now extended the cat eradication programme by a year and recently agreed new eradication methods which are starting to bear fruit.

Yachts and Moorings Regular patrols have been maintained on the principal islands in the Salomons and Peros Banhos atolls in relation to yachting activity. In general most yachts have been compliant with the territories Customs and environmental ordinances. This year no man-made structures have been encountered but the process of removing rubbish left by the yachts is very time consuming. New handouts for the yachtsmen have been produced, which advises them about the strict laws protecting the environment.

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