

# Chagos News

*The Periodical Newsletter of the  
Friends of the Chagos*

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## EDITORIAL

### 3 October 2002

I hope this date is firmly in your diary. The place is the Royal Geographical Society, 1 Kensington Gore, London. Nearest tube station is High Street Kensington. Next nearest is South Kensington.

The Annual General Meeting will start at 1715 in the Reading Room.

1800 Symposium “Chagos – the environmental outlook”. This will be in the Tea Room. Dr Charles Sheppard will start a series of talks on the environmental future.

1935 Refreshments provided in the main hall.

This is an opportunity to hear the latest news and views about Chagos and to discuss the future.

I hope every Friend who can attend will attend. It would be useful to know if you are coming – please send an email to [johntopp@btopenworld.com](mailto:johntopp@btopenworld.com)

### The BIOT Administration

The current Head of the Overseas Department and Commissioner, BIOT is Alan Huckle, the Administrator BIOT is Charles Hamilton and the Assistant Administrator Ann Furey. I mention the names of this new team because there have seldom been better relations between the BIOT Administration and

Friends of Chagos. They have a thoroughly positive outlook and a very friendly attitude towards Friends of Chagos and we, in our turn, are doing all we can to assist them.

### Contents

There is a medley of subjects: fish, birds, history. The US Naval Communications Station in Diego Garcia, later NCTS DG and later still NAVCOMTELSTA was the first proper command in DG and an original purpose of the UK/US defence agreement. The closure and transfer to civilian contract status this year is a turning point in the affairs of Chagos and a historical event. The last Commanding Officer was Nancy Dillard. We reprint her closing ceremony speech.

### Conservation Management Plan

A contract to write the Chagos Conservation Management Plan has been let by the BIOT Administration. This is very good news.

### Richard Edis

It is with great regret that I have to report the death of Richard Edis, many times Ambassador, former Commissioner, BIOT, author of “Peak of Limuria” and great supporter of Friends of Chagos.

*John Topp*

## CHAGOS REEF FISH

How little we know! It has been estimated that about 90,000 different types of plant and animal have been described from coral reefs, but scientists estimate that there could be as many as 2 million altogether.

In practical terms this diversity can be pretty bewildering. For many, just opening ones eyes on a coral reef is like being thrown into a maelstrom. Reef fish often provide a “way in”. They are easily observed, clearly marked (or downright stunning), and good books are widely available to help us identify them. Recognising just a few types of fish can be very rewarding – they become familiar faces and help one to feel at home on the reef. I’ve been lucky enough to study the reef fish communities right across the Chagos Archipelago and now feel as though I know many of them quite well. Counting them is another matter!

Charles Anderson has led the way in compiling the latest complete lists of Chagos fishes, and following the 1996 expedition produced a list of 784 different species. This list is very important, but that total number is largely a measure of how hard we’ve looked – the true total will be much higher. There probably aren’t many new fish species to be described in the Chagos waters, but there are lots of “known” species that have never been recorded there. At the end of the 1996 trip we were still adding such new records at the rate of 1-2 per day. Without even trying I found eleven new records in 2001.

Such discoveries are not surprising given the size of the Chagos reefs, and their relative lack, even today, of scientific attention. At the end of the 1996 expedition I sat on the beach at Nelson after a hard days diving. Here’s how I described that moment in my diary: Chagos is still “a place totally unknown, which we can only peer at, like small children trying to glimpse a fairground through a hole in the fence. We are the experts, spending hours and hours underwater, but really we are here for just a few short weeks. Each day we spend 2 hours or so submersed in this world. And as we sit, or swim (rather ineffectively) through the water we can see perhaps 30m in any direction. It feels like a lot, but really we have hardly scratched the surface...As I sat pondering, Nancy [Knowlton] cracked open a small piece of coral and discovered a new snapping shrimp never before described or seen by man. In fact she does this almost every time she picks up a piece of coral.”

There are probably over 1000 species of fish in Chagos waters. These include the world’s smallest fish, and the world’s largest reef fish, the giant grouper. We saw one of the latter off Solomon atoll. It appeared from below us and swam slowly over to check us out. Only 1.5m long it wasn’t yet full size, but it was so bulky, like a bus. Captured specimens of this fish have been found with turtles in their stomachs.

One of the big disappointments of the 1996 visit was the massive decline in shark numbers. It seems likely that an illegal fishery operating from Sri Lanka largely caused this decline. Most divers love to see sharks, but it is actually more important than this. Sharks are the top predators on the reefs, and play a critical role in the balancing of the ecosystem. Recently they have become a highly sought-after commodity and shark stocks have been decimated the world over. In 1999 Hong Kong, probably the main trading hub in the trade, was reported to have imported the fins of some 28 million sharks.

It is hard, perhaps impossible, to find a pristine reef with “normal” numbers of sharks. We had hoped that the Chagos might be such a refuge, so our estimate of an 85% decline in shark numbers from the 1970s to 1996 was heartbreaking. There’s no-where else in the Indian Ocean where sharks can really do well. Thankfully there’s a faint glimmer of light on the horizon. Thanks to the near continuous presence of the Fisheries Patrol Vessel since 1996 it would appear that this illegal fishing has declined considerably (though not stopped), and in 2001 we noticed what appeared to be a slight increase in the numbers of sharks.

Other, more controlled, fishing continues in Chagos waters. The big, high-value, fishery is that of the offshore tuna fishery, where foreign vessels pay a licence fee to fish with long-lines or purse seines. Every year there is also a small licenced fishery operating from Mauritius which works over the reefs of the northern atolls. Up to six large boats are granted licences each year, while the fishing is largely done with hand-lines (sometimes with electric reels) from a group of smaller boats or dories. They catch quite a range of species, but primarily focus on emperors, snappers and groupers. In recent years only two or three of these licences have been taken up. The vessels fish over all of the northern atolls (at present the designated “marine protected areas” do not apply to this fishery), and their impact is probably not great.

Around Diego Garcia there is also a recreational fishery which operates both from shore and from boats. In fact the catches from this fishery can be quite high. Some focus offshore on species such as tuna and marlin, but others work over the reef and take sharks, groupers and snappers. This is probably the highest impact fishery in Chagos Archipelago and it comes close to the sustainable limits observed in other areas for coral reef fisheries. It is certainly a fishery which would merit closer scrutiny in future.

Elsewhere in the world the idea of fishing reserves or “no-take zones” has become very popular. Lots of examples now show that fish-stocks in these closed reserves (no fishing whatsoever is permitted), do so well that they act as a “breeding stock” and export both young and adults to the surrounding reef. Fishermen can fish where they like outside the reserve, and many line up right along the boundary. The results have shown that overall catches around an island can be considerably increased, despite closing off large parts of the reef. Perhaps it’s time for Chagos to institute such measures?

As all the readers know, 1998 brought an unprecedented disaster to the Chagos reefs. Warm waters, linked to an El Niño event, but also underpinned by rising background temperatures (and hence climate change), led to a massive mortality of the corals. Most of the corals died. How did the fish cope?

Well last year (2001) we went back to look and the news wasn’t altogether bad. In fact remarkably few fish on a reef eat coral, and most of those that do also eat other things. So only a few declined because they didn’t have enough to eat (this included some butterflyfish and a filefish ). A lot of fish depend on the structure of the reef to provide them with holes to hide in, and a large surface area for their food – other invertebrates and algae – to grow on. A few of these, the coral “nestlers” like some damselfish , were affected, as the fine structures of some branching corals were overgrown with algae. But overall a lot of the physical structure of the reef was still standing in 2001, so many of the fish were not severely affected.

In truth we will have to expect more events like the one of 1998, as the oceans are getting warmer. What remains unclear is whether the corals will have time and the ideal conditions needed to recover between these events. If they do not then the future, even for the fish will be bleak. Over time dead reefs will be eroded, and will be replaced by flat stony plains or fields of rubble. Such places cannot support fish in the same numbers as a living reef, and there would be a crash in both the numbers and the variety of fishes. It’s possible that we could help to avert such a calamity by careful management, ensuring the strictest possible protection for the small areas of reef which survive a catastrophic event such as happened in 1998. These areas may be critical in providing the new stocks, not only of coral, but other organisms, to replenish the dead reefs.

**Dr. Mark Spalding**

**The BIOT Administration is producing a special issue of BIOT stamps to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Friends of Chagos. The stamps show some of Dr Charles Anderson’s brilliant photographs of Chagos reef fish in all their colourful glory. There will also be an exhibition of BIOT stamps at the 3 October Symposium.**

## **HISTORY OF U.S. NAVAL COMPUTER AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS STATION, DIEGO GARCIA**

Located in the heart of the Indian Ocean, Diego Garcia is the largest of the fifty-two islands that form the Chagos Archipelago. In 1965, during Mauritian Independence negotiations, it was agreed that Mauritius would give up all claim to the islands, and it would become part of the newly formed British Indian Ocean Territory.

In December 1966, the United Kingdom and the United States signed a bilateral agreement making the island available to satisfy defense needs of the two governments. The first order of business was to establish a communications facility. Following Department of Defense approval of the plan, the project was funded by Congress in the FY 71-72 Military Construction Appropriations Acts. Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 40 arrived on the island in 1971 and the era of construction began. On 23 October 1972, a supplementary agreement was signed by the two governments concerning the scope of constructing a limited U.S. Navy communications facility on Diego Garcia. The purpose of this facility was to improve communications support in the Indian Ocean for ships and aircraft owned and operated by either of the two governments. The installation would consist of an austere communication station with all necessary supporting facilities, including an airstrip. In July 1972, NMCB 62 relieved NMCB 40, assuming construction of the transmitter and receiver buildings, as well as continuing work on the airstrip, containment area, and industrial sites. Of note, the first aircraft to land on the 6,000 foot runway was an Air Force C-141 which brought the "Bob Hope Christmas Show" to Diego Garcia to celebrate Christmas 1972. Since then, the runway has been lengthened to 12,003 feet.

During December 1972, personnel assigned to the U.S. Naval Communication Station (NAVCOMMSTA), Diego Garcia Pre-Commissioning Detachment began arriving to prepare for commissioning by accepting equipment and facilities as they were turned over for operation and maintenance. In February 1973, the first group of Royal Navy personnel arrived to join NAVCOMMSTA Pre-Commissioning Unit.

Exactly two years after commencement of construction, U.S. Naval Communication Station, Diego Garcia was established on 20 March 1973. The Commanding Officer, NAVCOMMSTA, was assigned all Island Commander responsibilities. Until this time, the Air Transportable Communication Unit FOUR, a suite of communication vans capable of providing local and long-haul high frequency (HF) communications support, had been the sole communications resource. A major expansion of the station's capabilities occurred in July 1974 when the Defense Satellite Communications System satellite earth terminal was activated.

A significant change to the island organization occurred in October 1977 when the U.S. Navy Support Facility (NAVSUPPFAC) was commissioned. The Commanding Officer, NAVSUPPFAC, assumed all Island Commander duties previously assigned to the Commanding Officer, NAVCOMMSTA. The title of Island Commander was subsequently changed to Area Coordinator and then Regional Coordinator. The nucleus for NAVSUPPFAC was obtained from the original NAVCOMMSTA enlisted and officer allowances. All billets, other than those dedicated to communication support, were transferred to NAVSUPPFAC which now maintains and operates all facilities in support of the operating forces and tenant commands. NAVCOMMSTA became a tenant command.

Throughout 1980, world attention was focused on dramatic events in Iran and Iraq. NAVCOMMSTA played a key role in support of U.S. interests in these areas, providing critical communications support for U.S. and allied naval and air forces conducting high tempo operations in the Indian Ocean theater. In January 1987, a major military construction project upgraded High Frequency Direction Finding (HFDF) and cryptologic operations at the Naval Security Group Department (C-Site). Also in 1987, major electronics installation projects were

completed at the Transmitter Site (T-Site), the Tactical Support Communications (TSCOMM) facility and the Receiver Site (R-Site).

In 1991, NAVCOMMSTA provided vital telecommunications and cryptologic support to tactical fleet units, theater Commanders, embarked flag staffs, and national authorities in direct support of Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM. In October 1991, NAVCOMMSTA's name changed to U.S. Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station (NAVCOMTELSTA), Diego Garcia. In November 1993, NAVCOMTELSTA assumed responsibilities for all telephone services on the island.

During the 1990's, NAVCOMTELSTA has provided contingency support for Operations DESERT THUNDER, NORTHERN and SOUTHERN WATCH, and DESERT FOX. Since the aftermath of 11 September 2001, NAVCOMTELSTA has provided exceptional communications support to island commands, the 28<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> Air Expeditionary Wings, U.S. and Royal Australian Air Force Hornet squadrons, deployed VP squadrons, and U.S. and allied ships transiting the Indian Ocean theater. On 1 October 2001, Naval Security Group (NSG) Detachment, Diego Garcia was established from the NAVCOMTELSTA NSG Department and the remainder of the command shifted to civilian contractor operations provided by DG21.

Today, 15 March 2002, five days short of the 29<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the command's establishment, we complete the current evolution by disestablishing NAVCOMTELSTA Diego Garcia and establishing U.S. Naval Computer and Telecommunications Area Master Station Pacific Detachment, Diego Garcia. We thank you for joining us for today's ceremony.

**Nancy Dillard**

## **RESETTLEMENT: AN UPDATE**

Discussion of the relationship between the ecology of the Archipelago and renewed habitation filled the last issue of *Chagos News*. This topic will also provide the focus for the Association's symposium on 3 October. Readers may find it useful to know how matters now stand.

In June, Posford Haskoning, the consultants engaged to examine in greater detail the feasibility of resettlement of the northern atolls, presented their report. It is not possible to do the study justice in this brief space. However, its general conclusions were that "while it may be feasible to resettle the islands in the short term, the costs of maintaining long-term habitation are likely to be prohibitive. Even in the short term, natural events such as periodic flooding from storms and seismic activity are likely to make life difficult for a resettled population." In a short statement to Parliament, the British Government paraphrased the report's conclusions in similar terms: "While the report concludes that short-term habitation for limited numbers on a subsistence basis is possible, it also emphasises that any long-term resettlement would be precarious and costly."

It remains to be seen how the report's findings will feed into the ongoing discussions involving Chagossians and the various governments concerned. Friends of the Chagos, for its part, maintains its own interest in the ecological development of the Archipelago, whether or not there is resettlement. In the meanwhile, the symposium can provide a forum – perhaps the only one – for examining the science underpinning this report and for looking at the environmental implications for the Archipelago as a whole of the trends which the report's authors foresee.

**Nigel Wenban-Smith**

## LATEST NEWS ON THE BIRDS OF CHAGOS

The birds of Chagos have not enjoyed a profitable relationship with humans. The vast seabird colonies that preceded human colonisation were devastated by forest destruction, direct exploitation, and the depredations of introduced predators – especially rats.

This sorry tale is mirrored in the scientific record, where Chagos bird populations have barely earned a mention. Although keeping track of population trends is the first fundamental in biodiversity conservation, the seabird populations of Chagos have never been monitored.

However, things are perhaps starting to change, on both fronts. Peter Symens reported in 'Ecology of the Chagos Archipelago' that seabird populations appeared to be increasing on some atolls. Since then, it has become apparent that red-footed boobies are increasing in number in Diego Garcia itself. This may represent a slow recovery from the disasters of the early period of human occupation.

Meanwhile, Peter Lewis, BritRep for 2000-1, generously undertook to organise repeated surveys of selected parts of the red-footed booby colonies on Diego Garcia, through the year. Alan Hayward, Anna Buyvid, and several other volunteers successfully carried out the work, and the meticulous information that was gathered is of great value. It confirms what W.R.P. Bourne suspected in 1971: that red-footed boobies actually have two breeding seasons in Chagos. A first period of egg laying takes place in December – April, but a second period occurs from mid-June until at least September.

This has important implications: it means that the actual population of boobies that nest annually on the Chagos Archipelago is likely to be far higher than the numbers counted during the 1996 survey, which relied on a single visit to each site. Hence, Chagos is likely to be a far more important site in global terms than was previously imagined. We do not yet know how many of the other seabird species have double - or simply very protracted breeding seasons - but the chances are that this applies to several of them.

This phenomenon of double breeding seasons, or simply very prolonged egg-laying periods, is common among tropical seabirds. However, it is very often forgotten by biologists who learned their trade in temperate areas where whole seabird populations typically lay eggs within a few weeks of each other.

This study on Diego Garcia is a crucial first step in the design of seabird monitoring scheme that will allow us, for the first time, to keep tabs on the seabird populations of Chagos.

While all this seabird activity has been going on, there have been some interesting developments for migrant birds in the archipelago. BIOT lies at the extreme end of a major migration pathway, which takes birds from breeding grounds in Central and Northern Asia to winter in the Indian sub-continent and Indian Ocean islands. Scattered records through the years indicate that numerous species of waders, some ducks, and assorted land birds pass through or spend the winter. In recent months, birding interest has centred on a long-staying Lanner Falcon, and an Indian House Crow, both of which have taken up residence on Diego Garcia. Encouragingly, the UK Government is currently taking part in discussions about creating a 'Central Asian – Indian Flyway Agreement', under the 'Bonn Convention on Migratory Species', which, would lend legally binding international support to the conservation of migratory population. The UK government has consulted Friends of the Chagos on the possible inclusion of BIOT in such an agreement, and we await developments with interest.

So, with these various encouraging developments, perhaps a corner has been turned for Chagos birds, and the future will be brighter than the past

**Dr. Geoff Hilton**

## DIEGO GARCIA: A BET ON A BIKINI

*Even this journal cannot be serious all the time. This article is drawn from a light-hearted chapter in "Of Cargoes, Colonies and Kings", the highly readable memoirs of Andrew Stuart\*, who served in administrative and diplomatic capacities in widely varied parts of the world. We are invited to cast our minds back to Diego Garcia as it was in about 1975 ... ..*

The Chagos archipelago lies a thousand miles to the east of Seychelles and about the same distance from the southern tip of India. There is nothing in between. It must be one of the loneliest places in the world. Most of the archipelago is just rocks and shallows, the home of sharks, seabirds and innumerable fish. The only inhabited island is Diego Garcia.

Nominally Diego Garcia remains a British colony to this day, part of the British Indian Ocean Territory. Its Administrator is a British Lieutenant-Commander, bored out of his socks, but never failing to order one of the naval Regulating (disciplinary) Petty Officers and seamen under his command to raise and lower the BIOT ensign at dawn and dusk

Nominally the superior officers of the Lieutenant-Commander were myself and my immediate boss in Whitehall. The Ministry of Defence also had an interest, not only in the sailors, but in the military aspects of what was nominally an Anglo-American base. But nobody from London had ever been to Diego Garcia in serving memory. We decided that it needed an inspection.

The difficulty was how to get there. The protocol mandarins ruled that it was out of the question for the British Governor of a British colony to roll up in a US Air Force freighter. The whole effect would be spoiled. And we must fly in from the West, the direction of Whitehall, not the degenerate east.

Nor could we simply turn up in a long range RAF VC 10 jet. The difficulty about building an airfield on a circular atoll is that, unless you can cut corners, your runway ends up with a sideways curve like a banana. It was impossible to build the landing strip straight out over the outside reef. The water there was hundreds of feet deep. And while in theory it would have been possible to cut the corner, on piles over the shallower waters of the lagoon, the airfield would then be like a banana suspended only at both ends. I have no idea how the problem was finally solved, but at the time it meant that only propeller-driven aircraft with a short take-off run could land at Diego Garcia.

It was therefore a rather apprehensive cargo of British diplomats, boffins, civil servants and military folk who took off from Mahé in a rattling old piston-engined Britannia aircraft, specially chartered for the occasion.

The only bright spot, as we ground our way slowly across the Indian Ocean, was our young lady companion. Looking like something from a garage pin-up poster, she was nevertheless a senior civil servant from the Ministry of Defence. Though admirably serious in purpose, she had nevertheless brought with her a couple of bikinis and a wardrobe calculated to encourage her designer tan. Someone should have warned her – and us.

As the doors opened, a tidal wave of sound rushed over us like a Tsunami. Frantic Seabees – sent on an eight-months unaccompanied posting to build the present base – fought over each other for the first glimpse. As she appeared at the door, something like a groan broke out, as two thousand seriously deprived young men struggled to cope with a vision which, in their hopped-up state, could well have been a mirage.

A phalanx of British sailors formed around us as we made for the make-shift control tower at a run. They seemed quite unreasonably elated.

Later, the Chief Regulating Petty Officer explained. All that the Americans knew was that there was a woman coming on the plane. The Chief, however, had inside information and, when someone made a book on how old she was going to be, the British had bet the low field, under 25. Most of the Americans, knowing that she was a senior civil servant and being anyway sunk in pessimism and dope, had bet the high field, above 50.

The Chief and his friends had cleaned up.

Later that evening, when we had fought off the determination of the base commander to house the young lady in his own personal quarters, the British went off to their own club to celebrate on beer – lots of beer.....

One of the things that we had agreed to do was to check on the old plantation at the other side of the lagoon. The Ilois from Diego Garcia had indeed been resettled in Mauritius, allegedly with the help of the grant from the British Government. But they claimed that none of the money had ever reached them. And anyway they said that it was quite untrue that they were merely migrant workers, brought in annually to process the coconut harvest on Diego Garcia. Some of them asserted that their families had lived on the atoll continuously for over three generations and that they had as much right to the land as anyone else. An international scandal was brewing.

We needed to see for ourselves, so the Administrator had arranged for an American landing craft to take us cross the lagoon to look at the Ilois village. The landing-craft's bows grounded on the bright sand. The ramp opened and the crew competed officiously to hand our young lady ashore 'because of the sharks'. She thanked them prettily and adjusted her bikini, followed by a thudding noise that sounded like the boat's cox'n banging his head on the wheelhouse bulkhead in an agony of frustration. We trudged up through the silent avenues of coconut trees.

To an unbiased eye, the settlement looked like a fully-fledged village, complete with church, neighbourhood store and permanent boat sheds. It did not look like the sort of place whose inhabitants came there only for a few months before returning to their permanent homes. I felt depressed by this evidence of a community destroyed.

When I got back to London I told my masters so, and I am glad to say that a further substantial sum was eventually provided for the Ilois, in recognition both of their lost paradise and the fact that most of the money originally subscribed seemed to have gone astray in the bureaucracy of Mauritius.

We flew back to Seychelles in a sombre frame of mind, though not half as sombre as the Seabees we left behind. Our lady companion looked distinctly smug.

**Nigel Wenban-Smith**

*\*'Of Cargoes, Colonies and Kings' by Andrew Stuart (2001, The Radcliffe Press, London, distributed also in USA and Canada by St. Martin's Press, New York)*

**AGM. Those present on 3 October will elect a Chairman, a Treasurer, a Secretary and members of the Executive Committee. Nominations for office must be received by the Secretary at 29 Champion Hill, London SE5 8AL by 21 September 2002.**

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