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Chagos News

The Periodical Newsletter of the
Friends of the Chagos

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EDITORIAL

The Meeting on the Ecology of the Chagos Archipelago, British Indian Ocean Territory, held at the Linnean Society of London on 7th October, was a great success. We had expected 40: 80 came for the whole day and a further 30 for the late afternoon and evening.

The Meeting was opened by Professor Sir Ghillian Prance, Dr. Charles Sheppard, the Leader of the 1996 Chagos Expedition, took the chair and we had talks by John Topp, Nigel Wenban-Smith, Georg Heiss, Charles Sheppard, Goetz Reinicke, Jacquie McGlade, Mark Spalding, Alistair Joliffe and Charles Anderson. After lunch Professor Mark Seaward took the chair and we had talks by Peter Symens, Jeanne Mortimer, John Topp, Mark Seaward, Linda Barnett, Andrew Price, and Jan Everaats.

After tea we held our AGM. This was followed by a Presentation of the Conservation Policy for BIOT by Bruce Dinwiddy (HM Commissioner, BIOT) who also took questions from the floor. Then we had a lecture by Professor David Bellamy on the Magic of Chagos. Finally there was a Reception in the Library.

The general feeling at the meeting was that Chagos is indeed of international importance, not least for its relatively pristine state, and that sensible proposals are in hand to protect the present good condition.

In this Chagos News we include part of the Commissioner's Statement, the Chairman and Treasurer's statements at the AGM, a much requested list of some of the scientific publications relating to Chagos and one of the Abstracts from the meeting and we hope to produce more of these in future Chagos News. In the longer term it is hoped to produce a book on the scientific papers given at the Meeting.

The whole day was a great success and we are most grateful to all the participants, the BIOT Administration for financial support and our hosts the Linnean Society who have kindly offered to host our 1998 AGM which is planned for 6 October.

John Topp

Published Work on Chagos

by

Charles Sheppard

The essence of science is to research a problem and then provide the information for general use. To aid this, a large industry exists of scientific publication, in which scientists write up their findings in a formal way for the use of others. Science will not progress and, in our own field of environment, management of our remaining rich and wild places cannot be achieved, if the managers don't know a lot of essential information. We may also need to tell others what kind of information they need in the first place, which is another role of the scientific publication. The system is huge and it works very well - our technical society would not have progressed beyond steam power otherwise.

Many science journals exist to assist this process. Non-scientists may not be especially interested or aware of them - but they are there for anyone. There are few towns in the UK which have no public library or staff who do not understand the system. Your library itself may only stock thrillers and romances, rather than Marine Pollution Bulletin or Coral Reefs, but the 99% of other published material not on the shelf may be rapidly retrieved on request by the well established system. Actually, the system developed because of that 99%, not for romances and thrillers!

One duty of scientists therefore is to publish. It has long been the view of myself and many others that science is not worth doing if the results are not published, and I refer to 'proper' publication, in what is often called the white literature, not typescript reports which were prepared as 10 copies for private circulation - the grey literature. White literature passes through a system of review first - grey literature does not. Every journal has an editor and a board of assistants, whose voluntary job it is to accept good articles and reject sub-standard work. After all, there is a lot printed every year, and unlike readers of tabloid newspapers, we don't want to be burdened with flawed material. Maybe there is a good reason sometimes for not publishing results, such as that a perfectly valid hunch simply did not work out or, as in the case of Chagos, two scientists very sadly died not long after their participation. Sometimes, unfortunately, results are not published because the scientist was too lazy, or s/he muddled the work so it was not publishable, thus wasting the effort of generally quite a lot of other people too, but fortunately this is not very common.

For Chagos, I list here a range of scientific results from before the 1996 expedition. This is fairly exhaustive, but I may have missed something. If you want copies, please try your own established sources first, but if anybody wants an article and has an library filled exclusively with romances and staffed by robots, you can contact me. I exclude diving magazine articles, of which there were a lot too, but include some wonderful older gems. e.g. Bourne, Gardiner. Some work from all the 1970s expeditions is incorporated in one comprehensive article e.g. for a complete account of all mollusc work see Sheppard, A.L.S. 1984. Results from the 1990s will follow later, many in the volume which will arise from the Linnean Society meeting.

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(I have added several to Charles' list and of course no list is complete. However several earlier papers are excluded because they have been superseded by later papers. Atoll Research Bulletin 149 has a very complete bibliography. Editor.)

FRIENDS OF THE CHAGOS - 1997 AGM

Chairman's Report

At our 1995 AGM your Committee put forward a seven-point strategy, which you the members endorsed. So it is perhaps about time to check on progress.
First, we wanted to monitor what is happening to the environment of the Chagos. That is an objective shared with the BIOT administration, which organises an annual visit by its Conservation Consultant - a chap you all know - John Topp. So perhaps all that needs to be done is to establish a mechanism by which we, the Friends of the Chagos, can be informed of the outcome of the visits.
Second, we were to stimulate scientific visits - regular ones, if possible. Any comment today on that topic would be otiose! Except one: the BIOT administration came up with the goods, i.e. not just goodwill, but the funding to make the whole thing possible. I would like to take this opportunity to put this Association's gratitude formally on record.
Third, we wanted to establish links with other students of reef ecology. Quite a lot is happening, obviously, through the freemasonry of scientists, but the Committee may need to think whether there is more we can do, as an Association. The same comment applies to item four on the list: the monitoring of other marine conservation research being done in the Indian Ocean. We will report further.
Fifth, we wanted to encourage increased research into the history of the Chagos Archipelago. I am afraid that there is nothing worth reporting so far, but I hope that

by the time of the next year's AGM contacts with a number of interested academics will have borne fruit.
Sixth we aimed to expand our membership, though not indiscriminately. I have to tell you that this is a matter of running hard even to stay in the same place. But recruitment is something in which every member can play a part: what about all of you making a start at tonight's reception?
And seventh, we intended to prepare relevant educational and publicity material. Thanks to the enthusiasm of John Topp, Charles Sheppard and Mark Spalding, the book project which John mentioned in his Chairman's statement last year is now under way. Two titles have appeared, and two more are virtually ready for production, once the sales figures allow.
I should perhaps mention one item of "business in hand" which was not foreseen. We have participated in the meetings of the UK Dependent Territories Conservation Forum, which exists to enable bodies representing those interested in conservation issues in all of Britain's dependencies to compare notes, learn from each other and to make common representations to the government. We have now been invited to act, without com[promising our own independence, as one of the Forum's regional working groups. Subject to some points of detail, we expect to sign up to this arrangement in the near future.
So that is the outline of where the Committee is focusing its efforts. In the coming year we will aim to make further progress in consolidating our financial position, increasing membership, carrying on the unfinished business I have just described, and above all, monitoring the BIOT Administration's progress in solving the conservation problems identified by last year's expedition. In this connection, I am particularly glad that Bruce Dinwiddy, the Commissioner, is not only with us today, but is shortly going to make a statement on his Administration's conservation policy.
See you a year hence. But in the meanwhile, we shall try to keep you informed (and entertained) through the Friends' newsletter. Let me take this opportunity to thank not only of new ideas, but all the other members of the Committee, especially Nigel Wells, our Honorary Treasurer, and Simon Hughes, our Secretary. Without their constant support and commitment, I should have little to show for your subscriptions.
Lastly, before I sit down, I should like to pay tribute to David Bellamy for joining our deliberations. He has had the conservation of the Chagos in his sights for more than 20 years and all friends of the chunk of paradise are deeply indebted to his infectious enthusiasm and commitment.

Treasurer's report

The treasurer, Nigel Wells, gave his report, based on the detailed information available at the meeting. This showed total assets of £8,745.11 and total liabilities of £7,490.00.
He observed that the subscription had been increased to £10/$20 per annum and a reduced subscription for six years of £50/$100 had been successful in boosting the Association's cash flow. One major outgoing was for the newsletter and John Topp had largely financed the booklets with a loan of £4,000.
It was proposed by Jacqui McGlade and seconded by John Heath that the accounts be accepted. The motion was passed nem con.
Anyone requiring a copy of the financial statement, please contact the Secretary.
Elections. All existing holders of office and members of the Executive Committee were re-elected nem con.

BIOT CONSERVATION POLICY

by

Bruce Dinwiddy
Commissioner

17. The Territory's World Heritage quality has been recognised, but BIOT was not associated with the UK ratification of the World Heritage Convention since the conditions of the 1966 UK/US Agreement stated that all the islands in the Chagos Archipelago were to be made available for defence purposes. BIOT could not therefore guarantee to fulfil all the commitments required by the terms and conditions of the Convention. However, in line with the Administration's determination to protect BIOT's natural heritage, the islands will be treated with no less strict regard for natural heritage considerations than places actually nominated as World Heritage Sites, subject only to defence requirements. The Administration takes a similar approach with respect to the Bio-diversity Treaty.

18. With regard to Diego Garcia, the BIOT Administration will cooperate with the US authorities in the implementation of the 'Natural Resources Management Plan'.

19. Furthermore, the BIOT Administration undertakes, by the end of 1998, to:

(i) ask the UK to arrange to have the provisions of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat, 1971 (RAMSAR Convention) extended to BIOT, and propose possible sites for listing under RAMSAR;

(ii) designate Strict Nature Reserves as defined by the IUCN classification system, eg the rat free islands of the Great Chagos Bank, the three islands to the north of Diego Garcia, and all the islands to the east of Moresby and Fouquet in the Peros Banhos atoll;

(iii) consider designating Marine Protected Areas as a further measure to protect the reef fisheries; and

(iv) introduce controls to regulate unauthorised visitors to the Territory who arrive by sea.

(The above are the last three and most important paragraphs of the Commissioner's Statement made at the Meeting on 7 October and reprinted from the 8 page BIOT Conservation Policy Statement dated October 1997).

Reef fishes of the Chagos

J.McGlade and M.Spalding

This paper gives a short summary of some of the findings gathered by a number of scientists on the reef fishes of the Chagos during the 1996 Expedition. Some 59 new species records were added during this expedition that, together with a detailed revision of existing records (Winterbottom and Anderson, 1997), has led to a new species total for the Chagos of some 773 species. Clearly this figure is still far from complete.

Species inventory data provide an important tool for a description of the fish communities of the Chagos, placing them in the context of their location on isolated oceanic atolls in the central Indian Ocean. The reefs of the Chagos have been considered to form an important biogeographic link between the reef communities of the eastern Indian Ocean and those of East Africa. The fishes of the Chagos show affinities to both communities, giving further indirect evidence of the role of the Chagos as a stepping stone.

Following on from this work a consideration of the "pristine" nature of the fish communities is undertaken. Semi-quantitative data are presented which show a massive decline in shark abundance over the last 20 years, while it appears that other reefal and offshore fisheries may also now be influencing fish communities in the Chagos.

A final section considers the variation in fish community structure on outer reef slopes at ten different locations in the Chagos. Community structures, as described through species accumulation and species abundance curves, are typical of many other complex and diverse ecosystems. Unlike previous studies in other reef systems, including studies in nearby Seychelles, the reef fish community structures in the Chagos appear to be relatively homogeneous across distances of up to 150km. This apparent homogeneity can be linked to the oceanic location, the lack of terrigenous inputs and still probably low impact of man on these reefs.