

# *Chagos News*

*The Periodical Newsletter of the  
Friends of the Chagos*

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## **EDITORIAL**

### **Coral**

Editorial seems rather grand for a collection of news, comment and advertising, but here goes and lets start with some very good news. The last Chagos News included an excellent article by Charles Sheppard on the death of shallow water coral in 80% of the archipelago. He and I were unable to dive during our 10 day survey so snorkelled and could only observe to a depth of about 35 feet. Since then a team of American divers have surveyed part of the Diego Garcia lagoon and ocean coast. They report that in all areas less than 30 feet coral mortality was indeed extremely high but below 40 feet the majority of corals appeared healthy, or recovering. Outside the lagoon, at depths of 90 feet or more, 95.5% of all stony corals encountered were healthy. The percentage of stony coral cover was 55%; the percent of stony, soft and other corals combined was 65%. This figure compares favourably with Sheppard's figure 50-75% cover for seaward slopes, prior to the 1998 bleaching event. This is very good news. Now it is interesting to speculate what may

be the condition of the rest of the archipelago below 40 feet.. In the Maldives to the north, coral was wiped out to below 90 feet. However I am reliably informed that Addu Atoll, the southernmost Maldives atoll, is less affected, so there is at least a hope that the Chagos archipelago as a whole may be better off than we feared. We must await further surveys.

### **The Friends**

Last month the 31st Executive Committee meeting celebrated 7 years of existence. A lot has been achieved in that time. A very successful Expedition in 1996 and publication of the results in 1999. 4 other publications: *Sea Shores, Fish, Birds, Plants of Chagos*. 14 issues of Chagos News. We have put Chagos on the map in the pursuit of our charitable educational objectives mainly in the fields of scientific research and conservation and now we are turning more towards history. These achievements have been made possible by the support of the Friends and the BIOT Administration. Thank you.

*John Topp*

# **Slavery in the Chagos Archipelago**

*by*

## **Donald Taylor**

The expansion of the Western powers into the Indian Ocean would have been almost impossible without slaves. Portugal was already a well experienced slave trader on the Western coasts of Africa, and that experience stood her well on the coasts of East Africa, Mozambique and Madagascar. And the French were not far behind in their use of slaves to develop their plans for monopolizing trade in the Indian Ocean, as the population censuses show. By 1807 three years before the British annexed the island of Mauritius in 1810 there were 6,489 whites and 65,367 "negro" slaves. The figures are not much better seven years after the British occupation, for in 1817 there were 7,375 whites and 79, 493 slaves of various races.

The increase in the slave population after the British annexation of Mauritius may surprise us, since Parliament, through the labours of the abolitionist William Wilberforce and his supporters, had managed to pass an Act in 1807 to abolish the slave trade. But try as the Royal Navy might, the slave trade between Mozambique, Madagascar, Seychelles and Mauritius was never completely suppressed so that between the years 1811 and 1821 it is estimated that 30,000 slaves were imported into Mauritius. Estate owners there always seemed desperately short of labour mainly because slaves were needed for developing the sugar plantations, and partly because mortality among the slaves was high, not only because of their dreadful treatment, but also because of outbreaks of cholera. So the demand for slaves never abated, and the slave traders never could supply enough of them.

For the inhabitants of Mauritius, Bourbon and Seychelles, life without slaves was unimaginable. They were needed to work the fields and to be domestic servants in the home, and so it is not surprising to find that from the end of the eighteenth century there were slaves at the French concessions at Diego Garcia and Trois Freres. In 1793 M. Lapotaire from Mauritius had been given the concession at Diego Garcia and there started up a factory for coco-nut oil production, for which he had imported slaves from Mauritius. But such a "plantation" economy was not labour intensive. Unlike the labour intensive economy of husbandry which was required for the clearing of land, planting, tending and picking of a cotton crop, which was then being grown in Seychelles, coco-nut plantation work needed fewer labourers. So M. Lapotaire never had more than 30 or 40 slaves on his

plantation at Diego Garcia. And the slaves whom he brought in from Mauritius had been bought from cargoes of slaves which originated from Madagascar.

When the British annexed Mauritius at the end of 1810, the Royal Navy tried to put into effect in that part of the Indian Ocean the Parliamentary Act of 1807 which made the slave trade illegal. But they were hampered in their task on three counts. First, the French argued that in one of the articles of capitulation of Mauritius to the British in December 1810 it had been stated that their laws and customs would be respected; and as slavery and the slave trade formed part of their laws and customs its abolition was illegal. This line of argument was soon rejected.

Second, although the movement of slaves from one part of the colony to another was permitted, Parliamentarians had never envisaged the movement of slaves to and from the Dependencies of Seychelles, Rodriguez and the Chagos which were regarded as constituting the single colony of Mauritius. This provided a hey-day for the slave traders, and for the Royal Navy a nightmare. To overcome this the Navy insisted that any ship carrying slaves on legitimate business, each slave would have to have a passport. So in 1811 we find that M. Cayoux, who now had replaced M. Lapotaire at Diego Garcia, requested passports for 30 slaves whom he was returning to Mauritius. And Governor Robert Farquhar, with the consent of the Senior Naval Officer in Mauritius, provided him with the necessary documents.

Third, the Navy's own division of the oceans into areas of command did not help. The area of Mauritius and Seychelles came under the command of the squadron based at the Cape of Good Hope. Although the area of operations of this squadron extended westwards into the Atlantic as far as St Helena, to the east it did not extend as far as Rodriguez. Thus any H.M. Ships wishing to operate eastwards of Mauritius had to be given permission by the Royal Navy command based in India. This soon became known to the slave traders, so anyone wishing to elude the patrols of the Royal Navy were assured of a fairly peaceful voyage east of Longitude 60 E. But as the Royal Navy began to tighten its grip on slave traders who were operating from Seychelles and Mauritius to the west, so the slavers began turning to slave markets to the east. And this is when Diego Garcia became an important staging post for many of them.

During the two decades from 1820 to 1840 Diego Garcia became the staging post for slave ships from Sumatra to Seychelles and the French island of Bourbon. Off the NW coast of Sumatra was a well established slave market on the island of Pulo Nyas, where slave traders would call with great regularity to take on cargoes of "Malay" slaves. The slave traders were mainly from Bourbon (where the French

did not abolish slavery until 1848) who flew flags of different nationalities according to convenience - British, French, Dutch. The English Captain Rogers, master of the Dutch vessel Padang, gave evidence about the slave traders' use of Diego Garcia to the Commission of Eastern Enquiry held in Mauritius in 1826. He stated that when he was there Diego Garcia was visited by the French vessel Chicken sailing under French colours and that other vessels were there flying different flags, and they too had put in with cargoes of slaves from Pulo Nyas. The accuracy of his evidence would have been recognized by any one who had been there over a hundred years later: "Diego Garcia is described to be professed of an excellent harbour and yields an abundant supply of water. It is on the track of ships bound eastwards. The island has been settled from Mauritius, and the slaves employed in the cultivation of coco nuts and the preparation of coco nut oil, and are superintended by "Regisseurs" or Agents deputed by the proprietors who are resident in Port Louis. Some other islands, "Les Six Iles", of the same cluster have been settled by the inhabitants of the Seychelles, to which they refer. But in none of these islands do we find that any public functionary resides. "

Many islands of the Chagos were used as dumping grounds for leprosy slaves, especially shortly before Parliament passed, in 1834, the Act to Abolish Slavery. Slave owners were afraid that they would spread leprosy among their other slaves, and so they would lose the compensation promised by Parliament. Thus they abandoned slaves on many of the small islands around Seychelles, as well as at Diego Garcia where the Commissioners of Eastern Enquiry estimated that in 1826 there were 200 such slaves.. The Government of Mauritius had these removed later, by which time many had died. Those on the islands around Seychelles were taken to the leper colony on the island of Curieuse not far from Praslin.

When the Act for the Abolition of Slavery came into effect in 1835, George Harrison, the Government Agent in Seychelles, went to Diego Garcia to ensure that slavery had been abolished there, and to read to the slave owners the conditions of "Apprenticeship" which was to replace slavery for the interim period until the Abolition became absolute on 1 February 1839. George Harrison may not have been as observant as he might have been, for he made no mention of lepers on the island. But if the planters lived up to their usual practices, they probably kept them well out of sight.

**BRITISH INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORY ANNUAL  
ENVIRONMENTAL SUMMARY OCTOBER 1999**

**Coral.** The BIOT Government have circulated Dr Sheppard's report on coral mortality in the Chagos Archipelago widely in the hope that it will be a useful contribution to knowledge about coral bleaching. We are considering closer co-

ordination with the DFID-funded South Asia node of The Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network (GCRMN). We have amended the Imports and Exports Control Ordinance 1984 to give extra protection against the removal of coral from the Chagos. The wording has been amended to say "Coral, whether alive or dead." rather than "Live coral or coral which has been taken alive." This came into force on 14 July.

**Fisheries.** We are considering the comments and suggested recommendations on the 1998 inshore fisheries summary, sent to us undercover of the Chairman's letter of 8 September. We have received advice from MRAG on these and will respond in due course. This year we have reduced the number of inshore fishing licences, issued to the Mauritians, from 6 to 4 licences. Also earlier this year we prohibited the use of wire traces used on fishing lines for all inshore fishing. It is hoped this will help to minimize shark by-catches.

Through membership of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission the government of BIOT hopes to gain useful knowledge of the status of tuna stocks in the Indian Ocean. The BIOT Government has contributed to the stock of information through the work of MRAG. MRAG's logbooks and observer programme information are presented to the Scientific Sub-Committees and Working Parties. The information is particularly valuable as little information of this type has been collected in the Indian Ocean so far.

During the annual UK/US talks in Washington this year we raised the importance of logbook returns and on-going monitoring for the recreational fishery. We thanked the US for the continued support given by their Morale, Welfare and Recreation Unit on Diego Garcia. We said we hoped that this could continue.

**Research on Reef Fish.** The BIOT Government funded independent research carried out by Dr Mark Spalding, University of Cambridge, on the status of commercially important reef fish of the Chagos Archipelago. This was to expand on some of the data he collected during the 1996 Chagos Expedition. He was also able to draw on information he gathered from a short expedition to the reefs of the southern Seychelles. The report is waiting to be finalised pending comments from MRAG Ltd and ourselves.

**Feral Cats.** We have given our agreement to a feral cat eradication plan to be funded by the US Government. A team of Animal/Plant Health Specialists from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) have been contracted to implement an eradication programme which will provide a series of traps in numerous locations around Diego Garcia. The traps, designed not to hurt the animals, will provide food and water until they can be collected. They are then restricted within the cage before being shot at close range with a .22 calibre short hand-gun. The programme began in September and is to be monitored for the next three years to determine its effectiveness.

**Yachts and Moorings.** With the help of the Fisheries Patrol Vessel, when it is not carrying out fisheries duties, we have been able to conduct more Britops

exercises to the outer islands to police visiting yachts. We have also introduced a sacrificial anchorage area at Ile Boddam in the Salomons atoll in an aim to restrict possible damage to corals caused by moorings.

**Hydroblasting.** Last year it came to our attention that some of the merchant ships in the lagoon were using hydroblasting in efforts to clean their hulls. We asked the Americans to stop immediately and to consider alternatives, but agreed to permit the activity on one-off operational needs in the meantime. The Americans agreed to conduct an EIA to assess potential damage. We are awaiting the final report.

**Publication of Findings from the 1996 Chagos Expedition.** We would like to add that we were delighted to be able to provide some assistance in the launch of the 1996 Chagos expedition papers "Ecology of the Chagos Archipelago", an excellent book.

BIOT Administration

7 October 1999

**Friends of the Chagos are very grateful to the BIOT Administration for the generous book launch party given in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.**

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 1999 NOTES FROM THE CHAIRMAN'S REPORT  
Thanks for renewed hospitality of Linnean Society. A busy year, which I have time only to describe impressionistically.

First, carrying on unfinished projects, we published two further booklets, on the Birds and Plants of the Chagos. Congratulations to the authors. And as you know, the Lin. Soc. are tonight celebrating the publication of the results of the 1996 expedition - a magnificent work, well worth waiting for. Congratulations to the authors and editors. Buy now, while limited stocks last.

Second, the bad news. As you will know from the latest issue of Chagos News, mortality from the 1998 'bleaching incident' has been appalling - 80%. With our encouragement, Dr. Charles Sheppard was commissioned by FCO to investigate and recommend. The FCO is now considering his proposals for research and action.

We too have asked ourselves where we go from here. In this we were helped by having last year's seminar (and the resulting Situation Report on Conservation) as a point of departure. Most of you will have seen the text in the January issue of Chagos News, but copies available here too. That identified a number of issues, especially concerning the commercial fishery and coral destruction by yachts in the Salomon lagoon. The latter is even more worrying, now that corals outside the lagoons have been so badly hit by the warming episode. We have asked the FCO to look extra carefully at the fishing implications and to institute Marine Protected Areas. In this contest, we were glad to receive the report by MRAG on the 1998 inshore fishery. This painted a broadly satisfactory state of affairs, at least compared to other parts of the world, but revealed problems, especially in relation to shark mortality. We have submitted detailed comments and recommendations to the BIOT Government. In short, all the work that went into the

seminar a year ago has served to give focus to our dialogue with the BIOT Government on conservation issues; and it is a dialogue that continues to be constructive, productive - and friendly.

The dialogue also takes place in a wider context these days. I mentioned last year two separate developments - our association with the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum; and the creation of the FCO's Overseas Territories Department. In March, the Government published its long-awaited White Paper on the OT's, which included an important chapter on environmental issues. These issues were the subject of an invigorating conference - called, appropriately, 'A Breath of Fresh Air' - last June. I will just make three points about this event.

- a. we should all be glad that, with Ministerial involvement in the Conference, the FCO has shown significantly increased awareness of the importance of bio-diversity in these territories, for which it bears primary responsibility
- b. the Conservation Forum's role in the proceedings was invaluable
- c. I should re-assure you that the Chagos were not forgotten - Charles, John and I went along to speak up for the places without resident populations.

There is one area where dialogue is non-operative. Our efforts to get a sight of the US authorities' Natural Resources Management Plan for Diego Garcia remain unsuccessful. We have not even had the courtesy of a reply to our communications. Given that the US is under an obligation 'As far as possible.... not [to] interfere with the flora and fauna of Diego Garcia' - "shall not interfere" are the actual words of the Treaty; and given that in 1998 over 100 metric tonnes of fish were caught there in recreational fishing, it is, we believe, high time that the British Government reminded the US of their obligations. Maybe there is scope for a modest amount of recreational fishing to be allowed in return for a substantial contribution - not just an invisible, dust-gathering report - to the conservation needs of the island, indeed, of the archipelago. The present situation is simply indefensible.

I turn now to our usual areas of under-achievement. Our struggle to maintain, let alone increase, our membership continues. Can I ask each one of you to take one of our 'fliers' and recruit a new member by, let us say, the end of this millennium? And then, of course, there is our remit to study the history of the Chagos. Tonight, we are fortunate to have with us our newest member, Dr. Donald Taylor, who is keenly interested in this aspect of the Friends' concerns, and is going to begin by showing us his slides of the islands in 1963. With his help, I hope we can work our way steadily into crevices left unexplored in Richard Edis's small masterpiece. By the way, I am particularly glad to see him among us tonight; and I am sure he will only be too glad to sign the copies of his book which you purchase now.

Although I have not dealt, this time, with our activities as they relate to the strategic objectives you approved four years ago, it is fair to claim, I think, that those remain valid and that we have been guided by them. In the year ahead we aim to promote them through new activities; and we hope too that we shall have progress to report on the several conservation issues I have highlighted this evening.

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## COMMERCIAL FISHING

**The following information has been kindly provided by MRAG and is their copyright.** Fishing operations by longline vessels have been licensed by the BIOT Authorities since the declaration of the FCMZ in 1991. The longline fishery was dominated by vessels from Taiwan until the 1997 / 1998 season when Japanese vessels were licensed for the first time.

**Table 1 British Indian Ocean Territory FCMZ longline summary 1993/94 to date**

Year	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000
Vessels Licensed	24	37	16	13	42	71	35
Licences Issued	32	50	16	19	84	102	39
Months Licensed	32	50	16	19	84	108	103
Days Fished	564	706	135	280	1903	2307	N/A
Total Catch (MT)	550.2	669.96	135	182.52	2427.77	2193.93	N/A
CPD (MT day-1)	0.976	0.949	1.000	0.652	1.276	0.951	N/A

A purse seine fishery targeting large (>40 kg) free schooling yellowfin and skipjack tuna caught around floating objects has operated in the BIOT FCMZ since 1993. The fishery is dominated by the European purse seine fleet, consisting of French and Spanish flagged vessels with a number of other vessels under Flags of Convenience but owned and managed by the same European companies.

**Table 2 Summary of the last six purse seine seasons.**

Year	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99
Number of Vessels	44	44	42	42	47	51
Number of Licences	73	46	57	47	48	54
Number of days fished	1059	93	411	448	291	482 <sup>1</sup>
Total Catch (MT)	33331	2026	12708	13706	2173	6275 <sup>3</sup>
CPD (MT day-1)	31.474	21.785	30.92	30.594	7.4674	13.0187

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<sup>1</sup> Total catch and number of days fished have been calculated from the radio reports submitted on entry and exit to the zone. A more detailed breakdown will be available when logbook returns are complete

Figure 6 which compares the purse seine vessel activity patterns year on year, shows that the purse seine season is much shorter than the longline season. However, due to the