

# *Chagos News*

*The Periodical Newsletter of the  
Friends of the Chagos*

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## EDITORIAL

### **The High Court**

Late last month there was a 4 day judicial review in the High Court to examine whether there is a right for former Chagos islanders to return to the Archipelago. The islanders seek to live in the 2 northern atolls of Peros Banhos and Salomons and the feasibility of this is under review. Judgement on whether the Immigration Ordinance of 1971 is lawful or unlawful is expected in October.

Friends of Chagos is a Registered Charity and non-political. Our objectives remain unchanged and we will continue to highlight the unique value of the Chagos Archipelago. The UK Government recognised the Territory's World Heritage quality some years ago and there are good reasons why Chagos should become a World Heritage Site.

### **Contents**

We start this issue with a report from the current British Representative who during his year

has done a great deal to improve the environment and press forward with implementation of the Natural Resources Management Program for Diego Garcia. Stuart Watt is being relieved this month. We wish him well in his next appointment and welcome his successor Peter Lewis. Donald Taylor has again provided us with an excellent piece of historical research. Chas Anderson who was on the 1996 Expedition writes about cetaceans in Chagos.

### **AGM**

The AGM will be held at the Linnean Society headquarters in Piccadilly on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2000. Tea will be available from 1530, the AGM starts at 1630 and the meeting will end by 1800 when those who wish will repair, as the last two years, to a local restaurant. Names to me please. Nominations for the Executive Committee to the Secretary by 15 September 2000.

*John Topp*

## REPORT FROM CHAGOS

*by*

### COMMANDER STUART WATT

As my time in Diego Garcia comes to an end, one of my final tasks is to write an article for the Friends of Chagos. Without looking back through the previous BritRep submissions, I am sure there is a common thread and I apologise that I may be no different. Much good work has been achieved in the past for the conservation and environment, and a firm footing established; I believe I have continued to build on what my predecessors have done to protect this little piece of the world.

So what has been done over the past twelve months? In no particular order:

**The outer islands** – a much firmer line has been taken with the yachting community. The welcome to BIOT signs have been replaced by signs of what people can and cannot do. As there are not signs on all the islands, all yachts are given a copy of the 'Rules' as well as a copy of the Restricted Areas. All illegal structures have been taken down and removed from the Islands, the 'Chagos yacht club' graffiti has been painted over and the mooring fees have been increased. In addition we do not accept or take mail.

**Arrivals** – Everyone now coming to Diego Garcia is issued with an A4 sheet informing them of the basic rules. This covers but is not limited to, protection of the wildlife, rules concerning coral and seashells, the strict conservation area, the restricted area and other items such as the speed limits on DG roads.

**The Natural Resource Management Plan (NRMP)** of Diego Garcia – Issued in April 1997, there has been a perception that not much has been happening, I believe this has been incorrect and that a lot of good has been going on behind the scenes. More importantly, we now hold quarterly NRMP meetings to discuss the plan, how much we have and can achieve, and what we need to do to continue to look after the place. The minutes of the meetings are forwarded to the Secretary, FOC, and at the last meeting there was an invited FOC member present (this does not include those who are FOC members but in other roles for the meeting).

**Turtle Cove** – A lot of good work has been done at the cove. The large gapping hole at the entrance to the beach has been filled in, a proper car parking area established (by the use of telegraph poles) which now prevent vehicles driving onto the beach, and a sign erected to stop people entering the water. The reasons for this are to prevent any harassment of the Turtles and to protect their habitat. F&FI are producing some additional signs and educational materials but these are yet to arrive on island.

**Turtle Surveys** – there is a small committed team that conduct surveys on a regular basis to provide data to Dr Jeanne Mortimer.

**Recreational Fishing** – On a monthly basis log sheets are collected and returned to MRAG so they can provide Management and Conservation advice to the BIOT Administration. The returns of the log sheets have been a little bit hit and miss, so the organisation has recently been overhauled to tighten up the system. This should then provide a good database for MRAG to allow them to make informed decisions.

**Catch and release Policy of sharks / bill and sailfish** – Unfortunately, this volunteer scheme has not been successful. The NRMP committee has now removed these fish from the monthly fishing competition weight count and informed all coxswains of boats that they are not to return with these fish. Any fishermen that insist on bringing one of these in will not be allowed to use the MWR boats in the future.

In addition to this, the wire trace (leader) currently being used will not be allowed after 1 Sep 00, this should then ensure that at least shark's are not caught as they will bite through any mono-film fishing traces.

**Moorings** – There has been a restriction on the LCM's that during a fishing trip they are allowed to anchor once. As this has been in the NRMP for three years now, it has been agreed that no anchoring after 1 Sep 00 will take place, permanent moorings need to be established. This will then prevent any further damage to coral. As part of this, the small boats using the lagoon for fishing will either tie up to a buoy or use a sea anchor to prevent coral damage with their anchors.

**Cat Eradication** – This has now been in place since Sep 99 and it is now very rare to see a cat. It is the cage shy cats that now need to be caught.

**Rat Control** – the rat population seem to be much more visible now the cats have disappeared, an injection of funds has recently been approved and a vigorous rat trapping / poison bait stations are now in place. Rat eradication is probably much further down the line, watch this space.

**Bird Attack Strike Hazard (BASH)** – The incident of bird strikes on aeroplanes has increased in the last 18 months and a BASH programme has been approved in a designated area around the airfield.

**East Point Plantation** – Although having been in existence a long time, the programme of commands and groups sponsoring a building / cemetery / trail wanes with the I/C of each of the units. Currently there is a lot of interest and most projects have a sponsor and the plantation is gaining from the interest.

**Museum** – From all the artefacts found in my wardrobe left from previous BritRep's, a small museum has been opened in a room adjacent to the billeting office. This includes various bits of china, bottles, shells, and various metal objects found. I have been promised a larger room (the video store when it becomes vacant later this year) and once that is available, the intention will be to get photos of the plantation days on the walls as well as some notes on the history of the Chagos Archipelago.

**Landscaping plan (nursery)** – I have just seen the draft landscaping plan of the island. This with the new nursery should not only add a bit of colour but will allow more indigenous species to be introduced into some of the sparse areas.

For this small article I have concentrated on some (but by no means all) the conservation / environmental items I think you will be interested in. For me, it has been memorable year; I have missed my family but have to say the place enchants me. When I look each day at the colours in the lagoon, I realise how lucky I have been to have been here. As Father Roger Dussercle quoted on his departure from Diego Garcia, 'to leave is to die a little', I know I will feel the same way.

**An accidental visit to the Salomon group of islands in  
1772 by Thomas Neale, Captain of the *Swift Crab*.**

by  
**Donald Taylor**

In February 1772 Captain Thomas Neale was commissioned by the India Company in Bombay to find and then survey two groups of islands called Three Brothers and Seven Brothers which formed part of the Chagos Archipelago. The managers of the company had already sent a snow to locate them during 1770 and 1771, but they had been unsuccessful, and the small vessel had returned on each occasion with no further information.

At the time English navigators knew that the islands of the Archipelago were scattered around a vast Shoal, then known by the French name of Basses de Chagos, but today known as the Great Chagos Bank. But they mostly tried to keep away from the islands for fear of the Shoals, about which many stories circulated. The India Company's choice of Captain Neale for this survey, however, was a shrewd one, for he had considerable experience of the waters around the Chagos Archipelago and the Shoals of Chagos. Four years earlier, in September 1768 when he was first officer of the *Greyhound* under the command of Captain David Simmons, they had been on a passage from Madras to Bombay. They had sailed east of Ceylon, then as far south as possible to take advantage of the south east trade winds which would drive them north westwards so as to catch the south west monsoon far west of the Laccadive Islands that would eventually take them to Bombay. But once the *Greyhound* had reached latitude 4 S 46' the crew "saw the rocks under her bottom, and had soundings at 7, 8 and then 52 fathoms, and then no more soundings." Captain Simmons knew that they were over the Shoals of Chagos, and had no intention of sailing south to find out how far they extended. The accepted tradition among ships' masters was that they extended to 6 S 23', "if not more." But Captain Simmons was not going to find out; all he wanted was to make for Bombay by the shortest route the winds and currents would allow, and that meant setting a course to the north west.

Before leaving the Shoals of Chagos, however, Captain Simmons tried to fix the longitude of their easternmost extremity. He estimated that they were 7 degrees west of the meridian of Madras, which would have placed them at 72 E 45', more than "five degrees Eastward of where they are placed at present [i.e. 1772] in the Directory." This information was passed on to the masters of vessels in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. It was also sent to Captain Howe, the master of the Indiaman *Winchelsea* who was returning to England in 1769, to be handed over to the East India Company cartographer in London for inclusion in the next lot of charts of the area. Unfortunately it never reached England because the *Winchelsea* foundered on her return journey later that year.

By 1771 Thomas Neale had been appointed master of the small sailing vessel *Swift Crab*, and had set sail from England bound for Bombay. On his arrival the managers of the India Company commissioned him for the specific purpose of finding the Three Brothers and the Seven Brothers groups of islands, the first of which they believed to be situated about 3 S 50' and 62 E 30', and the second about 3 S 30' and 60 E 15'. Captain Neale was also to make track westward from these islands as far as the Seychelles, and to return eastwards along the same track to make certain that no other undiscovered shoals or islands lay in these latitudes (between 3 and 4 S).

Captain Neale left Bombay on 7 March 1772, and headed south towards the notorious Shoals of Chagos. But he was out of luck, for "meeting with some accidents at sea, after much perseverance [he] was obliged to bare [sic] away for Bencoolen [modern Bengkulu in Sumatra]...having on

board but one legar of water." He arrived at Bengkulu on 2 May, where he remained five days. During that time he took in fresh water and provisions, and the crew set about repairing the storm damage that his vessel had sustained. Then on 7 May they left Bengkulu and headed westwards once more, towards the Shoals of Chagos.

The south east trade winds had obviously not begun to blow with any consistency and in any case *Swift Crab* was probably too far north and east to take advantage of any winds from that direction. Their journey westward was very slow, and for the next 24 days they neither saw land nor did their soundings indicate that they were nearing the Shoals. Then on 31 May at 3 a.m. they got soundings at 50 fathoms. As it was so far into the night Neale decided to lay-to with the vessel's head to the southward. "In laying-to", he later wrote in his account of the voyage, "we shoaled very gradually, until 4.30 a.m. to 45 fathoms, mud; then had 43 fathoms, white sand; and the next cast 25 fathoms, coral rocks; and some casts 25 fathoms, sand and shells." He decided to go no further and returned gradually eastwards under topsails, making soundings all the time until he "could get no ground at 100 fathoms." He was certain he was in the vicinity of land, but when daylight came there was no land in sight, so he steered north for a few hours and began to edge westwards again. "At 9 a.m. we saw rocks under our bottom" and got soundings at 15 fathoms. So he hauled off northeast to get clear of the Shoals once more. But still no sight of land, and at noon he fixed his latitude as 5 S 50'. He then continued on a course NE by N, to keep clear of the Shoals.

Neale had probably reached the eastern edge of the Great Chagos Bank at about latitude 5 S 50' during the early hours of the 31 May 1772. This would have placed him slightly north of the half way point between Diego Garcia and the Salomon group of islands, at a distance of about 50 nautical miles south of the latter. When at 9 am he saw rocks "under her bottom" again, he was probably at the north eastern extremity of the Bank. Unfortunately he does not give us any precise details of his course after that, nor does he tell us how many nautical miles he covered, but he does say that the weather, though moderate, was very hazy, and there was still no sight of land. However at noon on the 1 June his latitude was 5 S 23' which would have placed him at the same latitude as Peros Banhos to the west and Salomon to the east.

It is not surprising therefore to read in the entry of his log book for the 1 June 1772, that at 4 pm he "saw two ranges of islands", one SW by W and the other ENE. He had no idea what these islands were called as they were not marked on his chart. This was not unusual since the charts used by British navigators in these waters were not as detailed as those used by the French at that time. He decided to head for the islands that lay ENE and by 10 p.m. he was about a mile from them, "but could get no ground at 100 fathoms." At daylight on 2 June he sent the boat ashore, "which soon after returned laden with Coconuts and Boobys; but as the landing here was very difficult, on account of the great Surff, I made sail to the Eastward in search of a better landing place; at about 9 discovered a very fine Bason. I sent the boat to sound it, in order to go in there, but they found it a very rocky Bottom: however the Water was very smoothe, so that a Vessel that had a Chain might ride there.

It is clear that Thomas Neale had sent some members of the crew of *Swift Crab* to land on one of the islands of the Salomon group, some five years before the islands of the group were named by Captain Bourde of the French vessel *Salomon*. There can be no doubt about this because he took a noon sighting that same day and found that the islands lay at 5 S 23', not far off the latitude for Salomon determined by Lieut. Blair for the East India Company in 1786. The other group of islands to the SW by W must have been Peros Banhos which Neale said were "innumerable, but as they were to the leeward I did not think it prudent to entangle myself with them". He noted

however that when he was near what we now know to have been Salomon, he was unable at sea level to see the islands to the SW by W (Peros Banhos).

Once the *Swift Crab's* boat had entered the lagoon of Salomon the crew were able to land "upon a very fine beach without any danger". Neale had provided them with firearms, "but they had no occasion to use them, the birds were so tame you may take them off the tree." There were ten islands in all "joined to each other by a reef of rocks, over which the Surf breaks with great violence." Coconut trees grew upon almost all of them, but they found no surface water. However they knew that where the coconut trees grew water could be found by digging, but as they did not need water they did not attempt to find any.

In coming across the islands of the Salomon group Thomas Neale had missed the islands he had been sent to find, the Three Brothers and the Seven Brothers. These were SSW of Peros Banhos, and Neale thought that they were NW of Salomon. The position which the East India Company had given him was hopelessly inaccurate, and when Neale sailed away from Salomon he was actually sailing away from his desired destination. When he did not come across any islands at the position he thought was 3 S 50'; 62 E 30' he then steered westwards towards Seychelles, keeping within the latitudes of 3 and 4 S. On 13 June 1772 he sighted the islands of Aride, Curieuse and Praslin, finally anchoring in the bay between Praslin and Curieuse. These islands which formed part of the Seychelles group had been claimed by the French since 1744. They lay approximately 4 S 15'; 55 E 45', and the more Captain Neale thought about it the more he persuaded himself that they were the islands which the India Company called Trois Freres. "I shall here deliver my opinion", Neale wrote in his log book, "that these islands, which we are now at, and the adjacent island are the Three Brothers; and will abide by that opinion till convinced to the contrary, as there are no islands to the East of them in this latitude, and many to the Westwards: however some others think to the contrary, on account of the high variations of the compass at this place."

At least he was prepared to accept that he might be wrong which in fact he was. The French had known for many years where the Three Brothers, or Trois Freres, were, but they were not going to let the British know. The latter had to wait until Licut. Blair's survey in 1786 before they could fix their exact location. Captain Neale however was one march ahead of the French when he located the Salomon group in 1772, but he never named the islands, nor did he claim them for Britain. Perhaps he was shy of calling them the Islands of the *Swift Crab*.

*(There were full very detailed references with this excellent research paper, which I have had to omit for reasons of space.)*

### CHAGOS CETACEAN SURVEY March-April 2002

Whales and dolphins. They have never been more popular. In recent years they have become the focus of many research endeavours and whale-watching ventures. As conservationists would put it, cetaceans (as whales and dolphins are collectively known) are definitely part of the 'charismatic megafauna'.

The Chagos. No need for me to elaborate here on the immense interest in documenting and conserving the Archipelago's flora and fauna. But did you know that the Chagos lies at the very heart of the Indian Ocean Sanctuary, a cetacean sanctuary that was established in 1979 by the

International Whaling Commission? The aims of this sanctuary are to prevent commercial whaling and encourage research on Indian Ocean cetaceans.

Against this background you might imagine that we know pretty much all there is to know about the cetaceans of the Chagos. Unfortunately this is not the case. There has been not one single study of Chagos cetaceans. We know next to nothing about them.

We do know that there must be a lot of cetaceans in the Chagos. Studies elsewhere in the Indian Ocean (e.g. Maldives, Sri Lanka and Oman) have shown that cetaceans are abundant and diverse. It is inconceivable that the Chagos does not have a comparably rich cetacean fauna. Indeed, in the 1850s there was a 'Yankee' sperm whale fishery in the Chagos.

We also know that there are several good reasons for learning more about Chagos cetaceans. For example:

- (a) The large whales of the central Indian Ocean are known to have been grossly overfished in the 1960s. They are now assumed to be recovering, but there is no information available to confirm this assumption.
- (b) Some populations of cetaceans in the central Indian Ocean appear to be geographically isolated from other populations of the same species further south. They may thus have separate conservation requirements, but their taxonomic status remains uncertain and in need of further study
- (c) Cetaceans are a significant component of pelagic ecosystems worldwide. A thorough understanding of the Chagos marine ecosystem, and hence the ability to conserve and/or manage that ecosystem, therefore requires an understanding of the role of cetaceans.

In order to address these questions, and more, we will be undertaking a Chagos Cetacean Survey Expedition in March-April 2002. 'We' are four British and American marine scientists with some 14 man-years *at sea* experience with this type of cetacean survey. Between us we have published numerous scientific papers on cetaceans, including those of the tropical Indian Ocean.

To carry out the Chagos survey we have chartered an ocean-going vessel from the Maldives. The survey will run for four weeks, with two legs of two weeks each. The survey will start and finish in Malé, Maldives, but the midterm changeover will be at Addu Atoll in the far south of Maldives. Assistance on the survey will be required from interested individuals; prior experience is not required as thorough instruction will be given and all survey work will be supervised.

If you are interested in participating (for either two or four weeks), and would like to find out more, please contact:

Dr. Charles Anderson, Marine Research Centre, H. Whitewaves, Malé., Republic of Maldives  
UK Tel & Fax: 01989-720-667 Email: [anderson@dhivehinet.net.mv](mailto:anderson@dhivehinet.net.mv)

Friends of Chagos Secretary: Simon Hughes, 29 Champion Hill, London SE5 8AL.  
Tel/Fax 020 7738 7712. Email: [fi28@dial.pipex.com](mailto:fi28@dial.pipex.com)

Editor: John Topp, 20 Lupus Street, London SW1V 3DZ. Tel:020 7834 3079. Email: [johntopp@barclays.net](mailto:johntopp@barclays.net)

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