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Chagos News

The Periodical Newsletter of the
Chagos Conservation Trust

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EDITORIAL

Eagle Island Rats.

It is hard to praise highly enough the magnificent work of the stalwart team that has laboured so mightily to remove the rats from Eagle Island. The names of the following must be recorded proudly in the annals of conservation: Alex Page, Andrew Sheppard, Chris Hillman, Darryl Birch, Elaine Fraser, Eleanor McManus, Fieke Molenaar, Guntram Meier, Nicholas Cole, Nicole Lohrmann, Peter Haveson. All of the above worked incredibly hard in atrocious conditions. Accounts overleaf give some idea of what was involved but nothing except actual participation can describe the sheer slog. Slaves introduced by the French to Chagos in the 1790s never worked so hard and certainly not with such enthusiasm, willingness and good humour. We salute them all. We offer praise and gratitude too for the generous financial support of three government departments, FCO, DFID and DEFRA as well as commercial sponsorship, especially that of Syngenta, Thames Water, WEXAS.

Paul Caboche

As our readers know, the CCT is greatly indebted to Paul Caboche, introduced to us by Donald Taylor, another contributor to knowledge of Chagos history. Paul has not only shared with us his direct experiences of life on Salomon before World War II and on Diego Garcia during it, but passed on much documentary and photographic material. The Committee has acknowledged its debt by adding his name to the small band of Honorary Life Members of the association.

AGM and EGM

Please see attached letter with details for this year's Annual General Meeting and Extraordinary General Meeting on Tuesday 21 November at 6pm.

Chagos Conservation Trust USA Launch

There will be an Inaugural Reception for the United States Branch in the British Embassy, 3100 Massachusetts Avenue Washington DC on Wednesday 27 September at 6pm. ALL members welcome. See attached letter for details. USA contact is Frank Stewart email ruthandred4@msn.com

Dates

Please put the above dates in your diary now.

John Topp

Rat eradication on Eagle Island

Guntram G. Meier
InGrip Consulting & Animal Control
Berlin, Germany

Rationale

After habitat destruction, invasive species are recognised as being the second most severe threat to biodiversity and, in the Chagos, rats and humans have been the main invaders, probably arriving simultaneously in the eighteenth century. Thirty-five of the Archipelago's fifty-odd islands have become infested and, since 1935, rats (Rattus rattus, the black rat) have been the only mammals on Eagle Island. Their elimination should open the way to restoration of renewed diversity of naturally occurring species, especially of turtles and seabirds, but also hardwood trees. This was the aim of the 11 people-team, managed by Alex Page from FFI and led by Guntram Meier, who had three months to complete their task.

Is it justified to kill thousands of animals on an uninhabited island? We think yes, if this is done for a strong conservation purpose! But can you protect nature by destroying nature? Again a clear yes from us, if the nature destroyed consists of exotic species which through human influence have been distributed to areas outside their original range and, once arrived, cause severe damage to humans or local biodiversity.

Organisation

The first rats were spotted immediately on arrival in the morning of Sunday the 5th of February 2006. The priority, however, was to set up in the shortest time possible a camp with all the basic necessities – tents, shelters kitchen, solar electricity supply, radio base, compost toilet, shower etc – just in time for its (and the team's) first test in the form of severe thunderstorm that very night. As for the team, partial lack of direct experience in invasive species control was more than made up for by their biological science background, familiarity with outdoor survival techniques and readiness to work hard together to achieve their common aim.

To get the job done, the team were divided into five pairs, with one pair remaining in camp for the first half of the project to look after the camp, see to the water supply, do the cooking, make repairs and improvements and – not least – safeguard supplies from the attentions of the rats.

Groundwork

First task was to establish a grid system to ensure that bait could be spread evenly over the whole island, at a density which could be achieved in the time available and also match the behaviour of the rat population, guessed to be around 10,000 individuals. Each pair was equipped with compass, machete, hand saw, flagging tape and tape measure, as well as materials to record any interesting features or vegetation encountered. Beginning at the north-east tip of the island, transects (identified by letters) were cut on a north-south axis at 30 metre intervals, then tapes tied every 30 metres (identified by numbers) to mark where bait stations would be placed. In total 123 transects were cut and 2,774 points identified. Additionally, 90 perimeter points were set, covering possible gaps between the last point on a line and the shore line. Given that Eagle Island is about 4.9 km from the NE to SW, the total length of the lines amounted to 83.2 km, which were cut by the team in just over six weeks.

The task took longer then originally planned, owing to some unexpectedly difficult vegetation. While dense walls of dead hibiscus and broad bands of Scaevola were hard work to go through, the real slow down came once the palm/mangrove swamp was encountered, where water was often some feet deep. The swampy area was around a kilometre in length and 500 metres wide. The problem in an eradication work is that no area can be left out and all have to receive the same standard coverage. Therefore ways had to be cut through the mangrove bushes and trees and tall palm trees chain sawed down to create bridges into the swamp. This has to be done, even if the vegetation like mangroves and Scaevola is native and is part of the species assembly which is due to become better protected in future.

All this activity, together with the presence of the team and its foodstuffs, naturally attracted the attention of the rodents (not to speak of the splendid population of coconut crabs!). In fact, the rats were in

very poor condition, suffering from inadequate nutrition as well many parasitic infestations. To minimise the risk of infections and transmission of parasites as well as rat damages in the camp, snap traps were set twice in February, eliminating most rats in the camp. In total more then 100 rats were eliminated in this area (0,5 ha) before the poisoning started.

Bait Laying

This was the second phase. Bait stations (commercially available boxes from PVC) were distributed to each of the previously marked points and loaded. The poison used is a second-generation anti-coagulant, of which the brand-name is "Talon G" ™, available in 20 g blocks on a wheat basis but coated with wax for longer preservation. Its active ingredient is brodifacoum, which works by preventing production of Vitamin K, crucial to making blood clot. As a result of ingestion, the animals have in- and external bleedings and die from circulatory failure within three to four days. Incidentally, although Talon G is called "rodenticide", it is toxic to all vertebrates and, as it accumulates in the liver, it poses a threat to vertebrate species which may consume dead or dying rats. On Eagle Island, the only creatures (other than a number of feral chickens) which might have been at risk were the small population of green herons, but these appeared to be alive and well when we left.

To give the rat population the largest possible blow initially four blocks of Talon were placed in each bait station. However, we had to keep in mind that on Eagle Island, the rats – normally nocturnal animals - were active in broadest day light, so those coming out at night might not find enough food (poison) left for them by the diurnal population (this, it emerged, was result of their high population, poor nutrition, and the dense load of parasites of all kinds which they carried). Therefore for the beginning of the control operation in the last week of March it was decided to toss an additional amount of two blocks to the west between two bait points, roughly halfway to the next line. This resulted in much more intensive coverage than the 30 x 30 meters set up in the grid system and increased chances of having bait available for animals coming out later only or which were too cautious to go into the stations. As it turned out, however, bait acceptance was, as a result of the rats' poor condition, very high right from the beginning.

The whole system was then maintained and poison replaced on a daily base right up to the team's departure. Slight adaptations to the quantities used and repetition of hand-broadcasting of poison were made from time to time, whenever seemed sensible, for example, in response to weather conditions and to the increasing amount of poison lost to hermit crabs and other Crustacea spp.

Provisional Results

In the eradication of small animals like rats it is hard to say at any particular moment that the last animal has died. Success requires perseverance and the careful monitoring of progress. On Eagle Island the technique used was to set live and snap traps over certain areas, along transects, in specific types of habitat structures, or randomly. We then made random and targeted walks across the island by night as well as in daytime, studied the daily records from the poison operation, noting how signs of rat-infestation tailed off, until the island was all but cleared of rats. Ongoing activities on around 0,25 % of the total of all stations were then wiped out by specific trapping which killed the four animals we had targeted. The subsequent dissection showed that all of them had eaten enough poison already to die within the next two days anyway, so again the success of the operation (in this case the unrestricted acceptance of the bait) was proven from a different side and aspect. In total more then thousand "trap-nights" were undertaken and countless hours of observations and monitoring walks. Permanent companions were now countless mosquitoes who – robbed by their normal protein base, the rats – pursued one even in the heat of the day on the shore in their hundreds.

Over the last three days a final major logistical operation was undertaken in which all the stations were removed from their former positions except a few specifically chosen to act as test stations to find out for how long poison can be provided on Eagle island for prevention of new infestations. The only plausible sources for this are illegal fishing boats, mostly Sri Lankan, carrying rats with them as stowaways. All material and people were withdrawn as planned on the 24th of April – while a severe rain and thunderstorm again tested the team's nerves literally up to the last minute.

We think eradication was achieved. A follow up visit to verify this currently assumed result is planned for later this year – again a routine technical step in eradication projects where only permanent presence or a revisit after a shorter time span can prove success or the need for an additional final action. So then, was our project justified? Again, we say Yes. Although around 10,000 rats may have perished, no longer will other, native animals, such as the turtles and seabirds have to suffer the predation by rats which

have blighted their attempts at nesting for over two centuries. We very much look forward to the next visit and the chance to see Eagle Island as it once was. Changes of vegetation and species compositions will now take place once the top predator is removed. There will certainly be an increase of invertebrates, while competition between plant species is likely, with the rats gone, to produce different winners and losers. Mosquitoes for instance are believed to vanish now as their only permanent protein base is no more. Birds should re-colonise Eagle Island from Cow Island to the south, which has a large breeding colony of terns, boobies and noddies. It will be a sort of natural recovery or natural experiment which can start, now that the largest influential factor of the recent past is not impacting evolution there anymore. As we came aware how many people are interested on the nature of the Chagos islands we are sure that this will be a closely watched process and there can be immediate assistance in any new challenge for further restoration work in the archipelago.

To thank everyone who helped in this project would demand its own issue of the Chagos news so it shall here only be stressed that the full trust and unrestricted support of the this project mainly financing agencies FCO/OTEP & DEFRA/FFI as well as the restless work of CCT and its members was the base of which everything else could be build on. This then was done by companies like Syngenta which tremendous generously gave all the rat poison for free and by this just enabled many conservation projects to succeed, others which provided travel opportunities, advise of all kind, moral support, their labour for the hard work in the field – or just a lot of mosquito repellent….

Life and Times on Eagle Island
Andrew Sheppard

We had the best commute in the world, along the beaches between our camp on the northern tip of Eagle, to and from the last point we had reached on the transect line we were cutting. This was a mini safari of various crabs, moray eels, turtles and sometimes dolphins. As we progressed further down the island this walk would take well over an hour. We cut the lines in two-person teams, the usual system being for one to rest and clear the path, while the other hacked through the vegetation on either a northerly or southerly bearing. The day was broken by a lunch break from about noon till 2. Lunch was always a Tupperware box of the previous night's leftovers; if we ate it by 12 it usually hadn't gone off, but by 1 o'clock it was usually a bit 'fizzy'. Then some more cutting until going home at about 6ish, and an early bed.

Our day started before dawn, with a 'wake up' tap on our tents. This wasn't all bad because it allowed us time to watch the sun rising from behind the sea while sitting on the beach with our oat-meal and coffee. We would end the day sitting in the same place, watching the huge expanses of pastel sky retreating back down behind the sea with the fading sun. This was part of a good routine that helped us maintain a fast pace for the seven weeks that we were cutting the baiting grid.

The Camp

A central tarpaulin was erected at the beginning of the first day, which became the foundation of the camp. This was where we cooked and to which we would generally gravitate. We would eat dinner together in the 'dining room' which became the social focus of the camp. This was an area between the camp and the beach which continuously evolved. It was where we built a circle of homemade palm trunk benches, around a driftwood table, and it was here that we would eat dinner as a group and catch up on the day's gossip. Our camp had a private solar heated shower stall which used collected rainwater and had a palm frond screen, while our compost toilet was a 160 gallon drum, half buried with a seat salvaged out of a pallet. Perhaps you will be interested to know that we filled up three of these drums over the course of the trip. Perhaps you will not.

As people cleared new areas and moved their tents about to more comfortable sites after the first rush, the camp expanded outwards. We lived in a variety of tents and hammocks, one person per tent, which over time became personalised with little things like a homemade boot stand, a clothes line or even in some cases a sandy path and coral garden. The inner lining of the tents acted as an adequate mosquito net, though they also kept the inside of the tent a couple of degrees warmer than outside. They also didn't keep out the rats.

Team Eagle-Island Rat Eradication Project (2006)


Darryl Birch


Nicholas Cole


Elaine Fraser


Peter Haveson


Chris Hillman


Nicole Lohrmann


Eleanor McManus


Fieke Molenaar


Guntram Meier

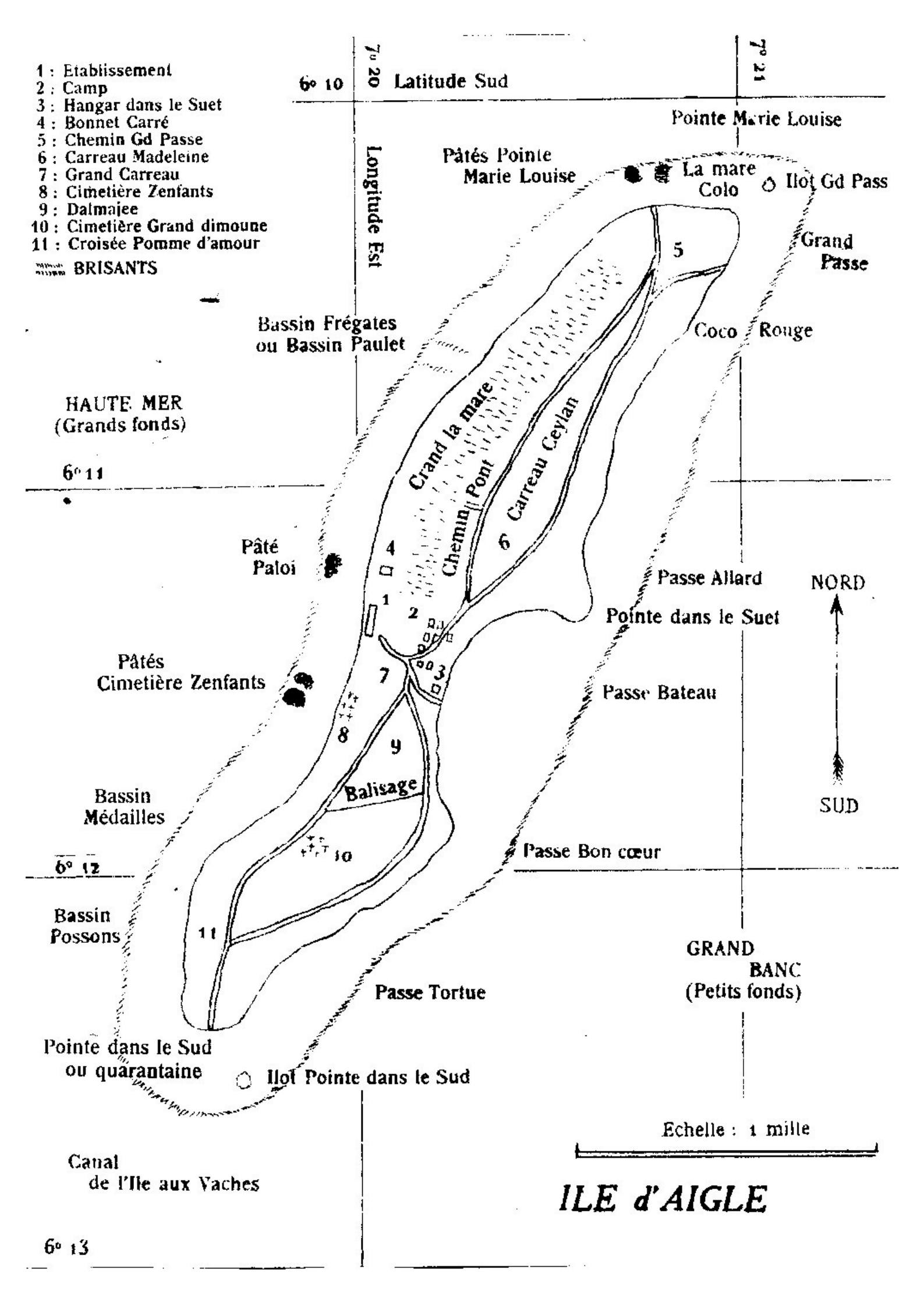

Alex Page


Andrew Sheppard

The Magnificent 11


FISHERIES PATROL


POISON
KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN
READ SAFETY DIRECTIONS BEFORE OPENING OR USING
Talon
RODENTICIDE
3
Bitrex
WAX BLOCKS
Active Constituent:
0.05 g/kg BRODIFACOUM
10 kg NET
syngenta


1 : Etablissement
2 : Camp
3 : Hangar dans le Suet
4 : Bonnet Carré
5 : Chemin Gd Passe
6 : Carreau Madeleine
7 : Grand Carreau
8 : Cimetière Zenfants
9 : Dalmajee
10 : Cimetière Grand dimoune
11 : Croisée Pomme d'amour
BRISANTS
7° 20
6° 10
Latitude Sud
7° 21
Longitude Est
Pointe Marie Louise
Pâtés Pointe Marie Louise
La mare Colo
Ilot Gd Pass
Grand Passe
Coco Rouge
Bassin Frégates ou Bassin Paulet
HAUTE MER (Grands fonds)
6° 11
Grand la mare
Chemin Pont
Carreau Ceylan
Pâté Paloi
Passe Allard
NORD
Pointe dans le Suet
Pâtés Cimetière Zenfants
Passe Bateau
SUD
Balisage
Bassin Médailles
6° 12
Passe Bon cœur
Bassin Possons
GRAND BANC (Petits fonds)
Passe Tortue
Pointe dans le Sud ou quarantaine
Ilot Pointe dans le Sud
Echelle : 1 mille
Canal de l'Ile aux Vaches
6° 13
ILE d'AIGLE


MAURITIUS TROCHETIA
PORT LOUIS
525

After the first couple of days the rats began to be a nuisance around the camp. They were not scared of us, and would constantly run through our camp on their way to our food containers or anything of ours that smelled interesting. This meant that on several occasions we had to dip the boxes and packets of our entire food supply into an iodine solution. Early on, over a period of a few nights, we snap-trapped nearly one hundred rats in an attempt to reduce the pressure, though within a few days other rats would have moved in, and it would start all over again.

The cutting

Most of Eagle Island is open palm forest, but during both the cutting and the later baiting and monitoring phase, every member had to work in some very difficult terrain. There were some large areas of swamp with incredibly dense palm or mangrove. It made an interesting change, but after heavy rainfall we would sometimes be wading along the transect lines with water coming well over our boots. Some unexpected expanses of dense mangrove especially slowed us down by an exhausting extra few weeks, throwing us behind schedule. Once, having strayed off a transect line in a particularly dense and swampy area of palm forest, I walked into a patch of quicksand and had sunk up to my waist by the time I started to crawl out. Overall the rain made a pleasant change from working in the intense heat. One day the cutting was called off because a rain storm and gale was so strong that windfall coconuts made it dangerous to walk through the forest. We would sharpen our machetes every evening; it wasn't uncommon to need to chop through a few 5 to 6 inch thick hibiscus limbs. Towards the end the whet stone had been heavily worn down. Occasionally, when we had time off, we would go fishing in the dinghy in the blue water on the outside of the reef. On these trips it was possible to catch a fish, literally within five minutes, which was large enough to feed all eleven of us. We would cook these on glowing embers on the beach. We would also use the dinghy to take us outside the reef to go snorkelling. Socially, our camp was very harmonious, and for the whole three months we worked very well together, which was no small achievement given the circumstances of relentless hard work and discomfort.

On a day off during the last week of cutting we had a visit from our friend the *Pacific Marlin* and some Marines who shipped us all aboard and hosted a barbeque for us, complete with cold beer. The *Marlin* dropped by once a month and delivered our mail. It was the *Marlin* and her crew that shipped us and all our equipment from Diego Garcia to Eagle island, and early on it was the scientific expedition on the *Marlin* which also took a group of us on a day trip to North and Middle Brothers, designed to show us the incredible bird life on islands that were not infested with rats. They also helped us ferry nearly 3,000 traps and a couple of tons of bait down the island half way through.

It was a massive logistical exercise, but the poisoning phase was much easier, and once we got efficient at it, we found our workload was much less, and we had long afternoons to ourselves. The results on the rats were obvious and immediate, and so the thought that our work had the intended result was enormously satisfying. The possibility of seeing Eagle Island become as densely populated with bird life as the Three Brothers are became very tangible and exciting.

Eagle Island in the 1930s

Nigel Wenban-Smith

In 1935, the decision was taken to close down the plantations on Six Iles (Egmont), Eagle Island and the nearby smaller islets. The company sailing ship, sv *Diégo*, had taken some of the workers from both Six Iles and Eagle to Salomon, while the remainder from Six Iles were taken in a smaller vessel to Eagle. The *Diégo* then returned to Eagle to pick up most of these people for transfer to Diego Garcia. Finally, she sailed once more for Eagle to take the remainder to Peros Banhos. On 20 June, shortly after her arrival, the ship was driven onto the reefs in a storm. All the passengers and crew were saved, but within days the vessel was broken up.

One of the *Diégo's* passengers was Father Roger Dussercle. As well as providing a vivid account of the disaster, he described[1] the problems of survival, the despatch of a small sailing boat to seek help and sustenance for the 56 islanders and 35 from the ship, and his own adventures in Peros Banhos and Salomon after sailing there in a small boat. Here, we reprint passages describing the geography of Eagle Island,

together with Dussercle's sketch map, for comparison with what FFI's team of ratters found sixty nine years later.

First, though, a few words about survival. There were not many stores on the island, which was, after all, to be evacuated. Nor do there seem to have been many domestic animals left. We know – though Dussercle does not mention them – that Eagle was rat-infested. As early as 1824, an official visitor had reported that this problem was so bad that, alone among the Chagos islands, Eagle could not produce any arable crops. Dussercle noted that no turtles or even birds nested there. The *Diégo* was however carrying supplies of rice for Peros Banhos, much of which the crew managed to salvage. Morale among the islanders was low and discipline had all but broken down; while the sailors bustled about, the workers declined to do anything, on the ground that they were not being given their full ration of rice. When the tides were right, night fishing, using flaming branches, could produce exciting hauls of lobsters; occasionally, a pig would be chased and caught in the undergrowth; and one must assume that fish were also still caught; but in general, the diet was of boiled rice, garnished with wild ferns. Efforts to make salt and soap were initially sabotaged by the islanders. It was only after several weeks that two sailing boats arrived, loaded down with rice and turtles obtained from Salomon (food was being severely rationed on Peros Banhos, which had been depending on the *Diégo* for fresh supplies….). Further supplies were brought to the island at the end of July and, finally, early in August, those still on the island were brought to Peros Banhos by a diverted steamer, the *Clan Macphee.*

Here, then, is Dussercle's description of his involuntary holiday home.

"Eagle Island is entirely planted with coconut trees, most of them 'cocos Bon Dié', that is, they have grown up naturally, the gifts of nature or brought ashore by the sea-currents. However, towards Pointe Marie Louise, one of the former administrators had started to establish a systematic and symmetric plantation: it makes a splendid sight, but no human work can rival the efforts of the Creator. Although minimal in area, Eagle nevertheless has some very beautiful spots. The breakers which surround it on all sides form a belt of foam, which boils ceaselessly about a quarter of a mile from land: it's like a perpetual rustling of white linen, except that the swishing too often resembles – alas – anguished cries from the depths.

Each reef point, each pathway, and each corner of the plantation carries its own particular name handed down by tradition. If we start from the Establishment and go north along the shore, we come across the Pâté Paloi, an enormous mass of coral which sticks out above the uniform line of breakers. Its name is a reminder of the existence of an old chap, Eloi (Papa Eloi, contracted to Paloi), who made this bit of reef his habitual and jealously guarded spot for spearing *ourites.* Further on, there is the Bassin Frégates, so called because the frigate birds assemble there every day 'to have their bath'. This bay is delineated by a gap in the breakers (known locally as a *couline*), which appears like a very narrow pass. It was this special formation, which allowed the canoes used as lighters to come right in to the sandy beach, that led one administrator to consider dredging a cut through the sand so as to inundate the marshy area inland – an area which extends almost all the way between the establishment and Pointe Marie Louise. If this could have been done, the small transport boats could have entered the artificial harbour, making loading and unloading much simpler. However, while this project was never executed, the Bassin Frégates is still called Bassin Paulet, that being the name of the imaginative and enterprising administrator who had thought up the idea.

And so to Pointe Marie-Louise, which is guarded on the western side by the Pâtés Pointe Marie Louise, to the east, by the Ilot Grand Passe. Between these two large dark, flat-topped coral heads there is the Lamare Colo (where a man called Colo perished); this is a passage between the Ilot Grand Passe and the land, through which small boats can enter the Bassin Grand Passe and anchor, south of the Ilot, during the North-west monsoon. If we follow the coast facing South-east, we come to the Coco Rouze (so called because of the tawny coloured coconut tree growing there); then the Passe Allard; then the Passe Bateau opposite the Camp; then Passe Bon Coeur; and, right in the south, before rounding the point, the Ilot Pointe dans le Sud and the Passe Tortue.

The Pointe dans le Sud (which the locals pronounce, confusingly, as if it were Pointe d'Annecy) is also known as Quarantaine. In fact this where, long ago, a camp was set up for the unfortunate workers who had succumbed to a measles epidemic, which had broken out on the ship taking them to Eagle Island. Pointe dans le Sud is a wild place. The sea there is almost always uneasy, on account of the proximity of the Cow Island (Ile aux Vaches) channel, and ceaselessly attacks the reefs of coral piled up into fantastic shapes, which stick out some way towards Cow Island itself. This island's clear silhouette often seems, in the eyes and imaginations of the local people, to be surrounded with the ghosts of corsairs, treasure hunters

and French raiders. Going back up the North-west facing coast, towards the Residence, one comes to the Bassin Possons and Bassin Médailles, both rich in sea game; 'médaille' is indeed the name of a species of fish, which the islanders also call 'cadin'. Two hundred metres before getting back to the Establishment, one comes across the Pâté Cimetière zenfants, hard bristling masses of spiky coral, which are to seaward of the children's cemetery. Beyond, there are patches of deeper water which provide the ship's usual anchorage during the South-east monsoon. That is where we were anchored when our ship [the *Diégo*] was wrecked.

The interior of the island is no less rich in similar names. To the north of the Establishment, stretching almost to Pointe Marie Louise and covering the western side of this section of the island, there lies a large pond – the Grand lamare – that is, the unhealthy bog which Mr Paulet had intended to transform into a boat basin, as previously mentioned. The muddy water of this marsh stagnates beneath the inextricable tangle of the *vhoons* and constitutes the best possible culture imaginable for the breeding of mosquitoes. We shall return to this topic below…..At the edge of the Grand lamare, on its eastern side, is found the Carreau Ceylan, planted with Ceylon coconuts, in the middle of which is the Carreau Madeleine, which provided us, during our enforced sojourn, with some leaves of *brèdes sonjes*. Between the Carreau Ceylan and Grand lamare there is a footpath called, rather pompously, Chemin Pont. This on account of the tiny bridge, constructed at the behest of Mr Paulet to serve as a jetty from which copra could be loaded, once his plan to bring the sea into the bog had been realised.

South of the Establishment and facing North-west towards the sea, there is the children's cemetery, with its little crosses carved into the coral. Apart from a single adult buried there in February 1932, only children lie there. Further on, in the interior of the island, there is the Cimetière grand dimoune, kept, as its name indicates, for adults. But, on the way there, one comes first to the Grand Carreau Dalmajee, named after an individual who was murdered a long time ago by a labourer called Paulin, and then to a demarcation line, the Balisage. Finally, just before reaching the southernmost point, there is the Croisée Pomme d'amour. It seems that this type of tomato once flourished there in abundance. A shame it no longer did so – we could have done with them to add to the *Brèdes langues de vache* (a sort of fern) and the meagre *sonje* leaves we got from the Carreau Madeleine…."

Well, what about the mosquitoes? Clearly these insects caused Dussercle greater distress than all his other hardships put together. He devotes pages to the tortures he suffered and to the measure, only slightly less terrible, taken to keep them at bay – a galvanised barrel filled with wood, so as to produce smoke throughout the night, which a momentary pause or directional shift of the wind would divert, allowing the mosquitoes to make up for lost time. He and his companions described their bed-time as "going to the smokery. The truth was that we preferred to be flue-cured, cooked but alive, rather than being the object of the mosquitoes' special favours." Now, at last, it appears that the elimination of the rats will have deprived the mosquitoes of essential nourishment, leading their elimination too…..

[i] '*Naufrage du* Diégo *à l'Ile d'Aigle* (Mauritius, 1936). Other extracts from this book, describing the actual shipwreck, appeared in CN nos. 7 and 8.

Chagossian Update

Nigel Wenban-Smith

The first months of 2006 were significant not only for the scientific and conservation work undertaken, but also for two developments concerning the Chagossian community. The first was the long-mooted and oft-postponed return visit to the islands by a representative group of islanders; the second, a further High Court judgment concerning the validity of BIOT's immigration rules.

The return visit took place between 29 March and 8 April. One hundred islanders went as passengers aboard the mv *Trochetia*, belonging to the government-owned Mauritius Shipping Company. The participants were chosen by Olivier Bancoult, leader of the Chagos Refugee Group, and included both his

own supporters and those of Fernand Mandarin, leader of the Chagos Social Committee, as well as members of the Chagossian community from Seychelles. The visit was made possible by the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding between the British and Mauritian governments, allowing collaboration in this enterprise without prejudice to their respective legal positions. Both governments contributed to the costs. Happily, the favourable political ambience was matched by the weather, with the participants enjoying perfect conditions – important, for the *Trochetia* would have been unable to enter the Salomon at all in bad weather and had anyway to cut short her visit so as to leave at high spring tide.
Inevitably and rightly, the return – to Peros Banhos, Salomon and Diego Garcia – was filled with emotion for those who had believed they might never see these atolls again. Many were disappointed to discover how far the settlements had been overwhelmed by palms and other natural growth, with only the maintenance of the manager's house and chapel at Diego Garcia's East Point as welcome contrast. Special priority was given to visiting the cemeteries and chapels on the three atolls, whose dilapidation and, for some of the graves, virtual disappearance gave rise to heartfelt demands for their restoration. Commemorative plaques were set up to mark the visit; but the islanders were also invited to put forward suggestions for establishing memorials to previous inhabitants that would be easier to maintain than the extensive cemeteries. Given the experience of Eagle Island, whose cemeteries were abandoned in 1935 and were only with difficulty re-discovered by the FFI team (see next/previous article), a well-built memorial close to each island's main landing place might prove a sensible solution to this problem, whatever the islands' long-term future.

The latter issue was revived by the High Court judgment of 11 May. This followed earlier rulings: in November 2000, the Court declared the 1971 Immigration Ordinance illegal and asserted the islanders' right of return (reported in CN 16). In 2003, however, the Court declined an application for compensation for the consequences of the islanders' exile and the Appeal Court turned down an application to re-examine that judgment. In 2004 (CN 24), the British Government made new Orders-in-Council which, among other things, re-introduced the main provisions of the 1971 Ordinance. The latest Judgment has the effect of invalidating those Orders and rejecting the traditional legal doctrine underpinning them. The Government has appealed.

As readers of Chagos News know, the Chagos Conservation Trust eschews all political engagement. CCT accepts the need to work within whatever legal framework may be established for the governance of the Archipelago. Its concern is solely for the maintenance of the area's unique ecological character, which, as the British government has publicly acknowledged, is of "global importance". It is too soon to know whether there will be renewed examination of the options for resettling the islands, let alone forecast the outcome. The recent High Court decision did not address this issue.

There have been other developments this year. We plan to report on the Chagos 2006 scientific expedition led by Charles Sheppard in our next Chagos News. We await articles from participants who are still analysing their data before writing peer reviewed papers which will lead to articles for Chagos News.