

The Periodical Newsletter of the Chagos Conservation Trust and the Chagos Conservation Trust US No 42 July 2013 ISSN 2046 7222



#### **Editorial**

This issue of *Chagos News* celebrates the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Chagos Conservation Trust. We started out as the Friends of Chagos in April 1993, a small group of people dedicated to the interests of the archipelago, brought together by our founder John Topp. Since then we have grown, and what we have achieved is beyond what that first small group dreamed, a fully no-take marine protected area.

Everyone who has visited the archipelago has enthused about what a biological wonderland it is. Left to itself for so many years, it is what so many places could become if we wanted, and had the will to make it so. We marvel at the wondrous places on Earth, seemingly without realising that so much more could be the same. Chagos is one of those places which will, hopefully, someday allow us to regain what we have lost.





So together we have done a wonderful thing. Many other groups have come to help and support us in the process, including many Chagossians, and some of them have written messages of support and congratulations in this issue. We also have a poem written especially for the anniversary. The job is far from over, we have much to do to understand it and secure its unspoilt place in a declining ocean.

Keep up the good work everyone.

Anne Sheppard

### FROM FOTC TO CCT

#### Nigel Wenban-Smith

It's hard now to believe there was a time when only those actually serving in Diego Garcia or managing its affairs could know or do anything at all about the state of the Archipelago's environment. When I was involved officially in the early 1980s, five years had already passed since the last scientific expedition and I had never heard the name of Charles Sheppard. However John Topp, the second of 'my' Britreps, made sure that I waded ashore onto several of the outer islands, even (somewhat hazardously) onto Danger Island. He also made sure that I read David Bellamy's Half of Paradise. I was smitten.



the Chagos represented. We had a lovely time getting them to parrot those two words 'globally important' in their anodyne replies to our letters! The appointment of a Conservation Consultant – none other than John Topp – was a huge step forward, creating the thinnest of Chinese walls between the inside and outside Chagos worlds.

This set the stage for a revival of scientific expeditions, starting with that of a multidisciplinary team in 1996, the first of a new series led by Charles Sheppard. Quite soon afterwards, the dormant issue of resettlement of the islanders removed in the 1970s returned in a succession of



The formation of the Friends of the Chagos coincided with my release from officialdom and I was at once corralled – no pun intended – by John. Those early shoestring days were just as Simon Hughes has described them. What we learned at once was that, access to and information about the Chagos being so tightly controlled, good working relationships with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office were fundamental to securing greater focus on environmental conservation. To some extent we were knocking at an open door, successive Commissioners (most notably Richard Edis) having put immense personal effort into developing this aspect of policy. But there was a continuous need to press for greater information and also to make sure that Ministers as well as officials were aware of the globally important marine treasure house that





highly charged legal cases. How should the Friends respond? We concluded that we could not become engaged on one side or the other of this polarised and essentially political debate. We should make clear that our task was to work for the highest possible standard of environmental protection in whatever conditions might be set by government. At the same time, we felt able to provide a forum for discussion of the issues involved and published a special edition of Chagos News (Number 19), which

included a notable article by the MP who had been the first to champion the rights of those then known as the Ilois, Tam Dalyell.

It was the time for a change of watch and the pleasure of seeing new impetus given to the association's work by William Marsden. With a change of name, the embrace of the internet, and greater collaboration with other conservation organisations (all of them made more aware of the Archipelago as a result of the FOTC/ CCT's work), I could from the sidelines watch the progressive increase in public recognition of the ecological importance of the Chagos.





Twenty years ago these achievements were just a glint in our eyes.

### We Are Now 20 Years Old

#### Simon Hughes

"Simon" said John," how about a drink at my club?"

"Why not?' says I.

After a few sherries and a very nice meal it was over coffee that John Topp, an old friend, (we had joined the Navy together on the same day), smiled: "I'm looking for a new Secretary for this charity I have set up, as Richard [Richard Martin, our current Treasurer] has to go off to Oman." "Why not?" says

I. How could I refuse after such a pleasant evening?



And so it was that I became Secretary. At first I just went to the meetings in John's flat, wrote the minutes (accurately re-written by John of course), enjoyed the wine so thoughtfully provided, and ate afterwards in the nearby *Goya* restaurant (also established in 1993!) with the rest of the committee.

It was like that for a year or so; I eventually learned how to spell Peros Banhos and even where it was, but it took quite a long time to become a "conservationist"; it was Charles [Sheppard] who started it by suggesting the conservation of Chagos was worth doing if only to preserve its beauty. But what really hooked me was the friends I was making; real dedicated conservationists.

I couldn't really understand a lot of the scientific stuff, but I tried, and sent off my attempts to Charles and Anne, who quietly and generously put me right; perhaps some members might be as ignorant as me and so, eventually, the factsheets came along.

Awareness of the Ilois' difficulties surfaced in 1999 as Chagossians took their case for resettlement to a higher level. More to learn, and it continues to need understanding, but another friend Nigel Wenban-Smith [Chairman after John] started his historical research to re-write *Peak of Limuria*, and in his forthcoming book *Chagos: A History*. Also Ted Morris had done a lot of work with his essay *A brief History of the Ilois* 

*Experience* and so it was easy to learn of the background and history with their generous help.

The next Chairman, William Marsden, with help from Pew Global Ocean Legacy, took us to another level with the Chagos Environment Group and bingo! The MPA. It was euphoric.

John very sadly died, but under Alan Huckle, our fourth Chairman, we are using the money he left us to do even better.

And so it goes on. For me it shows what a few friends and loyal members can do. I enjoy working with friends. It's fun and very rewarding!



### Friends and Science

Charles Sheppard

I'm not sure I recall much about the very earliest days of CCT, except that our meetings were always extremely convivial and usually held in the London flat of our founder and first chairman John Topp. I had received a letter from him – before email – introducing himself as an ex-Royal Navy 'Britrep' on the islands, a botanist too, asking whether I was interested in joining a group he was starting called *Friends of the Chagos*.



"You might have some ideas about its conservation, you see"! I certainly was interested.

I had previously had the extraordinary good fortune to have lived, in tents, in some Chagos atolls 15 years and more earlier when I had accompanied primarily military expeditions that my supervisor Professor David Bellamy had helped start up. Those early trips had been in 1975 to Eagle Island on the Great Chagos Bank and then for a much longer time to the northern atolls at the end of the 1970s. We investigated the reefs and islands, and showed that the reefs were wonderful places, though maybe not so different to many reefs. But since then there had been no visits for scientists to Chagos for years, and what David Bellamy later called the 'Decades of Destruction' had affected reefs all over the world. When Friends of the Chagos started, were the Chagos reefs in the same kind of trouble?



John Topp seeded the idea of organising a science expedition and, he was himself well aware of broader environmental problems, and had a good idea that it was still in marvellous condition. There would be only one way to get there with a scientific team and that was to apply for funding from any or all government agencies. The first application bounced right back: 'Not our remit because it is not Britain you see'. The next one: 'Not our remit because it is Britain you see'! Falling between two stools like this has plagued us until relatively recently. But we got there in 1996, supported by the BIOT Government and by two generous owners of large private yachts, Mr and Mrs Heath and Mr Mike Pilling, Friends of the Chagos was just three years old. The condition of the reefs was marvellous, like I remembered

them, and quite unlike almost every other area where I had worked during the intervening decade. It had avoided the 'decades of destruction'. Friends of the Chagos then helped fund a day long conference to present our many results at the prestigious Linnean Society of London.

The earliest days of Friends of the Chagos was, for me, much more than just something to aid the science, which in any case needed much greater funding than Friends of the Chagos possessed. It was, and still probably is, the main vehicle that provides the continuity that was lacking in any other aspect of Chagos. Many of its members had served there, joined by a growing number of scientists who had accompanied the expeditions. Some were just interested in global conservation. All formed a diverse and eclectic group, which still thrives.

Chagos and BIOT was, and is, an unusual place: a military base, a place of failed coconut plantations that were developed in slaving days and subsequently. Some plantations had failed in the 1930s, but most had struggled on through occasional bankruptcies since then. It contains a history in miniature of the tropical world. Friends of the Chagos, later Chagos Conservation Trust, had amassed a large and fascinating account of this history which reflects in miniature the world of tropical small island and their reefs. Some aspects I could see on my visits, from wonderful reefs to the silent ruins of plantation buildings where the main noise came from the rustling of rats and crabs, to the deafening noise from thousands of nesting seabirds on those few small islands that were never planted.

I tell people that science I do in Chagos is just a small part of the total because most of my work is in the very damaged tropical areas of the world. But it is the contrast with Chagos which so excites me. Chagos is always the best bit and is increasingly the reference site for scores of scientists.

Encouraged by CCT in its 'middle years', the science part of the CCT enterprise developed, through forming the Chagos Environment Network incorporating many of Britain's largest science societies and NGOs, whose primary mission was to persuade the government to afford it the best possible exception. It was just too different, so much better, it simply has to be protected. That succeeded.

I have sometimes wondered whether I exaggerate when describing how good



it is. Well, the data shows its condition but, more telling to me than numbers is when I take many scientists out to see it and listen to them, perhaps after their first scuba dive, when they express equal amazement, using just about every possible variation of the word "wow"! There is no exaggeration: just read what other scientists who have been there write about it.

I know the continuity developing from those early days of Friends of Chagos was central to this. John Topp died, a loss to his many friends. He left CCT a sizeable legacy so his help for it, and for the islands, continues indefinitely. In its later teens, CCT started funding an annual conference and now helps fund the more frequent expeditions to understand more about it. A common thread throughout has been the unpaid volunteers who have made up the core of the small but effective charity for this crucial place. The global prognosis for coral reefs is pretty dire, but those of Chagos stand a better chance of surviving for longer than most do. We will see - in another 20 years CCT, then middle aged, can look back and reflect again!

### 20 years protecting the Chagos Archipelago

#### Sonia Rai

CCT has come a long way since founder, John Topp set up 'Friends of Chagos' from his small flat in London back in October 1993.

"It was mostly a group of friends who had spent time in Chagos with the Navy." remembers Simon Hughes, our Secretary. Two decades on, it's a very different picture. "Now we've got people on our Board who work for some of the UK's leading environmental organisations - including RSPB, ZSL and Royal Botanic Gardens Kew. It's been an amazing and at times, a difficult journey. But I'm as keen about conserving this special part of the world now as I was back then. Possibly even more with current concerns about rising sea levels."





As the only UK charity working solely on conservation in the Archipelago, CCT now leads teams of international scientists to the region. Over 100 people have collaborated in research about the Chagos Archipelago and over 200 research publications have been produced about its amazing wildlife and environment.

Some of CCT's biggest achievements over the last 20 years include:

- Leading the campaign to establish the world's largest no-take marine reserve
  Finding unknown habitats including a mangrove swamp and immense seagrass beds
- Restoring forest at Barton Point a habitat for animals, birds and plants

To celebrate these and other results, CCT's first patron, Sir Bruce Macphail, kindly hosted a small evening reception on World Environment Day in June. The audience were given an exclusive screening of a new short film about Turtle Cove on Diego Garcia, and were shown the latest glorious photos from Chagos, taken on the recent CCT scientific expedition in March. Look out for these on our website soon.

Our Trustee Professor Charles Sheppard spoke at the event about the continued need to protect Chagos:

"It is the largest nearly intact reef system in the world, and it has many biological attributes which make it the perfect example indeed one of the few remaining examples - of a tropical marine system that we can learn from. For the benefit of everywhere else." He went onto explain how "...results consistently show, that these are the cleanest waters known in the world. Its reefs are the most resilient to warming water."

Heather Koldewey, another Trustee described her first experience of conducting research in the Chagos Islands.

"Chagos really taught me about what our oceans should look like. As a marine biologist, I have dived in many parts of the world. But most of the places where I work are under extreme pressure. When I dive I am used to seeing habitats that have been destroyed by fishing practices such as dynamite and I have been on dives when it takes 15 minutes to see a single fish. But it's not just the sheer abundance of fish there. It's also the behaviour of the fish. So while you're trying to do your scientific transect, they come up and say "hello" because they've never been fished. It's quite extraordinary."



#### It's been documented that there are six times more fish in the Chagos MPA than anywhere else in the Indian Ocean.

Heather went onto describe the positive impact that the MPA is having on species within the reserve.

"Closing the Chagos Islands to fisheries in 2010 stopped fishing, primarily targeted at tuna but which also had a massive bycatch, particularly of shark and ray species. This has provided an incredible haven for these species in the middle of the Indian Ocean, which is one of the most targeted, over-fished and unregulated oceans in the entire world."

To sustain this vital refuge for nature is becoming increasingly important in the face of climate change. Now more than ever, CCT is passionate and committed to continue a programme of research to find out how best to protect the exceptional ecosystem of Chagos. We are working to protect Chagos for now and for the future and look forward to doing this over the next twenty years!



# Message of congratulation from Peter Hayes, BIOT Commissioner and Director Overseas Territories, to the Chagos Conservation Trust (CCT) on their 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

I am delighted to send my best wishes to Chagos Conservation Trust on their 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The British Indian Ocean Territory is a truly remarkable place. Members of the CCT have done great work through their commitment and enthusiasm in both environmental protection and scientific research. This has generated global scientific interest in BIOT, in line with its global environmental significance.

I welcome in particular CCT's role in involving the Chagossian community in environmental projects. Much of the success here has been down to the generous contributions of many CCT members in a wide range of ways: from sharing expertise to inspiring participants, giving training in practical skills to mentoring. Having young Chagossians participating as team members in the last three scientific expeditions is a great achievement, and their enthusiasm to continue environmental work augurs well for the future.

### The Linnean Society of London

Professor Dianne Edwards CBE, FRS President of the Linnean Society of London

Congratulations from the Linnean Society of London on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chagos Conservation Trust! We are proud to have shared the journey with CCT, facilitating scientific meetings to consider research findings, and also chairing the Chagos Environment Network (CEN), a collaboration of organisations and people (listed below\*) with a conservation, environmental or research vocation contributing to the environment, conservation and science in the Chagos Archipelago/British Indian Ocean Territory. The Linnean Society has convened two important conferences on Chagos, the first in 1999 resulting in a book published by the Society entitled *Ecology of the Chagos Archipelago* (edited by Sheppard & Seaward), which laid down some baseline data. A follow-up meeting at the Society in 2011 (jointly with CCT and Pew), attended by around 90 UK and international experts, presented some of the highlights arising from research in the previous decade, leading up to achieving the fully no-take marine

protected area status. We look forward to convening further meetings on scientific research in the Chagos, and share the commitment of the CCT in their long term effort to protect the amazing Chagos Archipelago.

### \*Chagos Environment Network (CEN) partners

The Blue Marine Foundation The Chagos Conservation Trust Coral Cay Conservation The Linnean Society of London The Marine Conservation Society The Pew Environment Group The Royal Botanic Gardens Kew The Royal Botanic Gardens Kew The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds The Zoological Society of London Professor Charles Sheppard, University of Warwick





#### The Role of Pew's Global Ocean Legacy

Global Ocean Legacy (GOL) is a project of the Pew Charitable Trusts and its partners, and aims to establish a worldwide system of very large, highly protected marine reserves where fishing and other extractive activities are prohibited. GOL works with local citizens, governments and scientists around the world to protect and conserve some of the Earth's most important and unspoiled marine environments.

In 2007, GOL met with William Marsden, then Chair of CCT, to speak about the idea of establishing such a reserve in the Chagos archipelago. At the time, ecosystem-scale marine reserves of hundreds of thousands of square kilometres were virtually unheard of.



These early conversations led to the formation of the Chagos Environment Network (CEN) in 2009 and the publication of "Chagos: Its Nature and the Future". Inspired by this publication, the government launched a consultation, and in 2010, the then Foreign Secretary, David Miliband announced the creation of what was and remains to this day the world's largest marine reserve that is totally protected from extractive activities: the British Indian Ocean Territory Marine Protected Area.



Whilst CCT provided the Secretariat to the CEN, it was Pew's GOL project that provided the staff and resources that ran our campaign for the marine reserve on a day to day basis. Alistair Gammell, formerly the International Director of RSPB, had been appointed as GOL's Director of the Chagos campaign in September 2009, just as the government was preparing to announce the consultation and momentum was beginning to build towards the creation of the marine reserve. We asked him a few questions about that time, and his experience of working with CCT and the CEN.

*Chagos News:* Just prior to taking up your role with Pew, you had retired after 40 years with the RSPB. What was it that persuaded you to come out of retirement to run the Chagos campaign?

*Alistair Gammell:* I knew about how wonderful the Chagos was and this, combined with it being such an ambitious project – to give full protection to an area larger than France – made it irresistible.

*CN:* You say that you knew about Chagos, however RSPB is primarily bird-focused, did you know much about the marine environment of the Chagos?

*AG:* Not much at all, but I love fish and indeed nature in general and with help from CCT colleagues, I rapidly learnt about the Chagos' amazing marine biodiversity. I was also shocked to learn how bad the crisis facing our oceans is and this left me even more determined that the Chagos must be protected.



*CN:* What was your favourite thing about running GOL's Chagos campaign?

AG: Working for a great cause – better ocean conservation and also the camaraderie. It was wonderful to work with so many friends in CCT and the CEN on a common cause, and today we're all still working together to ensure that the marine reserve is supported into the future. And of course the final outcome! An amazing result that we should all be proud of – all of us in the different NGOs that worked for it, the public who signed petitions, all those who responded in more detail to the consultation and also the government who made the decision.

CN: Since the Chagos was declared a marine reserve, Pew's GOL London team has expanded and you're now working on lots of other marine reserve projects. Can you tell us a bit about these?

AG: The British government has an amazing opportunity to play an important role in the protection of our oceans, more so than most other nations. Our overseas territories mean that we have the fifth largest amount of ocean under our jurisdiction of any other nation, and because it's in territories spread across the world, the different habitat types that Britain's jurisdiction covers means it possibly has the

most diverse marine portfolio of any nation on earth.

We are now working with the National Geographic Society and the community of Pitcairn Island in the South Pacific Ocean. If the UK government gives the go ahead, this will become the world's largest fully protected marine reserve, about a third bigger again than the Chagos.





We are also working with the Bermudian government and others on the creation of a large fully protected marine reserve in the outer areas of Bermuda's EEZ. It is hoped that this will be a precursor to protecting even larger areas of the Sargasso Sea beyond Bermuda's own national waters. Another project is in South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI) in the Southern Ocean. Here again we are working with other NGOs, such as the RSPB. The whole of SGSSI's EEZ is already a "marine protected area", but actually there is still industrial fishing taking place throughout. In our view we should be giving this very special area much better protection than we currently do.

We're also just started working with the community of Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic, but that project is still in its very early days. We and they don't yet have a view on what might be protected and we're just at the point of commissioning the first scientific and economic reports to share with the island's community.

*CN:* So coming back to Chagos, what do you think are the most important priorities for the marine reserve in the years ahead?

AG: We need to ensure that the government and the public feel proud of this marine reserve and understand how important it is for the health of the Indian Ocean and that it continues to be well protected. Enforcement is an issue. It is in fact better in Chagos than most of the world's oceans, but it is also undoubtedly not as effective as we would like it to be. Most importantly, we want to continue working with CCT to ensure that Chagos has a strong group of friends who are ready and willing to work together for its continued protection. To find out more about the Pew Charitable Trusts and Global Ocean Legacy visit www.pewtrusts.org and www.globaloceanlegacy.org.



### The Case for Large Protected Areas

Kate West and Harriet Yates-Smith

#### Blue Marine Foundation

Compared to our knowledge of the terrestrial environment, our understanding

of the oceans is severely lacking, as more than 95 per cent of the underwater world remains unexplored<sup>1</sup>. Yet as we gain more insight into this little studied environment, signs of destructive human impact are visible everywhere. Unfortunately what we lack in our understanding of the marine environment, we do not make up for in conservation and protection. We are decades behind the advance of destructive technologies. Currently only 2.6% of the oceans are included in the worlds Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), some way off the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) target of 10% by 2020.

#### Hope for the future?

The result of us reaching crisis point in the oceans (88% of fish stocks are fully or over-exploited or already depleted) now means that conservationists have the attention of government and the public and have an opportunity to act quickly. A study in 2010 provided an assessment of progress towards reaching the MPA target which revealed that total ocean protection had increased by over 150% since 2003<sup>2</sup>. Although some way from achieving the 10% target, this demonstrates that we can act and is evidence of a global commitment to change.

#### A global increase in MPA coverage

The only way that this rapid increase has taken place has been through the creation of large MPAs, which not only contribute to this 'target' but also safeguards a wealth of ecosystems and biodiversity.



Photo George Duffield



Photo: Credit George Duffield ©



Photo: Credit George Duffield ©

Along the way large contributions to increased MPA coverage have included the creation of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument by the United States in 2006, offering protection to 70% of the US's coral reefs and 7,000 species, including the critically endangered Hawaiian monk seal. Other highlights have been: the South Orkney Islands Southern Shelf MPA (2009), the Prince Edwards Islands MPA (2009), Motu Motiro Hiva MPA (2010) and of course the Chagos Archipelago MPA in 2010. The declaration of Chagos was a landmark in conservation, as the 640,000 sq km area not only became the World's largest MPA but also the World's largest fully no take zone.

Making the entirety of Chagos a no fishing area was championed by CCT and, later CEN, for many years, and it was due to their hard work that the government declared it so on April 1st 2010. But a problem that came up before this reached a conclusion was the loss of income from the tuna licences which funded much of the administration of the territory. A solution was facilitated by the Blue Marine Foundation (BLUE) a small, dynamic organisation committed to increasing the area of ocean protected. BLUE brokered a historic deal and secured the generous funding from the Bertarelli Foundation to ensure that the recently designated site could be managed, as originally intended, as a strict no-take zone, in the absence of the tuna fishery which had previously operated in its waters.

#### Why do we need large MPAs

Chagos Archipelago is a shining example of how we can offer protection and enhancement to both biodiversity and fisheries resources. As the largest unfished, uninhabited network of coral reefs in the Indian Ocean, it acts as a global reference point for scientists around the world and as a reminder of what the oceans were like before human influence. *"Chagos is an incredible place for researchers such as myself, it's one of the few coral reef systems in the world that is insulated from most of the human influences that other reefs in the world suffer from" said Dave Tickler of University of Western Australia when speaking about the reserve.* 

Scientists have reported that Chagos shows dramatic differences in the numbers, size and even behaviour of fish compared with smaller marine parks<sup>3</sup>. BLUE's co-founder, George Duffield, who recently visited Chagos said of the Archipelago: "Chagos was unlike any place I have ever been. The diversity and density of fish, coral and birds were so astonishing that it was like entering a different world, or at least a different century. The need for large MPAs is now greater than ever, we must restore our oceans to what they once were."



Photo: Credit George Duffield ©



Photo: White tip reef shark, Chagos MPA. Credit George Duffield ©

Designating large MPAs not only provides us with benchmarks against which we are able to study and understand interactions with the natural world but also protects valuable fish stocks upon which we rely so heavily. The benefits of spill over effects from MPAs have been documented across the world, yet given that nearly 50 per cent of MPAs are smaller than 10 sq km these sites offer no protection to pelagic species: large MPAs could provide a solution. Our current understanding of the extent to which large MPAs protect migratory species is lacking, chiefly because large MPAs haven't existed for long enough to allow us to study them. Despite this, there is a growing body of evidence for the positive effect that reserves, like Chagos, have for pelagic species<sup>4</sup>.

Although we are some way off the 10 per cent MPA target, things are looking up for the marine environment demonstrated by the developments we have seen in just a few years. Over the next seven years and beyond, this global momentum needs to be sustained and needs to be done by adopting a holistic approach to MPA creation. This will mean protecting large (often offshore) MPAs as well as smaller sites which have greater interaction with coastal communities. Protecting large areas of the marine environment, like Chagos, offers us the former and if managed effectively will offer significant benefits to global biodiversity and the human population.

- <sup>1</sup> Figure from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration NOAA http://www.noaa.gov/ocean.html
- <sup>2</sup> Toropova C, Melanie I, Laffoley D, Matthews E and Spalding M, eds Global Ocean Protection: Present Status and Future Possibilities (Gland, Switzerland: IUCN, The Nature Conservancy, UNEP-WCMC, UNEP, UNU-IAS, Agence des aires marine protégées, France 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> Koldewey HJ, Curnick D, Harding S, Harrison LR, Gollock M. Potential benefits to fisheries and biodiversity of the Chagos Archipelago/British Indian Ocean Territory as a no-take marine reserve (2010)Mar Pollut Bull. 60 (11):1906-15
- <sup>4</sup> Sheppard, C. R. C., et al. "Reefs and islands of the Chagos Archipelago, Indian Ocean: why it is the world's largest no-take marine protected area." Aquatic Conservation: marine and freshwater ecosystems 22.2 (2012): 232-261

### 20th Anniversary Chagos Conservation Trust!



Mike Clarke Chief Executive, RSPB

The Chagos Islands are known to many people today as a world-leading example of marine protection. They hold both the world's largest living coral atoll and the world's largest no-take marine protected area. It is unlikely that the archipelago would be in this position without the ongoing interest and involvement of the Chagos Conservation Trust (CCT).

The RSPB has been involved with the CCT for many years, initially working on terrestrial site designation and island restoration, but more recently as part of the Chagos Environment Network, the group of nine leading conservation organisations who successfully campaigned to have the entire



Exclusive Economic Zone of the Chagos declared a marine protected area. Without the leadership and vision displayed by members of CCT, I am sure this designation would not have happened in 2010, or perhaps ever. The research carried out by CCT members was fundamental in showing that the Chagos was a place worth protecting, and the images they showed from its underwater world were truly amazing.

In a changing world affected by climate change and biodiversity loss, the protection of places like the Chagos is increasingly important. With 80% of reefs in the Indian Ocean destroyed or



damaged, the Chagos provides an environment that safeguards species as well as giving opportunities for scientific research and the chance to show people what a healthy reef ecosystem should look like. The birds, turtles, fish, corals and other wildlife of the Chagos now have a greater chance of survival.

I wish the CCT another successful 20 years, and look forward to further collaboration to ensure nature has a lasting home in the Chagos.

### Chagos Conservation Trust and the UK **Overseas Territories Conservation Forum**

Dr Mike Pienkowski Honorary Executive Director UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum

The relationship between the Chagos Conservation Trust and the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum has been long and productive. UKOTCF itself was founded in 1987 (as UK Dependent Territories Conservation Forum), and was able to help and encourage the late John Topp found Friends of the Chagos, CCT's forerunner, in 1993. In turn, John's involvement in UKOTCF was a great asset. He was a

regular participant in UKOTCF meetings. and also a great source of advice to myself when I became involved in UKOTCF as Chairman from 1995.

UKOTCF is a UK-based charity that promotes and advances the conservation of threatened species and ecosystems, and sustainable environmental management more broadly, across the UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies (herein UKOTs). It is the only body focused solely on addressing all aspects of conservation across all the UKOTs. UKOTCF is effectively a federation, working with and through its member and associate organisations (including CCT). UKOTCF operates regional working groups, maintains a website (www.ukotcf.org) providing a range of information on UKOT environmental issues, produces a regular newsletter, and organises meetings to facilitate the sharing of ideas and experiences. It provides reactive advice and support in response to emerging environmental threats and opportunities, and response to the institutional needs of its partners,

> The mutual support between CCT and UKOTCF continued to build in the 1990s and after. CCT's then Chairman, Nigel Wenban-Smith, served also on UKOTCF's Council and strengthened communication and other links between the two organisations. This was also enhanced by CCT effectively providing, by agreement, UKOTCF's BIOT

> UKOTCF also responded to CCT's request to help with public awareness. Before CCT had its own web-site, UKOTCF provided this, at CCT's request, as a section within its own web-site. Around the same time, UKOTCF was raising awareness in UK about the UK Overseas Territories and the importance of their biodiversity - by articles, web-site, exhibitions etc. For the exhibitions, large posters about each UKOT were produced,



including development of locally-led projects, as well as integrating these into more pro-active approaches.





#### **UK OVERSEAS TERRITORIES**

and UKOTCF was able to supply extra copies to CCT for its use. At CCT's request, A4 copies were also produced, with CCT information on the reverse – for one of CCT's early membership drives.

CCT has been involved too in changing emphasis to build on earlier successes. By about 20 years after

UKOTCF's founding (and 14 after CCT's), the UKOTCF Council and partner organisations felt that capacitydevelopment had generally gone so well that territory-based bodies had developed sufficiently to lead activities in most territories. Accordingly, UKOTCF reorganised its working groups from those based on individual territories to those based on regions. In fact, this had already happened in some regions. The purpose was both to increase the potential for exchange of expertise and ideas between territories and to identify common issues and needs, and we think that this has resulted in the best of both worlds. CCT has become a strong participant in the UKOTCF Southern Oceans Working Group (SOWG).

One of the greatest activities of CCT is, of course, the Chagos Marine Protected Area, and UKOTCF was very pleased to play its part in encouraging comment from all at the time of consultation on the proposed declaration. As both UKOTCF



and CCT have made clear, whatever the political future, sound conservation of the natural resources is vitally important. Others much better qualified will be able to write in this issue of the superb near-pristine marine environment of Chagos, and I will not try to compete. The much smaller land environment is, of course, far from pristine and needs much management and human activity to counter the consequences of earlier activities. In this context, UKOTCF commends the work of CCT, in partnership with other UKOTCF member and associate organisations such as the Zoological Society of London, and others in CEN, in developing training courses in terrestrial and marine conservation for young persons in the Chagossian community, so that they can participate in the vital work to conserve the heritage of their islands.



Looking back over these 20 years, a huge amount has been achieved – but this is only the start, and much more needs to be done to secure conservation of this unique archipelago. So, in congratulating CCT on its achievements over its 20 years, we look forward also to even more productive collaborations in the future.

#### From CCT-US to CCT Dr Sam Purkis

Dr Sam Purkis Chairman CCT-US

Chagos is the world's largest unfished marine reserve and this status owes much to 20 years of tireless efforts by the CCT. It is irrefutably important to protect large swaths of the ocean from direct human impacts as, beyond protecting fish stocks, Chagos serves a central role as a baseline against which scientists can assess the degradation that humans and global environmental change exert on the marine environment. Indeed, by studying such a vast ocean wilderness, it



might be possible to decouple the influence of direct human impact from environmental change, whilst in the rest of the world's oceans, the two are inseparably entangled. Following an invitation by William Marsden, a previous Chairman of the CCT, the Chagos Conservation Trust U.S. formed in 2008 and upon becoming a fully registered US 501(c)(3) not for profit organization in 2009, set out with the mission to extend the goals of the CCT to the United States by promoting conservation, science, education and historical research in relation to the Chagos Archipelago. The CCT US team is chaired by Sam Purkis, with Steve Snell filling the role of Vice Chair & Treasurer, Carol Garner as Secretary, Gwilym Rowlands as both Membership Secretary and Website Administrator, and Chip Batcheller serving as Outreach Director. It is a pleasure and a privilege to work alongside the CCT as they mark their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

#### Congratulations from Papahānaumokuākea



#### Nai'a Lewis

Strategic Initiatives Coordinator Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument and UNESCO World Heritage Site

In honor of the 20th anniversary of the Chagos Conservation Trust, Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument (PMNM) and World Heritage site extends hearty congratulations! With a successful cruise to the Chagos this past February, where PMNM was able to take part in collaborative research that hopes to make a significant contribution to the understanding of climate change and its impacts to ocean ecosystems, the future is bright indeed. PMNM looks forward to further cooperative activities that will help both sites, as well as improving largescale marine conservation world wide.



Charles and Anne Sheppard with Papahānaumokuākea collaborator Daniel Wagner, Salomons Atoll

### **Kindred Spirits**

Ernesto Bertarelli

That the Chagos Conservation Trust is celebrating its 20th birthday seems an incredible achievement. Not simply because of the significance of the anniversary itself, though it is indeed a great milestone. But rather because it provides some insight into how far ahead of their time the founders were in establishing the Trust in 1993.



Their foresight in recognising and standing up for the absolutely unique and vital importance of the Chagos marine environment is to be applauded – loudly, and more so, all that the Trust has achieved in those two busy decades. It has been an exemplar of advocacy, education and of action. I am sure I will be but one of many offering my congratulations and grateful thanks for all that the Trust has accomplished.

My family and I first really came to know about the Trust soon before the creation of the Chagos Marine Reserve, which our Foundation is delighted to have sponsored, when George Duffield from the Blue Marine Foundation came to me and said there was a danger that the fully-protected reserve that CCT wanted was unlikely to be designated unless a substantial sum could be raised. My family has a longstanding, historic passion for the oceans. Avid sailors, my sister and I spent most of our childhoods on the water, or so it seemed, and today we both return to the sea as often as we possibly can. So, of course, we were delighted to help.

That connection with the oceans meant that we saw first-hand the destruction that was – is – being wreaked; noticeably fewer fish in areas where previously they had been abundant, declining coral, an increase in waste – a tragic story, with which we are all too familiar.



Standing in stark contrast to that bleak picture is what is happening now in Chagos. The no-take reserve there is protecting what is surely the most extraordinary and important marine environment on the planet. Home to the world's largest coral atoll, one of its healthiest reef systems and some of its cleanest waters, it also has the most stunning, staggering array of wildlife. It truly is a refuge - a unique place.

These factors, of course, would be more than enough reason on their own for safeguarding the Chagos marine environment. But there is more. As we know largely thanks to the work of the Trust and its exceptionally knowledgeable and experience Board, the Chagos Islands are also hugely significant in terms of the current and future health of our oceans as a whole. The reason for this is twofold. First, because of the direct impact that the waters there have on adjacent ecosystems, as well as those further afield, and second, because of the singular opportunity that they offer to marine scientists, precisely because they are so relatively healthy.

The Chagos Conservation Trust has led the way in terms of conducting, coordinating and promoting research in the Chagos Archipelago. That research has deepened our understanding of the health of the waters and reef systems there and it has also provided invaluable insight into the role of havens like Chagos in the wider marine architecture. Scientific research, of course has also crucially helped to raise awareness – indeed, it underpinned the establishment of the marine reserve in the first place. So its importance cannot be overstated.

Following the Trust's example, The Bertarelli Foundation recently took its first step – of many, I hope – into marine science. In February and March 2013, having been kindly granted permission by the territory's Commissioner, the Foundation, in partnership with Stanford University and the University of Western Australia, launched an expedition in the Archipelago. Its aim was to pilot an electronic tagging project to examine the capacity to use remote technologies to monitor the movements of large pelagics in the region and was a great success, both in terms of the results achieved and lessons learned.

It was an absolute privilege to have been involved and to have seen first-hand not only the breath-taking, almost implausibly beautiful marine environment, but also the work of the dedicated, talented and passionate marine scientists. It is their work that provides the foundation for action, for in the cold light of hard facts, decision-makers will find it ever harder to retreat from responsibility. It is only by better understanding our oceans that we can hope to safeguard their future.

As people that look to the oceans as a source of recreation and pleasure, my family and I feel very strongly that we owe a debt to them. We are all too aware that the situation is grave, that there is more to do than ever. But we take heart from the Chagos marine environment, from its beauty, wonder and relative health; from the research it is providing us with and from the shining example it provides of what can be achieved. We also take heart that there are people who care about these things in the same way and in nowhere is this better exemplified than the Chagos Conservation Trust – kindred spirits and welcome friends.



### Chagos Expedition 2013

Professor Charles Sheppard University of Warwick

The scientific expedition in February-March 2013 was a success, (as always, I'm happy and relieved to say). There is a full 33 page report (with a lot of photos - not all words!) on the CCT website, so this is just a brief summary.



This time, half of the research budget came from a Darwin Award (DEFRA).

The lead in this was Dr John Turner of Bangor's Ocean Sciences, with Dr Heather Koldewey of ZSL and myself as what are called 'co Principal Investigators'. The other half of the funding was arranged in the same way as in earlier

expeditions, namely by choosing leading scientists to come who can attract their own funds. The ship was more full than usual in fact, with 14 scientists in total. As usual, the skipper and crew of the

good ship Marlin were simply superb, facilitating everything like catering of course, but going well beyond their expected duties, generously giving help with diving equipment, fuel management, lifting heavy buoys fitted with instruments in and out of the ocean, and much besides. We are lucky with the crew of the ship, in our reef based diving research. Our thanks are always very sincere.







This was the first of a set of three expeditions to be done under the Darwin banner. This fund paid for new equipment as well as the travel - a block of funds to underpin an expedition makes all the difference. Of the three that are funded in this scheme, I was i/c this one, and John and Heather will each take the lead on the next two. I would emphasize that although this is a new grant, the work itself can be viewed as part of an integrated series that started years ago, developing several of the themes and starting new ones all connected with gaining a better understanding of the huge area and finding information to help with its environmental governance.

We were busy - two weeks is really not enough, and we have requested three weeks for the expeditions in the next two years – as used to be the case sometimes. But we managed to do the work we had planned - just!

Without repeating the report: some work involved coral juveniles and coral cover, and retrieval and deployment of temperature recorders from all over the archipelago, and while corals are mostly good, it does look like some areas suffered a fatal stress during the preceding year – one unexplained result is the death of most deeper corals in Salomon lagoon. We cannot say why at this stage, but warming water is my suspicion here.





We obtained more video transects, carried on with the study of the high biodiversity, small fauna (that which we call cryptic fauna) and alongside this deployed several sets of plates to record settlement of young - this is also part of an international study. We started measurement of coral growth rates in some places, and also began work on sponges, the larger algae and black corals. We continued with work on the inter-connectedness of reef organisms between Chagos and the rest of the world. I have mentioned this before and results were slow initially but have now started to come in, with several papers published since the last Chagos News, in some very prestigious journals, on corals and some invertebrates such as the coconut crab and some starfishes. It looks like Chagos is firmly part of the western Indian Ocean 'province', as well as forming a link with the eastern parts. Work on coral erosion was started too.

On islands, ornithology was continued along with vegetation work, some with a view to the now-funded restoration project which will take place next year on rat infested lle Vache Marin island in Peros Banhos atoll. Concerning deep water, pelagic fishes, some fascinating equipment was tested and deployed in numerous places. This expedition was unusual in that we also started an extensive filming exercise, on land and underwater. Results on the CCT website soon. This complemented the collection, for scientific, outreach and archival purposes, of many hundreds of photos too.

We dived, for the first time, on extensive and newly discovered seagrass beds. These occur well away from islands, and brought home to us how little of the huge shallow area we have actually seen so far. We looked again at the relatively small area that was hit by a crown-of-thorns starfish plague last year, and started some rudimentary sea cucumber surveys to see how these are recovering from past intensive poaching.

Oh yes... we had the luxury this time, at last, of a portable laboratory that was winched aboard for the trip. Some scientists in the past have scratched their heads at how





rudimentary our facilities have been, especially considering how important this location is, but we have always managed - and I have put up with several (kindly) jibes about how basic our working facilities are compared with facilities in established institutions. Now though, thanks to the Darwin grant, we have a laboratory to work in after the dive. We can sort samples for example, without dripping sweat into them! Luxury indeed.

Our scientists came from Australia, Hawaii and California, as well as from several UK institutions too. We had another assistant of Chagossian heritage who, like others Chagossians on other expeditions have been, seemed to be indefatigable. As before, I never had to suggest that she or he might like to help with this or that – they were already doing it. I don't know why it is, because sometimes members meet up only when assembling in Singapore to get to the islands so don't know each other, but all get on extremely well. There is a magic to these trips and it is always a delight and privilege to be part of it all. The projects all succeeded in all their goals. Now, please do read the much longer account on <u>www.chagos-trust.org</u> if you have not already done so! Shortly, we will also post an update of scientific papers on the web too, and so look also at the file which basically lists all the ongoing projects that we have ongoing. I confess I was surprised when I saw how extensive this has now become. It is appropriate, indeed barely adequate, considering the size and importance of the area, but we are getting there!



We are very pleased to have a report of a research expedition from one of our sister Big Ocean sites, that of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. We try not to be too envious of the resources that they have! Our thanks to them for this story.

#### PMNM Story, June 2013

## New Discoveries Tie Northwestern Hawaiian Islands to Johnston Atoll

Members of a research expedition to Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument returned with specimens of new species of deep-water algae from the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI), and the first recorded specimens of black coral from Johnston Atoll. They also saw and photographed more than 20 species of fishes never before recorded from the NWHI, and 15 species of fishes never before recorded at Johnston Atoll.

The team visited Nihoa, Mokumanamana, French Frigate Shoals and Laysan Island in Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, and then <u>Johnston Atoll National Wildlife Refuge</u> in the <u>Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument</u>, approximately 860 miles (1,390 km) west of Honolulu. Johnston is regarded as a key "stepping stone" for a number of central and south Pacific marine species to colonize the NWHI. The findings represent a significant increase in the known biodiversity of Hawaiian coral reefs, and provides insights into how Johnston Atoll contributes to the diversity of our reefs in Hawai'i.

The team spent 26 days aboard the NOAA ship Hi'ialakai conducting research dives on deep coral reefs below 200 feet in the NWHI and Johnston Atoll. Scientists collected samples of fish, corals, other invertebrates and algae for population genetics analysis; surveyed deep coral reefs and associated reef fish communities; searched for invasive alien species of coral and algae; and conducted archaeological surveys of the Howland, a late 1800s whaling ship that wrecked at Johnston Atoll.

This expedition marked NOAA's first full deployment of closed-circuit rebreathers on a research cruise. Rebreathers recycle the gases that divers breathe, removing carbon dioxide and actively managing oxygen levels, allowing for extended dive times and more efficient decompression at depths not accessible using conventional SCUBA.

The scientific team included researchers from NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries' Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument and Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary, the University of Hawai'i, the Hawai'i Institute of Marine Biology, and the Bernice P. Bishop Museum.



Jacks (*Uraspis helvola*) over deep algal bed at Johnston Atoll. Credit: Greg McFall/NOAA



Table coral (*Acropora cytherea*) is common throughout the tropical Pacific and at Johnston, but in Hawai'i its distribution is limited to French Frigate Shoals and neighboring atolls. Credit: Greg McFall/NOAA



NOAA rebreather divers Daniel Wagner (who participated in the last Chagos expedition in February 2013) and Randy Kosaki (who spoke at the last Chagos conference at ZSL in November 2012) conduct coral, algae, and fish surveys at 200 feet at Laysan Island in Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. Credit: Greg McFall/NOAA



Giant Moray (*Gymnothorax javanicus*) peeks out of coral. These very large eels, which can reach eight feet in length, are common at Johnston but rare in Hawai'i. Credit: Mark Royer/Hawai'i Institute of Marine Biology

This old growth coral colony at Laysan in Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument is something not often seen – it could be several hundred years old. Credit: Mark Royer/Hawai'i Institute of Marine Biology

### The Russians of Diego Garcia

Ted A. Morris, Jr.

Once upon a time, on the atoll of Diego Garcia, the big news of the day was that the Russians were just off the coast, listening and sneaking ashore at night, or that their submarines routinely entered the lagoon and their aircraft flew overhead, or worse. So says the legend.

It's been 24 years since The Wall came down, and many of us have forgotten how seriously we took such concerns during the Cold War, or why the U.S. base on the British Indian Ocean Territory was created. For that we must go back to the 1960s when the United Kingdom was pulling back from "East of Suez" as it dismantled its empire, while the United States was preoccupied in East Asia.

At the same time, the USSR was expanding its Naval presence in the Indian Ocean, using an anchorage off Socotra Island, and building a fleet support facility at Berbera, Somalia, threatening the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf through the Red Sea to Europe and America. Both the U.S. and the U.K. desired a base somewhere in the Indian Ocean to counter the ever-growing Soviet Navy presence. In the end, Diego Garcia became that base.

At first, the base was to be a Naval Communications Station, relaying radio traffic on many different frequencies. As Soviet operations in the Indian Ocean were the subjects of much of that chatter, the USSR was intensely interested in knowing what we knew. It was a cryptologist's world, with everyone recording everyone else and then trying to figure out who said what to whom. When the first SEABEES arrived on January 23, 1971 to build the base, the Soviet AGI ships (Auxiliary, General Intelligence) followed our LSTs to the atoll, and maintained a listening watch over the Communications Station for years thereafter. To the men on DGAR in the early days, 'Russians' were a constant presence, just over the horizon.

I have a website about Diego Garcia, and over the last 15 years about 400 people have sent in stories of their time on the atoll in the 1970s and 1980s. A very few have written about the Soviet Navy in the vicinity, and I've distilled those stories here in chronological order, hopefully to give an idea of the mind-set of the times. (I've cleaned up the spelling and grammar in the quotes below.)

- SEABEE Tom Scott was a Construction Electrician 2nd Class at the time in Mobile Construction Battalion 40 (MCB-40), and arrived on Diego Garcia as part of a 26man advance party in February 1971 aboard the USS HARLAN COUNTY (LST 1196). He wrote: "Although I was oblivious to it at the time ... there were some political ramifications to what we were doing... The other members of the Indian Ocean Rim nations were concerned about the potential for conflict between us and the Ruskies in their placid little corner of the world. We were picked up by a Russian 'trawler' (it was bristling with fish poles or antennae, I'm not sure which) as soon as we cleared the east coast [of the U.S.] and it followed us all the way, remaining stationed off of Diego the whole time we were there [through October 1971] so their concerns might not have been totally unfounded."

- Retired Master Chief Richard "Scotty" Scott was aboard the USS VERNON COUNTY (LST 1161) as it arrived in March 1971 and recalled that, "A Russian ship was seen and continued to shadow us. The Old Man had told us now we were off to an Island in the Chagos Archipelago called Diego Garcia." - Ensign Joe O'Loughlin was a crew member of the USS ANCHORAGE (LSD-36), which arrived at Diego Garcia on March 28, 1971, wrote, "I remember the Russian trawler that dogged our ship's every move in and out of the area, all the antennas she had sprouting from her topside surfaces, and all the signal traffic she generated."

- Seaman Steve Brunette, also on the USS ANCHORAGE, said, "After leaving Freemantle, Australia, we were followed by a Russian cruiser who also stayed on the horizon while we offloaded the 2 evaporators and various other Seabee materials [on Diego Garcia]."

- Also arriving on the VERNON COUNTY was the "Old Man", Commander Daniel Urish. During his Command of MCB-40, he saw Soviet ships off Diego Garcia on numerous occasions.

On June 22, 1971, he spotted the Soviet Surveillance Ship DURIYA 10 miles out from Eclipse Point. The DURIYA was spotted again on June 24, and on the 30th. On the 4th of July, 1971, Commander Urish sighted the Soviet Naval Destroyer

#405 12 miles west of Eclipse Point, sailing in company with the DURIYA. Here are the drawings of these ships made by Commander Urish at the time:



Fred Cook, an Engineering Aide 3rd Class in MCB-40, also in the advance party, said that they spent a lot of time "watching the Russians watch us". He denied that Russian "commandos" ever came ashore, but that a practical joke involving supposed Russian rations found on a beach caused a great deal of anxiety for a while in March of 1971. He did share this story about the ever-present Soviet spy ships: "The entire time that we were on DG, the Russians had several trawlers, destroyers, and a cruiser or two that stayed out near the horizon to keep an eye on what we were doing. At first, everyone (almost) worried about them, then ignored them and finally forgot them. Somewhere in between the worrying stage and the forgetting stage, we decided to have a little fun with the Ruskies. One of the guys in Headquarters Company had done a previous stint in the Air Force as a communications tech of some sort and knew Morse code. So one evening he showed up outside H-15 (headquarters company hut 15) where yours truly and about a dozen other engineering types called home. Neatly tucked under his arm (in a plain brown wrapper) was a battle lantern he had stolen ... er ... that is 'borrowed' from one of the ships in the lagoon. As soon as it got dark enough and drunk enough, he started flashing messages to one of the Russian ships. Guess what? Pretty soon, they started talking back and real guick like, the messages were coming and going as fast as our 'expert' could handle the translations. At first the messages were simply 'Hello, how are you' types of things and the Russians were answering back very politely. Finally the appropriateness of the messages started to deteriorate (being nice got boring) and someone suggested asking if all Russian mothers wore combat boots (really!). There was a long pause in the flashes from the ship while they (apparently) double checked the message and in reply tried to change the subject. Well, this made 'the group' mad and the next message that went out had to do with everyone on the ship puckering up to our behinds. I don't know if the code was sent correctly, if the Russians believed what they

had received or if the Russian captain showed up on the bridge, but it got real dark real fast in that part of the ocean/horizon!"

- Dennis Vita also arrived in March 1971 with MCB-40's Bravo Company (in the SEABEES, Bravo Company constructs utilities and operates repair shops) and worked in the Generator 'Shack'. He asked, "Does anyone remember the Russian trawlers off our coast and our radio man playing a song for them -- Back in the USSR ?" Playing this song is a recurring theme in the stories, and is reported over several years.

Seaman Chris Ahern was a steel worker with the SEABEES of MCB-40 on DG in 1971, and had this to say about Russians on the island: "I also heard of all the stories of strange faces in the chow line, etc., etc. I did not believe there were any Russians on the Island as anyone else did. But listen to this. I did a 20 year career as a Steelworker and while I was stationed in Sigonella, Sicily in '77, I was getting something to eat at the chow hall and I sat down with this Marine SGT. I think Costa was his name. He looked at me and said hmmm Seabee huh, I was a Seabee once, well kinda he said. I replied what do you mean kinda? He began to tell me this story, I don't know if it is the truth, only that he was surely there at that time since he described happenings and the way everything was set up there. He said he was stationed at the embassy in Saigon in '71 and was told he would be going on a classified mission to Diego Garcia. This SGT spoke fluent Russian, he was told to grow out his beard and that he was going to be sent there undercover as a Seabee. He said about a month later he and two other marines were on their way. He said they went in on one of the first flights to the Island [so this was after July 28, 1971] and went on to say that they worked as if they were Seabees for about 2 months working during the day and patrolled the island at night. One night while passing Connex Box city (remember that where they kept a lot of the supplies) he and the other two marines heard whispering back in the maze of connex boxes. Costa said he whispered "over hear hurry" in Russian and sure enough two guys dressed as Seabees came running out of the maze. Costa said they apprehended them and they held somewhere outside of camp and sent back to D.C. to be interrogated. This really shocked me because of how much he knew about the island and things that happened at that time. I did not tell him that I was there until he was done with his story. I will leave to everyone else to form their own opinion."

- Some stories imply that everyone knew and accepted that there were AGIs offshore all the time. For example, Electronic Technician 2nd Class Jeff Mead who was with ACU-4, wrote, "Anybody remember the time when there was a problem with the burners on the chow hall mess kit barrels and about a 1000 guys were sicker than hell? If that Russian trawler knew that, they could have taken over the island in about ten minutes."

- Jonathan Rutka of MCB-1 Alpha Company (in the SEABEES, Alpha Company maintains all the vehicles and equipment) worked the night shift at the Equipment Repair Shop. He arrived in October 1971 and left in June 1972. He states: "I remember the day that the white Russian trawler came sailing into the bay. It appeared to be an electronics spy ship and I remember the large deck gun forward! Does anyone remember the Russian subs?" Jonathan may be mistaken; AGIs were in general not armed, and he may have seen the British sub *HMS ORPHEUS* enter the lagoon. She made a port call on October 8, 1971.

Overflight by Soviet aircraft is also a recurring theme, although Diego Garcia was so far from the nearest possible air base that such flights were more likely made by US or UK aircraft flying from aircraft carriers in the vicinity.

- In 1972, former Equipment Operator 2nd Class James Perez was on the atoll with the Chagos Detachment of MCB-133. He was a Disc Jockey on Radio Reindeer (the Armed Forces Radio Service AM station on the island). He says, "We used to play stuff for the Russians on the Trawler that was always just over the horizon during the day but it was just off the reef at night on the ocean side. I used to go out at dawn and watch them through my binoculars. We'd wave at each other then they would cruise over the horizon again. I think we had to do an emergency appendectomy for one of their crewman once, one of the first efforts at goodwill I guess.

"I also used to like watching the Russian Bear do touch and gos on the runway to check the length. We couldn't do anything about it 'cause we had no permanent aircraft there. All we could do was scramble a fighter flight out of Utapou, Thailand, and the Bear was long gone before they could get there. Kind of humorous looking back at it."

Without challenging James' memory of the events, TU-95 Bears did not have an air base in the region to support their operations until Berbera was completed in 1975.

- In 1972 - 1973, Dave Glazier worked on the concrete/masonry crew of MCB-4 during the day, and as a Disc Jockey on AFRS in the evening and, "Used to salute the Russian Trawler with 'Back in the USSR' from Beatles until the CO ordered me to cease. Remember the MIG used to flyover everyday around noon for picture taking, and do the wing dip salute to all of us?" Gregory McAdam was there then and also remembers playing 'Back in the USSR' routinely on the radio.

- Mike Bell was the Postal Clerk for the Naval Communications Station in 1973 & 1974, and wrote wanting to know if "anybody remembers the Russian sub pulling into the harbor?"

- In 1974, Anthony Baca, another SEABEE, reported that the USS ENTERPRISE (CVN-65) paid the island a visit in the form of aircraft fly-bys which, "gave me a sense of security since Russian ships had been the only ones around for a while."

- Mike Rea, a Builder Chief with the SEABEES in 1974 claims that Russian reconnaissance aircraft flew over the island routinely, and that "...we painted words on the top of our trailer that weren't complimentary to Russia. A few weeks after we did this we were told that it caused an international incident and we had to repaint the top of the trailer."

Between February 1975 and February 1976, Frank Wables, a Chief Radioman stationed at the Communications Station, remembered that Jerry Whitworth, the spy, was there at the same time. Frank says, "I always wondered why that Russian trawler was at the same end of the island at the same day on the first two nights of the month." The FBI investigation revealed that Whitworth mailed his stolen documents to a confederate off-island, but I can't help picturing clandestine meetings on a moonless beach with black-faced men in a rubber dinghy...

- John Reed, also stationed at the Communications Station between May 1976 and June 1977 wrote that, "I remember seeing the Russian Bearcat [Bear] fly overhead, shadowing the island. You could hear the thing an hour before you saw it. And the Russian trawlers on the horizon checking us out." This is entirely possible, but if it occurred, the event probably remains classified to this day.

- Another AFRTS Disc Jockey, Tom Reilly remembered that in 1978, "I had a weekly radio show, called the R&R show on Sunday afternoons. I played rock and roll. We were always getting warnings that Soviet ships were off shore listening to all of our communications. I always wondered how many Russian sailors were introduced to rock and roll that way..."

And that is the last mention of Soviets in my records. Was that because they were kicked out of Berbera about that time, or because the average American's attention was ever-after focused on the Islamic world following the abduction of 52 Americans in Tehran and the Iranian oil embargo of 1979? No doubt, some of both. But from 1971 to 1977 the men on Diego Garcia shared exchanges with the sailors of the Red Fleet, and everyone escaped without a scratch.





### Recollections of Diego Garcia and the Chagos

Oliver Alden "CHIP" Batcheller (1979 – 1984) Commander United States Navy (Retired)



CO NAF: An anonymous gift from one or more of my sailors. It showed up one morning on my desk.

#### The Nibble

In early November 1979, I was flying the A-6E Intruder off the USS MIDWAY (CV 41), on a short deployment to the Indian Ocean with the promise that we would be back to our home port of Yokosuka, Japan by Thanksgiving. One of our exercises was to plan a simulated attack on the air field located on Diego Garcia. The mission went as planned and I remember as we departed what an absolutely beautiful tropical island it was, having a blue lagoon, coral reef, pure white sand beaches and swaying coconut palm trees, a place that would be lovely to visit and explore. That night, 4 November, 1979, everything changed. The ship's Captain announced that there was a crisis in Iran, Americans had been taken hostage and we were headed north. We didn't get back to Japan until March, 1980. There were two more deployments to the Indian Ocean but we did not get close to Diego Garcia and the Chagos.

#### The Bite ...... Well Two Bites

In May of 1981, I received orders to the staff of Commander, Fleet Air Western Pacific located at Atsugi, Japan as the Operations Officer. I wasn't happy with those orders. I wanted a job that kept me in a cockpit, flying and hopefully back in the states. One of my jobs was to conduct Command Inspections of all the Naval Air Activities in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean which included the Naval Air Facility at Diego Garcia.

During my first inspection we took advantage of a boat trip outside the lagoon. We heard some loud splashes but saw nothing when we turned to look. Scanning the area of the splash a huge manta ray soon breached then disappeared. On our return to the lagoon another one breached just ahead of our boat. Looking over the bow of the boat, I saw several more swimming just below the surface, diving to the white sandy bottom then climbing and rolling to dive again, then climbing to breach. The trip and BBQ that night were the highlights of the visit there.

Another of my duties was oversight and management of Navy targets and ranges in the Pacific. There were no targets or ranges in the Indian Ocean, and with the continuing need for the presence of Navy Battle Groups in the Indian Ocean, I lobbied for and supported the need to at least see if there might be an option to set one up in the Chagos. I got a solo trip to Diego Garcia to investigate but was only allowed two days on island to do it. While there, I arranged a flight on a P-3 Orion (Sub chaser) deployed to Diego Garcia, to fly over the Chagos and take pictures of the islands. We flew low level over many of the islands. Again, what a beautiful place. In hindsight, I'm glad that the target plan was eventually scrapped. In the photographs below, the presence of sharks was immediately apparent. The oversized shark nicknamed Hector was well known to residents of the island in the 1970s and very early 1980s. The boat was reported to be 23ft in length.



1982 Eagle Island: A candidate target for practice bombs. Note the sharks between the reef and shore.

The legendary Hector in the lagoon; date unknown,

#### 'A great catch'

Early in 1983, I had the honor to be selected for orders to report in September, as Commanding Officer, Naval Air Facility, Diego Garcia, which I readily accepted. One of the rumors in the Navy was that if you really screwed up, you would get orders to Diego Garcia. I knew better. As with any orders there is the good side and the bad side. The bad side is that no family members are allowed on the island, it is a one year tour, it is considered <u>remote</u> duty, and it rains ...... a lot. The good side attributes were: a tropical island, warm waters, drop dead sunrises and sunsets, dedicated crew , cocktails with John Topp (BRITREP at the time), Friday nights at the BRIT Club, coconuts, beach combing for shells, exploring history, and many more.

The Island did not disappoint. Living was a bit sparse by some standards but perfect for me. Hours were long but acceptable when you considered that a walk on the beach or a swim in the lagoon were only a short walk away.

If you have young children you may be interested in the e-magazine *Sea Urchins,* written especially for them. Subscriptions are available at <u>www.seaurchinsmag.com</u>

The recent issue has a beautiful and informative piece about Chagos marine life.

We have 5 copies of the first issue to give away to the first 5 children who email me at <u>chagosnews@chagos-</u> <u>trust.org</u>.



### Chagos

Little islands in the blue, how do you do?

A little more hardwood perhaps?

Given half a chance I wonder at your coral wreaths, your fragile waving palps born with such coloured countenance.

Above we suck-sip from the hairy coconut while your pipes play an ancient fuque today.

These palms beat to the breeze on blue-wide sea, underneath tube-feet dance soft bells, set-off alarms that over fishing can.

The coelom pulsates in trapped Haiku the limpets holdfast still.

Keith Mac Ivor