CHAGOS NEWS

The Periodical Newsletter of the Friends of the Chagos

No. 1 **July 1993**

Editorial

Welcome! From its very conception it was obvious that the Friends of the Chagos would not only need, but would depend upon, a Newsletter as a vehicle for information to *and from* its members to keep them informed and to receive their views and suggestions. This first edition aims to establish this line of communication and to invite contributions.

The contents therefore comprise a word from our Chairman, John Topp, on where the organisation stands and progress towards formal achievement of charity status; a summary from the two 'Island Commanders' on measures being taken in the Chagos by those currently at the sharp end of the conservation effort; a scientific viewpoint provided by Dr. Charles Sheppard, principal Research Fellow at Warwick University, who has considerable Chagos experience gained in the 1970s Joint Service Expeditions; and a little history in the form of a first-hand account of the 1944 Cyclone.

I indicated earlier that communication has to be a 'two-way street': this means that the benefits of a newsletter will only be realised fully if Members use it. There is a huge amount of knowledge about the Chagos, much of it with Friends who have already joined, and it is this which we seek to unlock by encouraging you to put pen to paper and share it around. If *you* have news, views, comments or suggestions, please do contribute by writing to the Editor at: Friends of the Chagos Newsletter, 37 Holly Grove, Fareham, Hampshire, UK PO16 7UP.

Happy reading... and writing!

Richard Martin

Friends' Progress - a note from the Chairman

It was joining a similar Charity that prompted the idea of creating the Friends of the Chagos. Trying the idea on other people elicited enthusiasm and some draft objectives met with approval. Professional help produced the brochure which you will have seen, and the whole process took about a year.

Now we have an 'up and running' organisation. Four formal meetings have taken place this year and officers have been appointed to the posts of Chairman, Treasurer and Newsletter Editor. Membership has now passed the 50 milestone, which is good for our first half year. A number of Friends have been very generous with their initial subscriptions, and this is greatly appreciated. A Sterling bank account has been opened in the UK and a dollar account in Diego Garcia - the latter was important as a US $10 cheque would have cost £8 to clear into a UK account, and we would have lost money on every dollar member who joined!

Currently we are grappling with our Articles of Association and registration with the Charity Commissioners: a bit like passing a camel through the eye of a needle - while *we* know that our intentions are honourable and charitable, we have to prove it legally to the watchdog. This is no bad thing, and will ensure that now and in the future all expenditure of our subscriptions is correct, legal and properly accounted. It is a guarantee for all Members; at the same time it relieves us of tax and puts the Friends of the Chagos on a proper footing.

It is far too early to foresee how successful the Friends of the Chagos will be; that depends on us. We need now to increase our numbers, recruit and expand. We already have a richly diverse membership of intelligent individuals whose contacts are widespread. How about each of us aiming to find a couple of others each year to join? Another brochure and membership form are enclosed to help, and the latter can be reproduced locally, if required.

Finally, let me say that I spent the whole of February in Diego Garcia, by courtesy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and can tell you that 'our' island - and the whole of the Chagos, which I visited thanks to the US and UK military - are in excellent shape.

John Topp

Friends' Annual Subscriptions

Members are reminded that subscriptions to the Association are renewable annually. In order to avoid subscription renewals continuing all the year round it is necessary to 'blob them up' into half -year periods: thus any members who paid their initial subscriptions prior to end - June 1993 are requested to renew their subscriptions by 1 January 1994. Please help us to minimise admin costs by renewing without the need for further reminders.

The Current Perspective

It is indeed a great pleasure and privilege for both of us to be currently serving as the British Representative, British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), and the Commanding Officer, U.S. Navy Support Facility, Diego Garcia respectively, at the time of the launch of The Friends of the Chagos. Readers can rest assured that the islands are in good hands and that we, and our men and women, are looking after them to the best of our ability. We are, of course, fully aware that 'to the best of our ability' is a very subjective phrase and its definition will change almost every year as the island's population changes. Let us tell you of the state of some of the islands, some of the ongoing projects, and of the initiatives presently contemplated.

We both arrived here in Mid-1992 and were impressed with what we saw. It is evident that great care has been taken of the environment and that each change of personnel has brought with it fresh ideas. We like to think that we have brought our own ideas and ways of achieving them: we have certainly spent a great many hours ourselves working on environmental matters and as we come to the end of one year in office, we are confidant that history will prove that we have been pulling our weight to ensure this wonderful tropical paradise has been well looked after.

The main project that our predecessors instigated was a concerted effort to clear the area around the old East Point Plantation (EPP) of trees and other vegetation so that visitors - mainly the inmates - can enjoy the historical sites that the area presents. Sounds simple - BUT!!

The buildings were heavily overgrown with trees and bushes. Walls were cracked, corrugated tin roofs were rusty, and roof timbers had rotted and fallen into the buildings. This made it difficult, even dangerous, to clear some of debris; even now, some are such that we must wait for the roofs to collapse before attempting to clear them. Quarterly clean-up days have been built into the DG programme and projects for these days have been determined by the British, dependent upon the priority at the time. Good advertising, the incentive to work at the plantation instead of the office, and a free MWR BBQ with sodas at the end of it have heightened the environment clean-up effort. Response has been good. At the time of the visit by His Royal Highness The Price EDWARD on 3 October 1992, the area was looking relatively immaculate with no overgrowth of weeds, trees or bushes. A great many buildings cleared of debris, and the EPP Manager's House restored externally and with a fresh coat of paint. Restored also is the Chapel, the Morgue and the Bleeding Stone, and, more recently, the cemetery. In order to obtain the necessary pass to enter the restricted area we now charge one dollar per person per day and this money is well spent on restoration projects and, soon, a museum.

Of course, the EPP is not the only concern of ours. Preservation of the right type of trees, the scaevola ('scavvy'), the birds, animals, fish, coral and shells are just as much at the top of our agenda. We must keep the correct balance between building projects to meet the military needs and the conservation of our flora and fauna. Thus, we take a great interest in whatever plans are afoot to ensure we are not destroying our beautiful environment. Lowering the scaevola on the shore in the downtown area and removing the Casuarina (Ironwood) trees have done a lot for the aesthetics of the shoreline, the view and, most importantly, the cooling breeze blowing through downtown.

Litter has been a constant problem for both of us. Over the past, too many people have not looked after the environment well on this issue. Evidence of parties on beaches and careless attitudes to discarding cans and paper cups, and worst of all, cigarette ends have meant a great deal of work for us all. Over the past year we have been playing catch up!!! We are succeeding, but when you are looking for litter, you suddenly realise how large the island really is. The whole of the Chagos Archipelago seems to be downtide of some flip-flop manufacturing country, judging by the number of these items washed up on our shores. This highlights the need to always keep litter campaigns in the forefront of our minds.

The yachties use the outer islands in varying numbers throughout the year and, although they are generally environmentally conscious, they have provided a few problems that need to be addressed, mainly the onward collection of the litter that they necessarily leave behind. We are working on this issue with great enthusiasm.

The CO NSF, Captain Stephen C WOOD USN, will be moving on in June 93, but the Brit Rep Commander Fred HATTON RN is staying for a second year completing in June 94. Let us hope that the work in the past and the initiatives for the future are not lost with personnel changeover as they seem to have been in the past.

H F HATTON JP	Stephen C WOOD
Commander, RN	Captain, USN
Commissioner's	Commanding Officer
Representative	Navy Support Facility

Where it's at.

Where Chagos is at, scientifically, is a crossroads.

A history of Chagos is, by any measure, fairly brief. The story of early settlement when much of the vegetation was cleared for copra production is probably well known to all readers of this newsletter. Later displacement of the local people with the development of military facilities on Diego Garcia is likewise a familiar story, and one which I do intend to repeat here. With the provision of an airfield on Diego Garcia, however, the Chagos archipelago was provided with enormously increased access, which brought potential benefits in terms of enabling us to understand its natural history.

Being located at such a central, pivotal place in the Indian Ocean, its natural history and its ecosystems are of central importance. It might be possible to divide up the study of Chagos into phases, three perhaps, but the first two are so scanty that a phase would represent little more than the visit of one or two scientists. Development of island science and reef science has mostly taken place in other parts of the world, not in Chagos. Darwin is commonly quoted as being the first naturalist to remark on it, though he never went there and had to be content with examining Captain Moresby's charts - a kind of "very remote sensing". G.C. Bourne's account of Diego Garcia which was published in 1888 is, to my mind, the first important paper on the area and now after more than 100 years we can see that it is a landmark in the scientific understanding of atolls and reefs generally. Stanley Gardiner's large publication arose from work done at the turn of the century and was ready "for publication in 1914 when the Great War broke out. War and other tasks and illness prevented my return to the work

for some years afterwards." The eventual publication was 1936. This publication is, to my mind, mainly description with little novel synthesis, though it contains much interesting information which several later scientific visitors could use for estimating changes over time.

Always an interesting area for naturalists, Chagos continued to attract visitors and collectors on occasion, specialising in different groups. This leads to the third and most recent phase: the three "ecological expeditions" of the 1970's. These all included mixes of scientists, with Joint Services personnel, who were examining various atolls from two new perspectives. One perspective was the novel one (for Chagos) of looking underwater with diving equipment, and the other was to apply a more synthetic, ecological or ecosystems approach to the study. Retrospectively, the 70's and 80's were the decades when such studies enormously increased our understanding of how ecosystems *worked*, as opposed to just what they *looked like*, and work in Chagos was significant in this respect. The three month expedition to Egmont was first, followed by one of similar length to the islands of the Great Chagos Bank, culminating in one of 9 months to "all the rest", based in Peros Banhos and Salomon. We talk of these terrestrial names of course because that is where we humans lived, but the important point is that these islands together make up less than 1% of the Archipelago's inhabitable, and inhabited, well-lit substrate. Even more than is the case with an iceberg, Chagos mostly lies just below water.

These three expeditions have amassed a substantial amount of data which is of general value in advancing marine science, and of course specific to Chagos. They put Chagos on the map in one sense, and more than one publication by scientists who have not even been there have now referred to Chagos as one of the better known areas of the Indian Ocean in scientific terms. While the many resultant publications have often focused on specific groups, the attempt throughout was to mix or inter-relate subjects in order to advance knowledge of how it all works, and what the role of this large expanse of reefs is in the general Indian Ocean pattern. Many technical publications arose, and lest we laugh at the apparently inordinate delay that Stanley Gardiner suffered with his paper, new ones from the expeditions in the 1970's are still appearing; the next ones to come will be on foraminifera, about 15 years after the initial work!

The position today is that there is much general data on Chagos, and many of us have cabinets full of additional unpublished data which does not find an easy place in the conventional journals and which is only of use to future visits and repeat surveys. The position is also that we have a much better understanding of the role which Chagos plays in the Indian Ocean scheme of things. Just as the expeditions of the 70's did not repeat work done earlier, so the next scientific phase in Chagos needs development beyond the general survey and measurement type, fun though that may be. It needs to be strongly orientated towards what is sometimes called conservation science. Indeed one of the scientists on the last expedition of the 70's initiated this.

This is because the world's general requirement from natural scientists is now as much on conservation as it is on pure science. In a time when biodiversity is becoming a well used word, rates of the removal of species, habitats and ecosystems from earth is proceeding at frightening rates. At a time when we have realised that although scientists have apparently accurate estimates of how many electrons there are in the universe, we now suddenly find ourselves unable to tell within two orders of magnitude how many species there are on earth. At this point, we are suddenly required to understand enormously complex

systems in order to advise on how to protect them.

One general, sometimes rather woolly approach to finding an answer to this is that done under the label of "management". Management in marine science at least, generally has been a euphemism for tinkering, and often tinkering blindly, with ecosystems which we really do not understand very much about. We used to think that ecosystems and species interactions worked in some kind of linear way. Now we have a horrible realisation that many elements of them work in non-linear and chaotic ways (chaotic in its structured mathematical sense, not in the meaning of being a complete shambles!), and we have the knowledge also that most attempts at marine management in the past have been somewhat less than a total success. Man's numbers, after all, are increasing the pressure on all living systems.

It need not be like this. There are those of us who believe that management methods are now moving into yet another phase, partly to adjust to increasing pressure on the dwindling number of "untouched" habitats, and partly to utilise our improving methods for understanding.

Chagos is one of those areas which is relatively untouched. Its distance from centres of population, and the military presence, mean that outside the confines of that particular activity, Chagos experiences the advantages of low human disturbance. We need to know how an untouched system behaves if we are to be able to learn what its weak points are. A "new-era" management plan for Chagos is called for.

Like science generally, management plans have evolved, and are evolving fast. We know that a hands-off approach has not generally worked on land, and has equally failed in many coastal and estuarine systems around the world. It has worked so far in Chagos, because of its isolation, but this cannot be relied on for ever. A realistic assessment shows that the best way forward is to prepare a draft plan using the information which is available now (and which has been available for some years), then go out to the Archipelago to test and verify those elements in it which are testable, and then to refine it and present it. The crossroads referred to at the beginning of this article is the one where we have the choice of carrying on some natural history or scientific studies, hoping that Chagos will remain more or less untouched, or of deliberately assuming that world pressures will sooner or later reach Chagos. A continued absence of significant human impact might be the case, but if it is not, Chagos is so small and vulnerable that it is unlikely that there would be much that could then be done. Prevention is better than cure, and this applies as much in global doctoring as it does to human medicine. So, a draft management plan is required as the next step. I hope that many Friends of the Chagos will be able to take part.

Charles R.C. Sheppard

Principal Research Fellow
University of Warwick.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The first A.G.M. of the Friends of the Chagos will be held at 20 Lupus Street, Pimlico at 3.00 p.m. on Wednesday 13 October, 1993. It intends to seek members'approval of decisions made by the Executive Committee up to that date, to review progress towards Charity status and to deal with any other matters arising. It is expected to last about one hour. Any members wishing to attend should contact John Topp by 1 October, informing him at the same time of any items they wish to raise.

FCO RECEPTION

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has generously offered to hold a Reception to launch the Friends of the Chagos, to be held in the FCO on Wednesday 13 October 1993, from 6.00 to 7.30 p.m. Members and their spouses are welcome to attend; those wishing to do so are asked to contact Johnn Topp at 20 Lupus Street, London SW1V 3DZ by 1 September, to allow timely issue of invitations.

The 1944 Cyclone

Anyone who has served in Diego Garcia will remember the wreck of the Catalina on the beach near East Point. How and when it got there are less clearly known. Browsing through some of the material in the MoD's Air Historical Branch recently, your editor came across the original account of the damage caused to the RAF's wartime unit, No 29 Advanced Flying Boat Base (AFBB). Here it is, as sent in 1944:

From: No. 29 A.F.B.B. 240 & 205 Squadron Detachments.

To: 222 Group, 225 Group, 240 Squadron, 205 Squadron, Kogalla.

Date: 18th September, 1944.

REPORT ON DAMAGE AT No. 29 A.F.B.B. CAUSED BY CYCLONE

1. On Friday 15th September high winds were experienced, gusting to 35 knots. Weather report was requested from Group, and we were advised that some improvement might be expected within 24 hours. Visibility was 3 miles, cloud 10/10ths, wind S.E. Request was made to 222 Group that A & E Squadron in transit to D.G. be delayed, and this was done. Boat guards were put aboard all aircraft at dusk but in view of the fact that no further deterioration in weather was predicted, gale crews were not installed. There were four aircraft at D.G. - L & N 205 Sqn and C & K 240 Sqn.

2. At 01.00 hrs FG on Saturday 16th September, wind increased, and Seaplane Tender No 449 found it necessary to remove the Walton Marine Tender from its moorings; whilst towing it, the towline parted and the Walton was lost. The S.P.T. gave search without success, and also inspected all aircraft, reporting all correct at 13.10 FG. **[This should presumably be 03.10.]** Guards were stationed all along the beach and told to report immediately any new developments; a heavy sea was then running.

3. At 05.15 a red flare was observed from K/240. Having regard to the very high seas then running, and the loss of the Marine Tender, it was obviously impossible to instal the gale crews. At 05.30, "K"s moorings carried away, she drifted and came into collision with C/240. In spite of the gale then blowing the S.P.T. made a thorough attempt to save the collision. The wind had veered to S.W. by this time, and "K" was safely beached on a sandy bottom. All personnel were called out to assist. W/O Park, Captain of "K", took every precaution for the safety of his aircraft, making it secure to palm trees; it was found on examination that the main and storm pennants had parted.

4. At 06.00 the S.P.T. moorings carried away, the 5" bollard being torn from the bow. Engines were immediately started, but cut, owing to swamping by heavy seas which caused her to drift onto the beach. At 06.15 she was safely beached. During this time the dumb dinghy and barge sank beside the rapidly disintegrating pier. By now the wind had reached hurricane force; buildings and trees were falling. The bomb scow broke away from its moorings and was washed ashore. The refueller began to drag its moorings and slowly approached the shore.

5. As all the Marine Craft Section's Aldis lamps were rendered u/s, lamps were taken from "K", and V/S established with the other aircraft. L & N/205 were reported to be alright but C/240 reported water up to Catwalk in Pilot's Compartment. R/T watch was opened in "K", but the transmitter proved to be faulty. The Station Nursing Orderly, who was standing by, was ordered to supply rum and hot tea to personnel turning blue from the effects of cold and exposure.

6. At 07.30, "C" was seen to be approaching the beach north of the pier, the boat guard having given warning of the situation by V/S. The main pennant had parted, and although moused, the shackle pin on the storm pennant had worked loose and fallen out; as the aircraft approached the beach, personnel swam and waded out to it with a rope which was made fast to the Tail Ring, and the aircraft was pulled tail-on clear of the pier. The tide was coming in, but still very low. Ropes were made fast to both float rings, and as the tide rose, the aircraft was pulled up onto the beach. All the time the tide was coming in, the aircraft was in great danger of fouling the pier with its port float and wing, and of fouling the bomb scow which was drifting in on the rising tide towards the starboard float, and only the most strenuous effort on the lines of the aircraft and the bomb scow prevented serious damage to the aircraft.

7. At 10.00 the boat guard in "N" reported that the main pennant had parted, the aircraft being held by its storm pennant only. Whilst the rest of the personnel were engaged in looking after C/240, the Marine Craft personnel endeavoured to board the refueller, doing so only after experiencing extreme difficulty and risk. Their intention was to use this, the sole remaining marine craft, in an endeavour to take off the boat guards of "L" and "N", for whose safety considerable alarm was felt. The sea, however, proved too rough, and they were washed overboard, sustaining light injuries. At 11.00 hours the refueller broke her moorings and swung beam on to the sea. Forces had to be split, a party being detached to prevent this craft from running onto "K". Lines were attached and the refueller made reasonably safe. Rolling beam on to the sea, she rapidly filled and foundered. During this time everyone was working under the most impossible conditions, being blinded by driving rain and sand, and suffering from constant exposure to the sea and the gale. Forces were again split to enable personnel to obtain refreshments.

8. By this time buildings on the foreshore were collapsing and precautions had to be taken against injury by flying debris. All craft were taking a heavy punishment from the high seas, the tide was exceptionally high. At 13.30 a courageous and successful attempt was made by F/O Usherwood and Sgt Gregory (205 Sqn) to rescue the boat guards from "L" and "M", in a rowing dinghy which had been salvaged. Owing to the heavy seas running, it was impossible to take the dinghy alongside the aircraft, and the boat guards had to jump out of the Aircraft and swim to the dinghy. Reports were submitted by the boat guards, and it was decided to get gale crews on board when the seas abated enough to make this practicable. At 13.45 reliefs were arranged to enable personnel to obtain hot meals, but this had to be interrupted as all hands were needed to render assistance to the beached Aircraft. Shortly after 14.00 hours both "C" and "K" were at high water mark and lashed securely. The wind then veered again to NW and everyone was mobilised to prevent "C" from fouling the pier. Whilst this was happening "K" swung beam on to the tide and sustained irreparable damage by a palm tree, through being driven on to the grass verge by the exceptionally high tide and strong wind. "C"s port float was allowed to swing over the grass verge and her hull allowed to swing three quarters on. She was then secured from all directions to prevent further movement. The bottom must have taken a pounding and the port float a wrenching, but on later inspection only a few dents were observed.

9. An inspection was made of the Camp in the morning and afternoon and damage was reported. Two huts being hit by falling trees and one severely twisted with supporting beams broken. At 15.00 hrs a signal was received from Group warning us of a risk of a Hurricane force wind; this was revoked at 17.35. At 16.30 the wind abated, though the sea remained choppy. Gale crews were put aboard "L" & "N" and a system of watches organised throughout the night. Photographs were taken during the day of various incidents. There were no serious casualties. A preliminary assessment of the damage sustained at this Base is appended.

(Sgd.) L E TOMLIN, F/Lt
Officer Commanding, No. 29 A.F.B.B.

The Appendix showed K/240 as beached and extensively damaged, C/240 beached with slight damage and minor damage to N/240. All were soon back in the air except for "K", which remains on the beach today.

Marine craft suffered worse: the Refueller, Walton Marine Tender and Barge sunk, the Seaplane Tender and Bomb Scow beached and badly damaged. Amazingly, the Marine Tender was found 8 days later on the southern tip of the island - ocean-side - and was soon soon repaired. Damage to facilities ashore was also substantial.

"Chagos News" is a private newsletter produced in England by the Friends of Chagos, an Association which is applying for charitable status, and distributed free of charge to Members and other interested parties. The views expressed are those of the individual contributors and are not necessarily those of the Association or the Editor.