

UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum Annual Report 1999/2000

Chairman's Report on behalf of the Executive Committee

The UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum has continued to develop and consolidate its activities both in the UK and the Overseas Territories. This report covers the period from July 1999 to June 2000.

Organisational Development

The restructuring of the Forum's secretariat has taken place. The Director for Development has been able to concentrate on developing capacity, raising awareness and attending to conservation issues within the Territories, while the Coordinator has been able to give attention to the daily running of the Forum. All Associate Members have formalised their membership of the Forum. A fundraising subcommittee has been formed and is investigating a range of possible sources of funding for core work. UK member organisations, RSPB and the National Trust, have offered the Forum advice through their own fundraising departments. Further funding sources are being sought, particularly for continuation and development of further modules of the Forum web-database. A 'Friends of UK Overseas Territories' is being set up for those individuals who feel they would like to support the work of the Forum.

Working Groups

These have met on a regular basis. Their reports are given below. The purpose of the groups is to exchange information between the Territories, and to focus on their needs. They involve a wide range of interests and link into our OT partners as much as possible. Working Groups are trying to take a more proactive approach to conservation issues. For instance, although the initial threat of a rocket launch site on Sombrero (Anguilla) appears to have been diverted, the group is actively pursuing ways of achieving effective conservation on the island.



The possibilities of forming a European Working Group will be explored at the conference in Gibraltar. This development reflects an increasing involvement in the Forum of NGOs and Governments in the Crown Dependencies, i.e. the Isle of Man and the Bailiwicks of Jersey and Guernsey, as well as the rather special OT of the Sovereign Base Areas in Cyprus. The Forum still needs to give attention to ways of resourcing the valuable activities of Working Groups.

Relationships and links with Overseas Territories and OT NGOs

The Forum continues to maintain close-working relationships between those based in UK and partners in the Overseas Territories. Forum officers are working with the officers and Council of the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI) National Trust on a 3-year programme of strategic development, to increase the Trust's capacity, assist

some ways similar to the existing collaboration between the Forum and TCI National Trust. This is different from assistance with particular projects, and somewhat wider than organisational development, bringing in especially relationships with government and other national and international players.

The Forum is working with the Gibraltar Ornithological & Natural History Society to organise the conference "*Calpe 2000: Linking the Fragments of Paradise*", sponsored by the Government of Gibraltar. The conference will take place from 28th September to 1st October 2000.



UK Foreign & Commonwealth Minister of State Peter Hain (above left) admires some of the Forum's new display boards (left) on the wealth of biodiversity in UK Overseas Territories, at the 'String of Pearls' Open Day at the FCO (Photos: FCO/P Tsui and UKOTCF/M Pienkowski)

for forward planning, facilitate partnership with government and other key players, aid the links with

UK government and other overseas bodies and to help develop strategic conservation programmes, projects to implement the priorities and appropriate planning systems.

Both NGOs and government officials in several OTs have indicated to Forum Officers their need for facilitation in strategic development, in

The main themes for the conference are:

- Environmental awareness and education;
- Information networking;
- Tourism and funding for the environment;
- Making protected areas effective;
- Biodiversity action planning.

Relationship with UK Government and government agencies

The year started well with the successful *Breath of Fresh Air* conference, organised in London by FCO with Forum support. The subsequent slow

development of the Environmental Charter has been disappointing to many of the participants in that meeting, both NGO and governmental. A general feeling from the OTs is that more guidance is needed. Forum Officers (with special support from BES and BOU) are exploring with FCO and OT partners ways of making real progress. In addition, many of the subjects in the Gibraltar Conference will be relevant to implementing effective conservation.

The Forum has continued to play a major part in the UK Ramsar Committee, coordinated by the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, and has continued to be the main source of advice on the implementation of this Convention on Wetlands of International Importance in the OTs.

Advice to other UK Government Departments has included consultations with the Department for International Development on their forthcoming Global Environment Programme for the Overseas Territories.

Conservation priorities

The Forum would like to achieve a position whereby sound conservation policies and practices in the OTs mean that reactive dealing with inappropriate developments became the exceptions. There is still some way to go before this is achieved. However, we are pleased that an increasing proportion of effort is concerned with proactive work including both direct conservation actions and capacity building. The Forum's *Conservation Review* (itself achieved with Darwin Initiative support) continues to provide a strategic framework for priority projects, and it is pleasing to see many of the projects supported by FCO and the Darwin Initiative, as well as by NGOs, using this framework. As a result, a good number of the actions required in this review have been, or are being, addressed.

In the context of the Darwin Initiative, it is rewarding to see projects active in Ascension, St Helena, Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands and Turks & Caicos Islands. Most of these involve work by Forum Member organisations. In one case, the Forum itself is leading, alongside the TCI National Trust and CABI, to underpin locally led sustainable development to provide a plan and effective mechanism to conserve one of the largest and most natural Ramsar Convention Wetlands of International Importance: North, Middle and East Caicos. The Darwin project

is centring on biodiversity surveying and management planning. This forms part of a well-integrated suite of projects of the TCI National Trust. These include environmental education work with schools, training for villagers and the development at the ruins of the historic plantation, Cheshire Hall, as a headquarters for the Trust, some of this supported by FCO. Complementary work organised by the TCI National Trust is providing small business development workshops for the villagers of Middle Caicos, so that they can provide appropriate infrastructure, including help to the Trust in managing sites and trails and guiding, bed-and-breakfast, production of local crafts etc. Further complementary projects need developing and funding. Much of this work featured in the speech by HRH The Duke of York to TCI Legislative Council during his visit in March 2000, when he was able to visit Cheshire Hall.

The Forum's Director for Development has worked with St. Helena personnel and others to develop a strategic approach for the establishment of a National Trust on St. Helena. The services of the Director-General of the National Trust have been secured on a voluntary basis to facilitate the work in St. Helena for a period after his retirement. In addition, he will also assist Forum officers to develop preparatory legal material, prior to the visit, pending funding being secured for the project as a whole.

Ways of rebuilding and developing further the previously strong conservation work by the

building on previous work and addressing priority needs. Articles in the *Caymanian Compass* of 26th and 27th January brought attention to the use of money taken from the environmental protection fund. The fund was set up and revenue measures instituted for the sole purpose of environmental protection, particularly the purchase of pieces of ecologically important Central Mangrove Wetlands. The Forum is pursuing with UK government the misuse of the fund in the light of environmental protection, good governance and transparency.

Public awareness and publicity

The Forum has an ongoing priority to raise the profile of the Overseas Territories, both in respect of their links to UK and to highlight their biodiversity; this is to a range of audiences, including people in UK, those living in the OTs and others visiting the territories. The Forum is grateful to the FCO, RSPB and a number of photographers who have made it possible to produce a further seven large display boards in the Forum series. These join the three general introductory boards and five territories boards which were produced previously. All fifteen boards were displayed at the FCO *String of Pearls* open day in June where over two and a half thousand people visited the stand during the day. The South Atlantic group of boards is to be displayed at RAF Brize Norton, the starting point for many who visit Ascension, St Helena and the Falklands. Some of the boards are reproduced in miniature in this report.

The material gathered for the boards is being included on the web-site and a new edition of the booklet is being produced. A number of the OTs have indicated a need to obtain smaller posters suitable for distribution. These will be produced when funding is available. Further funding will be needed to produce boards and material for the remaining OTs.

Two editions of *Forum News* have been published, in September 1999 and May 2000. These have been able to highlight environmental issues; the proposal by Beal Aerospace to build a rocket launch site on Sombrero Island; the slaughter of tens of thousands of albatross in the Southern Ocean through tuna long-

line fishing; and the misuse of funds designated for environmental protection. *Forum News* is one of the means of communicating on conservation issues relevant to the OTs. Apart from its use by the conservation community itself, it is widely read by Overseas Territories Governors, Governments and interested organisations in the UK and elsewhere. *Forum News* is now published on the Forum's web-site as well as on paper, thereby greatly widening the readership.



Mike Pienkowski (far end) outlines the new Forum web-database to the regular meeting between the Forum and UK Government, held on this occasion in the Locarno Conference Room at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (Photo:FCO/P Tsui)

Montserrat National Trust and partners is being explored by the Forum's Director for Development who is working with the government of Montserrat's London representative. Forum member organisations are also developing projects to meet research needs in the post-volcano era.

Forum Officers have been working with colleagues in the Cayman Islands National Trust to explore potential new projects

Information management

The Forum's largest project at present is the development of the web-accessible database to aid information flow supporting conservation in the Overseas Territories. The web-site (www.ukotcf.org) has been active for some time and is frequently visited. The initial design stage of the web-database has been completed and handed over to the Forum at the end of May. Testing with real data is well advanced, and public access is envisaged soon. A complex piece of programming will allow data-entry by partners in the OTs and elsewhere, with appropriate security checking. The first modules cover strategic priorities in the OTs (based on updating of the Forum's *Conservation Review*, allowing this to continue to be used as a means of setting strategic priorities for project work – see above); contact points and basic information on a range of conservation issues; contact information for potential funding sources; and a database of projects and potential projects.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has given a generous initial contribution towards the first phase of the database project. There is a desperate need to seek further funding. The OTs have expressed great interest in the project and indicated a number of priorities they would like to see

included in the database,:

- Sites database, to monitor site-related issues, aiding information decision-making, public participation and reporting for international commitments etc.
- Biodiversity database. Where OTs do not have capacity to house such data themselves; data could be repatriated at a later stage.
- Literature. Most of the studies made in OTs are not available to OTs. This could provide a means of tracking the available published and 'grey' literature.
- Basic data on organisation and responsible officials in each OT.

A major part of the Forum's fund-raising need is to seek sponsorship for the funding of these and other modules.

Overview

The Forum has had a successful year. The Forum's database and web site project is making good progress. *Forum News* remains a conventional – as well as now an Internet – publication vehicle for the Overseas Territories to express views, share information and alert others to conservation issues. A further seven display boards have been produced to join the existing series to help raise public

awareness to the biodiversity of the Territories.

Conservation priorities have been identified. The Forum is working closely with partner organisations in the Overseas Territories, and with Governments there and in the UK. There is increasing involvement of the Crown Dependencies. Comparison with the priorities set in the *Conservation Review* 5 years ago demonstrates substantial achievement despite very limited resources and unplanned development in some Territories.

Funding remains one of the biggest challenges for the Forum. Although the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has given a generous contribution toward the first phase of the database project in order for this project to continue funds are desperately needed, and core support needs to be secured in the longer term.

Forum Officers will continue, wherever appropriate to advise UK Government on matters relating to the environment in OTs. Also, they will continue ongoing liaison and support to Associate Members in the OTs. They will continue to work alongside, and independently of, government to raise the profile of the OTs wherever possible and to draw attention to their special status with regard to the UK.

Report of the UKOTCF British Indian Ocean Territory Working Group

Five topics stand out.

Coral Mortality

There has been no repetition of the 1998 ocean warming incident. Equally there has been little natural regeneration and the long-term trends in sea temperature are discouraging. A proposal to examine the current state of the reefs and the prospects for their ecology, as part of a regional programme already under way, has been put to the FCO and awaits their response.

Commercial Fisheries

The British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) Government has made available reports by the Marine Resources Assessment Group on the 1998 inshore fishery and the 1999 tuna fishery. These revealed a damagingly high by-catch of sharks, consistent with the sharp decrease in the numbers observed in recent years. The effect of the Government's response – to ban the use of wire traces – has yet to be seen. Another source of concern is the proportion of juvenile tuna being caught. On these and several other issues the Friends of the Chagos have urged the BIOT Government to take even more stringent conservation measures, while welcoming their decision to maintain (for the time being) a fishery protection vessel continuously on station.

Conservation Consultant

Fisheries apart, conservation is overseen by the



BIOT Conservation Consultant, John Topp, whose contract was extended during the year. His job involves advising on conservation measures being mooted and ensuring, by annual inspection, that those adopted are being enforced. This arrangement provides vital continuity, which would otherwise be lost, given the regular staff changes in London and, even more frequently, in Diego Garcia itself. In the last year, this official has given special attention to the dangers of excessive recreational fishing

and of inadvertent importation of alien species (e.g. in unwashed building sand).

Possible Resettlement

Early in 2000 the British Government decided to examine the feasibility of re-populating some of the northern atolls of BIOT. The outcome of this examination is not yet known and no decisions have yet been taken; but the Government have stated that they recognise the regional and global importance of the BIOT environment, which will be given due consideration at all stages.

Publications

As foreshadowed in last year's report, the Friends of the Chagos published two further booklets in July 1999, *Plants of Chagos* and *Birds of Chagos*. In the same month *Ecology of the Chagos* was published under the auspices of the Linnaean Society. This provides a full and eminently readable account of the scientific results of the 1996 Expedition.

Report of the UKOTCF Wider Caribbean Working Group

The WCWG met four times during the year. In March 2000 Jim Stevenson replaced Chris Ninnes as Secretary. We thank Chris for his valuable assistance over the past three years. Individual members have taken over responsibility for reporting on each of the six Territories covered by the Group. This has improved the collation of information on environmental problems (and successes) in the Territories.

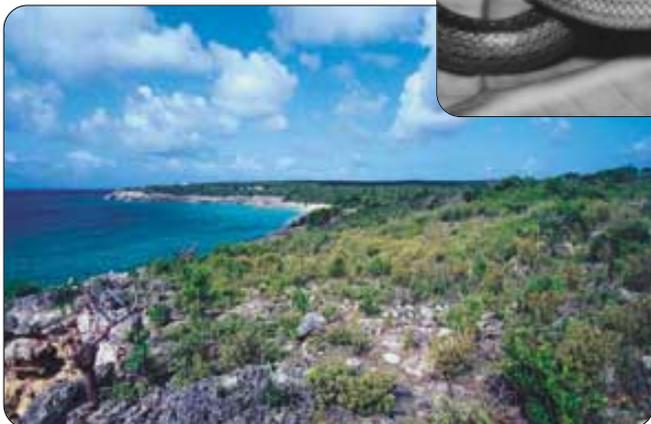
Problems in two Territories have been of particular concern during the year: the proposal to establish a rocket launch site on Sombrero Island, Anguilla; and the use to which the Cayman Islands Government has put funds raised from an environmental tax on visitors.

Anguilla

It now seems clear that Sombrero will not be used as a rocket launch-site by Beal Aerospace and we hope that we can close the file on this development.

However, the issue certainly brought Anguilla's biodiversity into the lime-light. Tony Murray (an ornithologist from RSPB), Dr Jenny Daltry (a herpetologist from FFI) and Dr Michael Ivie (an invertebrate specialist from the University of Montana) visited Sombrero at the end of 1999. Their expedition not only showed that the island held more seabirds than previously thought, but, more importantly, it found a thriving invertebrate population with perhaps a dozen or so endemics. Dr Daltry censused the endemic Sombrero black lizard, and also found another lizard and a gecko, both of which are likely to be unique to Sombrero. Since then, follow-up visits by RSPB staff have found that Anguilla has quite a rich avifauna, with Sombrero and Dog Islands being exceptionally good for sea-birds.

Anguilla: Racer Snake and part of the coastline
(Photos Glenn Gerber and Ivor Hodge)



The Sombrero issue has a number of lessons for us, but the main one should be that no-where is safe. We must make sure that conservation issues are given due weight as part of a proper sustainability plan for each territory, and that the public is aware and supports the conservation case. Building a conservation ethic among the general population in Anguilla is going to take time, but RSPB and FFI are both helping the Anguilla National Trust to achieve this. Meanwhile WWF-UK is running a Darwin project in Anguilla to ensure that islands like Sombrero get the legal protection they need.

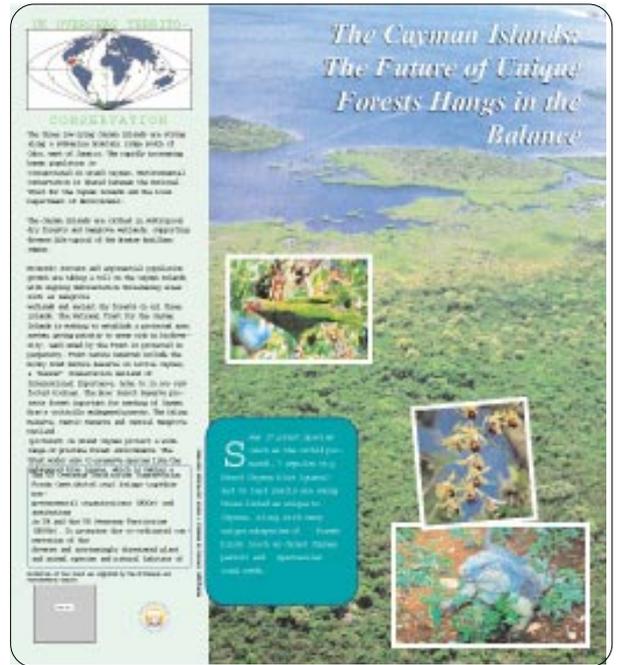
Cayman Islands

In 1997 the Cayman Islands Government imposed an environmental tax on visitors. The original objective for raising this tax was to use it to purchase land for conservation, in particular the Central Mangrove Wetland on Grand Cayman which has been proposed as a Ramsar wetland site of international importance. The funds raised from this tax, to date more than US\$8 million, have been transferred from the Environmental Protection Fund into general revenue and been used for, among other things, road construction and the recurrent and statutory expenditure of the Department of the Environment and the Environmental



Health Department. The Central Mangrove Wetland is of critical importance to Grand Cayman as a lung, and as breeding ground for many species of fish and other marine

creatures which are of economic importance to the island. The Forum will continue to press for the tax to be used for the purpose for which it was intended and for the Central Mangrove Wetland to be created a Ramsar site. Elsewhere on the island there has been extensive damage to mangrove by developers, in one case more than 100 acres of virgin mangrove being destroyed in four days for a hotel complex in direct violation of the conditions placed in the outline planning permission. On a more optimistic note, the Department of the Environment is producing comprehensive environmental legislation



implementing the Biodiversity Convention. And the Cayman Islands National Trust's biodiversity survey, funded by FCO through WWF and resulting originally from a Forum proposal, has gone well.

Montserrat

Again on an optimistic note, in Montserrat the National Trust has been revived and funds have been obtained to re-establish the offices and construct a Natural History Centre. However, the Department for International Development's Country Policy Paper published in March is disappointing in terms of acknowledgement of the value of natural resources and environmental services in the future development of the island.

The endemic mountain chicken (a frog) and Montserrat oriole are the focus of considerable attention for Forum members

and for the Durrell Wildlife Trust, based in Jersey where some of the orioles are being studied in captivity. After the major eruptions on the island had ceased, first indications were promising and the forest in the Centre Hills seemed to be supporting a surprisingly high density of birds. Both the birds and the habitat have been continuously monitored by forestry staff in Montserrat. Their data reveal an astonishing and continuing decline in numbers in the two seasons since the first count. Probably 40% of the birds present in 1998 are now missing and it appears that something is seriously amiss. RSPB has stepped up the level of research to try and determine the root of the problem. There is a need for continual monitoring at a time when resources for the Forestry Department are severely limited, resulting in staff losses in forthcoming months unless funding is found.

British Virgin Islands

Excellent progress has been made in the British Virgin Islands on the Darwin Initiative Project. Despite hurricanes, the botanical work is on schedule. The most important expected outputs of the Project are to be management plans for Gorda Peak and Anegada National Parks, based on good biodiversity data and carried forward by a core of trained staff. On a negative note, siltation from development at BVI's Beef Island airport has caused serious damage to coral reefs. This illustrates the need for proper implementation of planning procedures.

Turks & Caicos Islands

The Turks and Caicos Islands National Trust is going from strength to strength,

and the Forum is working with it to develop this capacity. The Trust's well-received report was presented at its annual general meeting, at which both the Governor and the Chief Minister spoke warmly in support. The same week, the Government agreed to transfer the first four areas (two islands and two historic sites) to the Trust to protect and manage. During his visit to TCI, HRH The Duke of York visited one of the sites, Cheshire Hall, and looked forward to its development with a centre for the Trust and a way of introducing residents and visitors to the islands' heritage.

The Darwin Initiative Project, centred on Middle Caicos to develop a management plan for the Ramsar wetland and adjacent areas, has started well, with excellent local involvement. In parallel the National Trust has started a series of small business workshops for local villagers which will help them to link in and take advantage of the Plan as part of its implementation.

As elsewhere, many challenges remain, with proposals for inappropriate intensive developments throughout the islands particularly in East Caicos, and others which potentially conflict with the sustainable approach on Middle Caicos. As in the Cayman Islands and other Territories, a strategic and open approach to planning is badly needed.

Bermuda

Bermuda is the only Overseas

Protocol of the Cartagena Convention concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW) which highlights the region's growing recognition of the need to conserve threatened, endangered and depleted wildlife species and encourage sustainable management of coastal and ocean resources. The UK has signed but not yet ratified this Protocol. Two members of the Group and representatives of each of the Territories attended a meeting of the Society of Caribbean Ornithology in the Dominican Republic in July. Overseas Territories were included in UK's delegation to the Conference of the Parties to CITES in Nairobi, where a proposal by Cuba to trade in Hawksbill Turtles was defeated - an important conservation success as all turtles are threatened worldwide and the Caribbean population of the Hawksbill is a recognised local stock.

A useful meeting on CITES implementation was also held in London



West Indian whistling ducklings feed around their mother while the drake stands guard, Middle Caicos 1999. Local people reported the breeding of this vulnerable species in the area of our Darwin Initiative project following the planning meetings with their involvement

(Photo: UKOTCF/M Pienkowski)

Territory to receive a Darwin grant in the current round. The grant for £99,000 is for work on a Biodiversity Strategy led by the Bermuda Museum and Aquarium, with FFI. This is an excellent project and should provide a useful model for other Territories.

International aspects

Members of the Group attended or were directly involved with several international meetings concerned with conservation efforts in the region. These included the signing of a

between representatives of the FCO, several NGOs and the CITES Secretariat to address problems identified by the CITES draft report on the Overseas Territories and the WWF-UK "Conched-out" report

Awareness of the need to maintain the environment in these small and vulnerable Territories does seem to be improving both locally and in the relevant departments in the FCO and DFID, but all too often short-term economic gains are given preference over the long-term well-being of the islands. The Group will continue to press the Territories' governments to take their environmental responsibilities more seriously, raising potential threats to the environment or specific instances of mismanagement as they occur.

Report of the UKOTCF South Atlantic Working Group

The Group met four times this year, once at Kew, and three times at the RSPB offices in London. Mike Maunders' responsibilities at Kew increased before his taking up an appointment in Hawaii, and he was unable to continue as Joint Chairman. David Taylor became sole Chairman with Dorothy Evans continuing as Secretary.

Once again we have been successful in maintaining regular contact with the South Atlantic Territories. Though we have had no visitors from the Territories to meetings this year, we have established a regular system of reporting from them so that each meeting has an up-to-date picture of the current environmental developments and problems in each. Dorothy Evans visited the Falkland Islands early in the New Year. We have been joined by David Tatham, former Governor of the Falklands, and Roger Huxley, former Administrator of Ascension. Sadly we shall soon lose the contribution of Cathy Hopkins who will be returning to St. Helena.

It has been our objective to be as supportive as we can to the NGOs and relevant Government departments in the Territories in tackling the issues which confront them. In SAWG these have generally been less dramatic and obvious than in the Wider Caribbean Working Group, with a high proportion involving research and capacity-building.

St Helena

The Environmental Awareness Year, which started in late 1998, produced a considerable outburst of community and educational activity. There has been a litter campaign, guided natural history walks organised by the Education Department and school away-days to study the environment. Ken Webster, the Environmental Education Teacher in WWF, paid a visit to advise on environmental education. Probably the most important piece of research work has been on the decline of the wirebird, found only in St. Helena, which is proving to be a complex problem; it has not so far been possible to establish clear evidence of the relationship between wirebird population numbers and changes in vegetation. The project, conducted by Dr Ken Norris of Reading and Dr Neil McCullough undertaking research on the island and funded by the Darwin Initiative and WWF, continues.

The St Helena Nature Conservation Group has continued to play a critical role in many of the local initiatives despite being short of skilled people. It is now looking forward to helping to create a St. Helena National Trust which will be greatly facilitated by the planned visit early in 2001 of Martin Drury, currently Director-General of The National Trust, who will be retiring shortly and has responded to a request from the Forum to make himself available to assist in this way. The Trust will expect to concern itself with old buildings of historical and architectural interest as well as with biodiversity. In the meantime there is concern amongst environmentalists in St. Helena at what they see as a lack of progress on the Environmental Charter.

Ascension

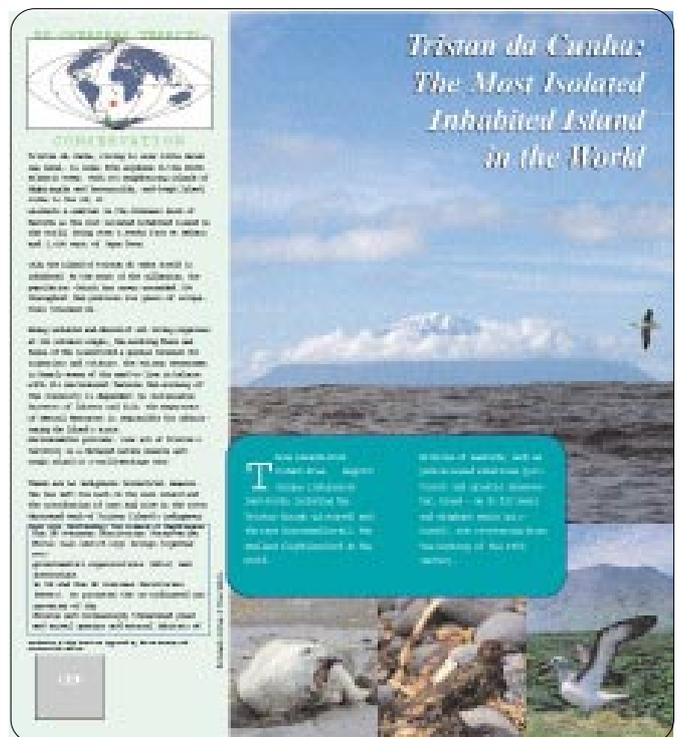
Discussion about Ascension invariably focuses generally on how the Management Plan issued in January 1999 is to be financed, and specifically on the problems for sooty terns caused by feral cats and rats and the spread of Mexican thorn seeds by wandering donkeys and sheep. FCO plans for funding Ascension to be introduced from April 2001 are eagerly awaited. At present the FCO is still digesting the advice of consultants but in the meantime they have allocated £30,000 to feral cat control. The Forum (through RSPB) is trying to raise further funds for other eradication and control purposes.

Efforts to encourage environmental education on Ascension were boosted by a visit of the RSPB Education Officer, Rachel Sharp, who met with SAWG before she left. There is keenness to develop environmental awareness, which RSPB in particular is assisting with the supply of educational materials. The turtle research project by Swansea University funded by the Darwin Initiative has helped to raise the level of local interest and involvement, including by the school, but is drawing to a close. There is worry about the decline in

the turtles' nesting activity. Further funding is being sought. The small Ascension Heritage Society has begun to focus on the island's buildings some of which are of great interest but, of course, there is a lack of funds for any restoration work. lack of funds for any restoration work.

Tristan da Cunha

Gough Island continues to attract attention and interest. A joint project between RSPB and the Percy Fitzpatrick Institute in Cape Town funded by the FCO to the extent of



£40,000 will involve putting an ornithologist on Gough for a full year for the first time, to establish a firm basis for the further monitoring of eight globally threatened bird species of which there are significant populations on the island. It will employ Tristanians and therefore have an important subsidiary outcome in training them in bird-monitoring and biodiversity conservation. Tristanians have also been involved in a successful project on Gough (again funded by the FCO to the extent of £40,000) to eradicate the invasive grass *Sagina procumbens*. An Austrian botanist has collected plants for study on Tristan, Nightingale and Inaccessible, while Dr Peter Ryan and his wife have concluded a major survey of birds on Inaccessible for which a management plan is under preparation

The Falkland Islands

Falklands Conservation in the Falklands and the UK has continued its excellent work in promoting environmental awareness, undertaking research projects and seeking to influence or advise the Falkland Islands Government (FIG) in appropriate areas. They have scored a particular success this year in the formation on the islands of a junior Wildlife Watch Group. Wildlife Watch is the junior branch of the Wildlife Trusts in the UK and this is the first ever overseas branch. A visit by ten children in a yacht to the remote Jason Islands was a highlight of their first year. A member of the Group attended the Millennium International Children's conference on the Environment in May. The Prince of Wales has accepted honorary Membership of Falklands Conservation following his visit to the islands in 1999.

The passing of the Wildlife and Nature Bill gave cause for satisfaction. However, Falklands Conservation has not been pleased at the introduction by FIG of a Conservation Levy, a general tax on cruise ship visitors which gives the impression of being earmarked for conservation but is not. Increased cruise ship visits have highlighted the relative lack of information available to visitors and the need for a code of practice. A project to produce a Falklands Sites Guide incorporating such a code has been funded by FIG but further funds will be needed for its publication.

Progress with the declaration of Ramsar sites, already earmarked, is slow because of the need to set up management agreements with landowners. There have been some disappointing experiences with the military, usually well disciplined in environmental matters, involving handling of penguins and low-flying aircraft; these are being taken up with the Commander, British Forces, and a plan to work together with the Services on environmental projects has been agreed.

There continues to be a substantial research programme. The Seabird Monitoring Programme run by Falklands Conservation has now been going for fifteen years. It focuses on penguins and tries to reach conclusions about the effect on them of commercial fishing. A further penguin census to determine changes in the population since the last one five years ago is needed if funds (£50,000) can be found; the Rockhopper Satellite Tracking Programme continues. The Seabirds at Sea Survey, run by JNCC is another ongoing project funded originally by the oil companies but now funded by FIG; it gathers information about seabirds offshore. The recent apparent decline in the black-browed albatross population has given cause for concern. Falklands Conservation has received £25,250 from the FCO for albatross research but a further £60,000 is now needed to census the total breeding population later in the year. Jim McAdam of Queen's University, Belfast is at present engaged in a Darwin

Initiative Project to record and map the status and distribution of the islands' flora.

South Georgia

With the consultation process complete, the Environmental Management Plan for South Georgia has now been published in final form with the endorsement of the Commissioner (the Governor of the Falkland Islands).

South West Atlantic Environment Conference

This took place in London on 7 and 8 June. It was sponsored by FIG and supported by Falklands Conservation. It drew together the scientific and environmental work undertaken around the Falklands in recent years, particularly that related to oil exploration.

Longline Fishing

SAWG has discussed the issue of the seabird mortality (especially in respect of albatrosses) caused by longline fishing, and the measures being taken to prevent or ameliorate it. It is a matter which concerns all the Territories covered by SAWG, but also has implications for the Caribbean Territories. The issue of the precise role to be played by the Territory Governments and FCO in formulating National Plans of Action and the development of a Southern Ocean Albatross Agreement is under discussion with FCO.

Report of UKOTCF Pitcairn Working Group

The Group's main activities and concerns continue those described in recent reports.

Rat eradication

As indicated in last year's report, total rat eradication on Pitcairn itself was not achieved in 1998 by Wildlife Management International. During 1999 numbers of rats built up steadily on Pitcairn despite the efforts at control by the Conservation Officer. In early 2000, rat numbers reached a worryingly high level. For example in one house, they chewed through the rubber seal on an oven door and ate a sponge cake left in the oven overnight. The Island Council is keen to have a third attempt at eradication, possibly combining this with eradicating fruitflies and mosquitoes. The fruitflies are major pests in the island gardens while Pitcairn is one of the few Pacific islands currently free of mosquito-borne dengue fever. At least one lesson from the earlier



unsuccessful eradication attempts is that the period of intensive monitoring needs to be longer than was the case in 1997 and 1998, and that more rat bait needs to be available during this monitoring period. Preliminary discussions about a combined onslaught on rats, fruitflies and mosquitoes are underway with SPREP (South Pacific Regional Environment Programme).

Meanwhile the news from Oeno remains good. The atoll is rat-free. A three-hour check on Ducie in November 1999 during the *World Discoverer's* visit revealed no rat signs. There is every indication that the eradication programme of November 1997 was successful.

Plant conservation

The Working Group applied for a Darwin Initiative grant to extend the work of the small nursery established by Jay Warren, Conservation Officer. The application was for funds to enable the Officer and another person to enhance populations of the rarest plant species and to replace some of Pitcairn's alien vegetation by native flora. Alas, the application was unsuccessful but there is the possibility of seeking funds for similar work from the Overseas Territories' Global Environment Programme when it begins receiving applications in the next few months. Meanwhile a smaller grant from Flora & Fauna International was obtained to begin some work on propagation of invasive species and to set up some trial eradication plots.

Airstrip

Whilst the idea of an airstrip on Pitcairn Island remains at the forefront of many

minds, both on the Island and elsewhere, it remains uncertain exactly what service is envisaged (e.g. emergency only, a sporadic charter service, a scheduled service). Until this issue is resolved, the exact extent of - and the regulatory framework for - the airstrip remain unknown. When they are known, it will be easier to draw up terms of reference for the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) that should precede work on the airstrip.



A view towards St Pauls across Rope Bay, Pitcairn (Photo: S Waldren)

Road construction

The DfID-funded rebuilding and surfacing leading up the Hill of Difficulty from Bounty Bay to Adamstown on Pitcairn has not yet started. To minimise any damage this project may do to native vegetation, Dr Steve Waldren of Trinity College, Dublin, has been retained as an environmental consultant. It is hoped that Dr Waldren will be on the island when the project contractor is extracting stone for the road building.

Henderson leaflet

Most yachts reach the Pitcairn Islands from the east - Henderson first, Pitcairn next - having set forth from Easter Island. To apprise those aboard of the immense significance of the World Heritage Site of Henderson Island, a leaflet for distribution to yachts by the Easter Island authorities has been drafted by the Group. It has yet to be translated into several languages and printed.

Officers and Contact Points

First contact on any issue should normally be the Forum Co-ordinator: Frances Marks, 15 Inshall Road, Chipping Norton OX7 5LF, UK Tel: +44 1608 644425;

Email: fmarks@ukotcf.org

Alternatively to the Director for Development: Sara Cross, 14 Goose Acre, Cheddington, nr Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire LU7 0SR, UK Tel/fax: +44 1296 661363; Email: sara.cross@ukotcf.org

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Chairman: Dr Mike Pienkowski, 102 Broadway, Peterborough PE1 4DG, UK. Tel/fax/answerphone: +44 1733 569325; email: pienkowski@cix.co.uk

Members: Fred Burton - Dr Rebecca Cairns-Wicks - Nigel Crocker - Michael Gore - Dr Penny Law - Sally Nicholson - Paul Pearce-Kelly - Jim Stevenson - David Taylor - Nigel Wenban-Smith

WIDER CARIBBEAN WORKING GROUP

Chairman: Michael Gore, Tel/Fax: +44 1372 372248; Email: gore@clara.net Secretary: Jim.Stevenson, RSPB, The Lodge, Sandy, Beds SG19 2DL, UK. Tel: +44 1767 680551; fax: +44 1767 683211; email: jim.stevenson@rspb.org.uk (in case of difficulty: stella.rumbles@rspb.org.uk)

SOUTH ATLANTIC WORKING GROUP

Chairman: David Taylor, 53 Lillian Road, Barnes, London SW13 9JF, UK. Tel: +44 181 748 0202; email: DTa2530440@aol.com Secretary: Dorothy Evans, 3 Barns Hay, Old Marston, Oxford OX3 0PN, UK. Tel/fax: +44 1865 240209; email: devans@barnshay.freereserve.co.uk

PITCAIRN WORKING GROUP

Chairman: Dr M de L Brooke, Department of Zoology, Downing Street, Cambridge CB2 3EJ, UK. Tel: +44 1223 811059; fax: +44 1223 336676; email: mb10005@cus.cam.ac.uk

BRITISH INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORY WORKING GROUP

(represented by FRIENDS OF THE CHAGOS) The headquarters of the Friends is at 20, Lupus Street, London, SW1V 3DZ, UK Tel: +44 171 834 3079. The current office bearers are: Chairman: Nigel Wenban-Smith Tel/fax: +44 171 267 1798; Secretary: Simon Hughes Tel/Fax: +44 171 738 7712; Treasurer: Nigel Wells Tel: +44 1730 266074; Fax: +44 1730 269387.

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