

Cayman Conference: UK Minister announces funds for conservation in UKOTs

At the UKOTCF-organised Conference in Grand Cayman, UK Biodiversity Minister Huw Irranca-Davies announced plans for ear-marked funding and a new 'Overseas Territories Challenge Fund' as part of the UK Government's Darwin Initiative.

The conference warmly welcomed this announcement, but called on the UK Government to do more to help meet the urgent environmental challenges faced in the UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies.

The latest UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum-organised conference on conservation in the UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies (UKOTs/CDs) and other small island communities took place in the Cayman Islands, from 30 May to 5 June 2009. This was the fifth such event, following those held in London (1999), Gibraltar (2000), Bermuda (2003) and Jersey (2006).

For the first time in this series of conferences, the event was attended by a UK environment Minister, Huw Irranca-Davies from Defra. In his address, Mr Irranca-Davies announced that the next round of the Darwin Initiative would see "potentially over £1.5 million being ear-marked for Darwin projects in the Overseas Territories." The Minister further announced that the Darwin Initiative would support a new 'Overseas Territories Challenge Fund', providing up to around £25,000 each for UKOT-based projects, to enable the development of larger funding bids to the main Darwin Initiative.

The conference, which attracted delegates from all over the world, warmly welcomed the Minister's announcement, and its recognition of the specific geographic and resource constraints affecting the UKOTs. However, delegates called on the UK Government to do more to help meet the urgent environmental challenges faced in the UKOTs/CDs, including by providing dedicated resources to enable sustained programmes, not just short-term projects, in support of conservation in the Territories.

In addition to the Minister's address, the conference discussed key conservation and other environmental issues affecting the UKOTs/CDs. Conference sessions examined implementation of the 2001 Environment Charters, environmental education, climate change, planning and protected areas, raising the profile of conservation, invasive species, enhancing capacity, and joined-up thinking. Under the general theme of *Making the Right Connections*, the conference aimed to draw on similarities and differences in experience across territories, to provide insights into common challenges, leaving participants better equipped to address local needs

As well as researchers, conservationists, policy makers and other professionals, the conference included contributions from 'the next generation' – students from local schools and colleges. Dustin Bodden from the University College of the Cayman Islands (UCCI) Brac Campus, said in the final session "For me, this conference has probably been one of the most life-changing experiences ever...some of you are mind-blowing, the things that you do...I would really like to thank all the organisers who helped me and my fellow students here. As I've come to see from this conference, a lot of you are actually like super-heroes – not that you are all perfect in everything you do, but what amazing feats some of you achieve with the moderate resources that you have."

Reflecting on the achievements of the conference, UKOTCF Chairman Mike Pienkowski said "Those working for conservation in the UK's widely dispersed Overseas Territories rarely have an opportunity to meet in one place to share experience and ideas, let alone with a UK Minister. So, these conferences have become an important part of UKOTCF's work. It wouldn't have been possible without the support of the UK Government's Overseas Territories Environment Programme, the Cayman Islands Government, our partner organisations and all the voluntary effort from within UKOTCF. The Forum will continue to do everything it can to promote protection of the internationally important biodiversity of the UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies."

See first report of the conference (including full text of the address by UK Biodiversity Minister, Huw Irranca-Davies): <http://www.ukotcf.org/pdf/2009conf/firstReport.pdf>

See coverage of the conference in the local media:

http://www.caymannelnews.com/archivist.php?news_id=16028&pageaction=showdetail&news_id=16028&arcyyear=2009&arcmonth=6&arcdays=07

<http://www.caymannewsservice.com/science-and-nature/2009/06/07/former-governors-visit-cayman-eco-conference>

<http://www.caymannelnews.com/news-16100--1-1---.html>

<http://www.caycompass.com/cgi-bin/CFPnews.cgi?ID=10382994>

<http://www.cayman27.com.ky/news/item/1717>