

## Enhancing Cayman's Marine Protected Areas

*Forum News* 36 (p.11) reported a number of awards made for projects in the UKOTs under Round 17 of the UK Government's Darwin Initiative. One of these centres on assessment and enhancement of the Marine Protected Area (MPA) system in the Cayman Islands. The project is led by Dr John Turner of the School of Ocean Sciences at Bangor University, in collaboration with the Cayman Islands Government's Department of Environment (DoE) and The Nature Conservancy.

His Excellency Mr Duncan Taylor, Governor of the Cayman Islands, hosted the launch of the project at Government House, Grand Cayman on 27 October 2010. Speaking at the launch, John Turner recalled that the project had been planned during the *Making the Right Connections* Conference, organised in Cayman by UKOTCF just 18 months earlier.

A network of protected zones (Marine Parks) currently encompasses about 17% of the ocean shelf area of the Cayman Islands, but it is generally held that 30% or more of all representative habitats should be protected if the network is to be effective. If this target is to be met, careful planning is required, based on a detailed knowledge of the different marine habitats, their distribution, uses and vulnerability. The ultimate aim of the new project is to provide scientific evidence to underpin an expanded Marine Park network.

More specifically, the project will: assess the ecological resilience of coral reefs around Grand Cayman, Cayman Brac and Little Cayman; assess the extent of representation of different habitats in existing and potential protected areas, using habitat mapping conducted under the earlier *In Ivan's Wake* Darwin project; quantify the value of protected zones as "nurseries" for fish and other organisms which subsequently spread into non-protected areas; assess the impact of recreational, commercial and illegal fishing; and produce options for an enhanced protected area system for stakeholder and public consultation, using data collected by the project and state of the art MPA planning tools.



*Croy McCoy (Senior Research Scientist, Department of Environment, Cayman), James Byrne (Marine Program Director, The Nature Conservancy US) and Dr John Turner (School of Ocean Sciences, Bangor University) underwater in the Cayman Islands.*

Marine Parks were established in Cayman waters in April 1986, the first such protected areas in the Caribbean, providing a system of MPAs which is regionally and internationally well regarded. However, speaking at the project launch, Gina Ebanks-Petrie (Director, DoE) noted that the challenges facing the marine environment in Cayman had changed over the last 25 years. John Turner described in detail the broadening range of threats to marine biodiversity and associated livelihoods. At a global scale, these include climate change impacts, notably rising sea temperatures (and resultant coral bleaching), ocean acidification, and increasing storm frequency. Regionally, coral and urchin diseases, widespread over-fishing, and reduced water quality from land-based pollution have degraded Caribbean waters, and, locally, significant growth in the resident population and visitor numbers have increased pressure on the marine environment, including through accelerated coastal development and associated habitat loss.



*Cayman Island Governor Mr Duncan Taylor listens as Dr John Turner, School of Ocean Sciences, speaks at the launch event.*

In Cayman, as in other UKOTs, effective protection and management of the marine environment is an economic, as well as environmental, imperative. Local fisheries need to operate on a sustainable basis, if catches and income are to be maintained in the long term. Many visitors are attracted to Cayman by the quality of diving and other "wildlife watching" experiences, so a significant proportion of tourism revenue depends on the health of the local reefs, as well as other habitats and species including sea grasses, mangroves, turtles and seabirds. Coastal protection is another consideration, as the threat of sea-level rise and storm surges increases.

Expansion of the Marine Park system will require amendments to the *Marine Conservation Law*, but it is widely accepted that (after 25 years, and in the face of new challenges) the current system is in need of review. Such work is also timely, as the Cayman Islands consider wider measures for biodiversity protection under a long-awaited National Conservation Bill, which it is hoped will replace out-dated legislation and provide more effective protection for terrestrial (including coastal) habitats and species.

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## UK Government increases contribution to RSPB Henderson Restoration Project

At the end of October, Caroline Spelman, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, announced, at the Convention on Biological Diversity's 10th Conference of the Parties in Nagoya, Japan, that the UK Government would increase its contribution to the fund being raised by RSPB (see article in *Forum News* 36). This brings the total contribution by the British government to £413,000. RSPB are still aiming to raise the outstanding balance of approximately £400,000 before July 2011 in order to ensure the completion of the project.

Henderson Island is a World Heritage Site and is one of the few atolls in the world whose ecology has been practically untouched by a human presence.

Further details on this project, plus a new video showcasing the wildlife of Henderson Island and the devastating impacts of rodent predation, can be found at <http://www.rspb.org.uk/news/details.aspx?id=262476>