



A Marine Protected Area (MPA) in Chagos

Response on behalf of IUCN and its World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) to the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Consultation on whether to establish a Marine Protected Area in the Chagos Archipelago/British Indian Ocean Territory

Summary

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) supports the creation of a full marine reserve in Chagos, encompassing the whole of the territorial waters and the Environmental Preservation and Protection Zone (EPPZ)/Fisheries Conservation and Management Zone (FCMZ) of the Chagos archipelago. IUCN also recognises the essential involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the consultation towards the establishment of an MPA, and considers it essential that the outcome be reached through agreement of all such stakeholders.

Full protection is preferable to protecting only some areas or features of the archipelago or restricting only certain extractive uses as it will realize greater conservation benefits which will sustain and build over time. This includes, for example, more comprehensive and effective protection to the full range of ecosystems and habitats in the archipelago, securing a refuge for many threatened species. In particular the global fishing effort for tuna has led to great reduction in abundance around the globe. The protection of the Chagos EPPZ and FCMZ would provide needed relief for tuna and other pelagic species in the Indian Ocean. It would also enhance the value of the archipelago as a vital scientific reference site for marine as well as climatologic research and monitoring; and lead to a greater positive impact of the Chagos marine protected area outside its boundaries, as a fully functional ecological stepping stone and source of larvae. It will also constitute a highly significant contribution towards meeting international and national protected area targets, and provide a global conservation legacy for future generations.

IUCN's support for protection of the marine environment of the Chagos archipelago is not intended to and does not imply the taking, the endorsement or the acceptance on the part of

IUCN of any position on the dispute between the UK, and Mauritius concerning sovereignty over the Chagos archipelago. Before any decision is made as to protected area status, IUCN would also expect that all concerned parties, including former inhabitants of Chagos, have been properly consulted and their views duly considered.

The purpose and intent of this IUCN submission, therefore, are simply to underscore what IUCN sees as a unique opportunity to extend the highest forms of protection to a significant part of the Indian Ocean, where coral reefs are in good health and marine species can find a refuge.

The Importance of Chagos

A biodiversity hope-spot: Chagos is home to a broad range of marine ecosystems, ranging from the healthiest, most resilient coral reefs in the world, sandy lagoonal habitats, seagrasses and mangroves, deep slopes, seamounts, deep-sea canyons, hydrothermally active areas and large areas of pelagic and abyssal benthic habitats. This provides invaluable refuge, breeding, nesting, nursery and feeding habitats for numerous marine, terrestrial and avian species. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species lists 76 species occurring in Chagos with elevated risk of extinction, and a further 32 that are data deficient. However, it should be noted that many species groups and notably deepwater habitats have not yet been assessed, and Chagos may yet provide many important discoveries if it is sufficiently preserved.

An environmental insurance policy: Due to its location at the very centre of the Indian Ocean, its rich wildlife biodiversity, and unrivalled marine ecosystem health, Chagos acts as a unique biodiversity refuge and a re-seeding bank for other, more degraded, parts of the Indian Ocean. In other words, it serves as an environmental ‘insurance policy’.

A benchmark and reference site: Chagos environmental health, extremely low direct impacts of human activities and uniquely low levels of pollution make it a rare example of relatively unmodified and unperturbed ecosystem functions and species assemblages. This provides us with a scientific benchmark against which other areas can be compared. It also provides a natural, living laboratory to help us understand and deal with such problems as pollution, loss of biodiversity and climate change. It will provide a scientific control site to compare with other more impacted sites, a means of filling gaps in global climate monitoring programmes; and will contribute to our understanding of the processes that collectively create climate change, global warming and ocean acidification, the threats they pose, and management options to counter them.

Value of full protection

The UK Government and the BIOT Administration have enacted significant legislation to protect this globally important environment. However, a more robust and extensive framework for conservation is needed to meet future challenges. Enshrining the environmental characteristics of Chagos in a protective legal framework will ensure the area can continue to provide its vital functions and services.

Creation of a protected area encompassing the Chagos Archipelago and the whole of the territorial waters and Environmental Preservation and Protection Zone (EPPZ)/Fisheries Conservation and Management Zone (FCMZ) is preferable to protecting only some areas or features of the archipelago or restricting only certain extractive uses for the following reasons:

- It would provide more comprehensive and effective protection to the full range of ecosystems and habitats in the archipelago, ensuring ecological integrity. This is the foundation on which all other benefits of the archipelago rests. Restorative action on islands damaged by human activities (e.g. introduction of non-native species such as rats, and alteration of vegetation) and measures to prevent species introductions could also be more efficiently designed and implemented.
- It would secure a refuge for many threatened species, including corals, fish, turtles and numerous sea birds, and importantly provide protection to pelagic and deep-sea species that are by and large not sufficiently well protected through MPAs. Comprehensive protection to the pelagic realm would not only benefit pelagic life, but also help sustain the many deep sea benthic communities that depend on nutrients from dead bodies of large fish and whales that sink to the seabed. Deep sea communities are known to be highly diverse, but are also among the least studied. By failing to protect seamounts, deep-sea canyons, hydrothermally active areas and abyssal plains we stand to lose much of the life they harbour before we even know what it is, let alone its importance for the world ocean system.
- It would end the negative impacts of fishery bycatch, a common and damaging feature of both long lining and purse seining. While revenue from fishery licenses thus far has supported enforcement in the area this has not effectively dealt with illegal fishing, and it does not serve to reduce bycatch. The loss in revenue from fishing licenses is outweighed by the potential conservation benefits of halting all extractive use. The need for effective enforcement would remain high and would need considerable commitment (some further considerations on this subject is provided by the Shark Specialist Group of IUCN's Species Survival Commission, see Annex).
- It would greatly enhance the value of the archipelago as a scientific reference site for marine as well as climatologic research and monitoring. Most areas in the world are altered by human activities to a point where it has influenced our interpretation of nature – a shifting baseline. The unparalleled recovery of Chagos reefs from the global mass coral bleaching event in 1998 illustrate how healthy environments can rebound from stress and injury. A survey by IUCN found no marine invasive alien species in Chagos, the first time such a survey has failed to detect non-native species. Securing the health of the entire Chagos archipelago can provide a better tropical marine baseline than only protecting parts of it. This increases the value of Chagos in helping us understand the global processes currently shaping our environment, including climate change.
- It would ultimately lead to a greater positive impact of the Chagos marine protected area outside its boundaries. Protecting all habitat and species will increase the resilience of the area as well as its function as a source of larvae that can reseed areas that have been degraded, such as most reefs in the Western Indian Ocean. It will ensure Chagos can continue to act as an ecological stepping-stone, serving the distribution and evolution of the whole range of marine biota in the Indian Ocean rather than just some.

Creation of a protected area encompassing the Chagos Archipelago and the whole of the territorial waters and EPPZ/FCMZ would address a shortcoming in the global network of MPA, most of which are too poorly protected, too small or too far apart to be ecologically coherent. It would create one of the largest MPAs in the world, increasing the marine area

held in MPAs by 20%. This would constitute a significant gain on global targets for marine environmental protection, and demonstrate global leadership on marine conservation.

Such an MPA would constitute both a lifeline for the worlds' troubled oceans, and an outstanding legacy for present and future generations.

Further considerations

IUCN with its constituent Commissions is the worlds' foremost network of technical expertise with respect to protected areas. We recognize that the establishment of any MPA requires the best available scientific input (ecological and socioeconomic) as well as involvement of all stakeholders, and encourage the FCO to continue its broad consultation in taking this process further. Importantly this should entail continued commitment to best practice and an adaptive approach to management, including sound assessment of management effectiveness. This will serve all stakeholders and the environment of Chagos alike.

The recommendations herein are provided based on the present situation and with the aim of securing the greatest global benefits of the Chagos archipelago. Irrespective of the legal process regarding resettlement and of its outcome, it is clear that actions that maximize the environmental health of the Chagos archipelago, and the functions and services that it provides, will best contribute towards that end. In the future, geopolitical and legal developments as well as environmental change may warrant a reassessment of the protection status and management strategies – indeed such reassessments are an integral part of effective MPA management – but awarding full protection to the entire Chagos archipelago and the whole of the territorial waters and EPPZ/FCMZ will greatly enhance their value and will serve the best interests of all concerned parties, now and in the future.

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