

Chagos News

*The Periodical Newsletter of the
Chagos Conservation Trust*

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EDITORIAL

First Colour News

We hope you will enjoy our first Chagos News with colour photographs. Last issue we had black and white photographs for the first time and now, ever keen to keep up with modern technology, colour. It is more expensive but the Committee decided the expense is worthwhile. Please let us have your opinion.

Content

There are two articles. One covering the recent commercial cruise to the Chagos Archipelago and the other is more historical.

The Cruise

The cruise was a success. It was the first and it may prove to be the last for some time. There are various reasons for this. The whole of the British Indian Ocean Territory is set aside for the defence purposes of the United Kingdom and the United States of America. There is no access to BIOT without approval. The BIOT Administration permitted this cruise as a one off experiment.

What is your view about tourism in Chagos?

History

In this issue there is a fascinating article by Paul Caboche. He wrote the text in French. Paul is 86. He lives in Mauritius. He is one of the last people alive who can give us such valuable testimony of the 1930s way of life. We are most grateful to him.

Once again Nigel Wenban-Smith has translated. Nigel is a former Commissioner, BIOT, and former Chairman of CCT when it was Friends of Chagos. He was the main reviser of Peak of Limuria and continues to delve into the archives and especially those of the Public Record Office at Kew. We appreciate the time and effort he gives to this research.

AGM

Our Annual General Meeting will be held at 1800 on Wednesday 7 September in the Rutland Room at Over-Seas House, Park Place, St James's Street, London SW1A 1LR. (Afterwards those of us who can will repair to a local hostelry for dinner.)

Hope to see you.

John Topp

The Chagos WEXAS expedition

by

Mark Spalding, PhD

April 2005 saw the first ever trip of fee-paying visitors to Chagos. To call them tourists would perhaps paint the wrong impression, and to call it a luxury cruise would certainly be bending the truth. In fact this was a non-profit trip, and was given permission to visit the islands largely because it was facilitating otherwise costly scientific observations both above and below water. But that didn't stop it being fun.

Diego Garcia was off-limits, so the journey began in the Seychelles, where the MV Indian Ocean Explorer has its home. There were 15 guests, from very varied backgrounds. Here were 4 doctors and a professor (only one medical, but we were good on nanotechnology, electronics and fish biology!). Here too was the big-shot furniture "salesman" from Ireland, the corporate lawyer from Azerbaijan, the retired civil servant, the human rights lawyer, the actor, the fashion guru (with wardrobe of swimwear to match), the Wing Commander...and so on.

It was to be a 5-day journey and on that first bright afternoon aboard I think we all eyed each other with a little suspicion, wondering what on earth it would be like to spend so long cooped up in a smallish boat with "that lot". The crew added 9 others to the melting pot, a wonderful group of Seychellois (plus one German dive-master) with unparalleled experience in these waters, and warm, friendly characters that quickly melted our reserve. Suddenly we were at sea, passing between the islands of the Seychelles, the sun setting and beer in hand. Maybe we'd be okay.

The boat wasn't fast, but the 5 day trip had its moments – when seabirds, dolphins or whales joined our journey, and when we watched the "wildlife spectacular" of boobies chasing flying fish through the air! Land was still a welcome sight, helped perhaps by sweepstake organised around the time of first sighting.

This isn't a scientific report (one is in the pipeline), but it's worth giving a quick summary of what we saw. Island visits were permitted to the nature reserves only in the company of myself. The purpose of these was to make notes and crude counts of the seabirds and any nesting activity...and to add any further information to Charles Sheppard's on the impacts of the tsunami. Offshore, limited diving was permitted to facilitate observations of the corals and fish.

Before even setting foot on land, that first late afternoon as we headed in the small boats towards Egmont, my heart sank a little as I noticed, clear and sharp through the shallow water near, the pale outlines of bleached coral heads. We had arrived during a coral bleaching event. Thankfully it was much less severe than in 1998 – the impacts were in shallow waters only and were quite unevenly distributed through the Archipelago. Off southern Eagle Island and in the lagoon at Salomon, there was quite extensive, bleaching

related, coral death. The value of being there to note this event is worth stressing. Had we not seen this, the observers on the 2006 expedition might have struggled to attribute this to a specific cause.

Away from the bleached sites the reefs seemed in rude health. Coral cover was high, comparable in many areas to the coral cover pre-1998, with only three sites still having much reduced coral cover.

The fish-life was abundant. Dazzling schools of fusiliers swam in regularly and surrounded us, sometimes in such quantities it was hard to see the reef. The Chagos Anemonefish became a familiar sight and large groupers hung out in deeper water. There seemed to be fewer jacks than on previous visits, but one species, the mean-looking black jack, was abundant (previously this had only been identified from a single observation). Perhaps some changes like this are little more than the natural dynamics of reef life. It's also worth remembering that the Chagos coral reefs cover an area the size of southern England. On an hour-long dive or snorkel one may cover an area the size of a football pitch – in our entire trip we probably surveyed an area equivalent to a small English village. So even with well-picked and widely spaced dive locations it's hard to make grand statements about the state of all Chagos reefs.

Sharks were still there, probably in similar numbers to 2001, and always a thrill to watch. I nearly swallowed my snorkel when I watched our resident Professor drop off the boat for a snorkel and almost land on top of two very large nurse sharks that just happened to be swimming past at the same moment. By the time he'd fiddled his camera to the right settings they had swum lazily on!

*But if there was a theme to the exciting marine encounters it was probably rays. Eagle rays (formerly quite a rarity in these waters) were seen on a couple of dives, including an unforgettable interaction with a group of 25 of these magnificent beasts which made a fly-past, then circled all around us in a breathtaking melee. And manta-rays. Scientifically the most exciting observation was a new species record for Chagos, the smooth-tail mobula *Mobula thurstoni* (photographed, but ID still to be confirmed). But in terms of adrenalin, snorkelling with a group of 5 giant mantas as they fed on a swarm of tiny crustaceans in the water was hard to beat. The snorkellers were strictly enjoined not to chase or touch, and the mantas remained with us, unperturbed. We watched dumbstruck as they performed back somersaults close to the surface, their huge mouths agape as they strained the sea water for its thick plankton soup.*

On land, the rat-free islands were as alive as ever with birds. Red-footed boobies were nesting, though not in great numbers. Their fat chicks, like animated powder-puffs eyed us with a strange mix of disdain and embarrassment as we passed. Sooty terns were circling in large numbers above some of the islands in Peros Banhos, and were just coming to the end of their nesting season on Middle Brother, with small gangs of large speckled chicks lining the rocks on the island edge. The frigate birds on North Brother were just beginning to display, and we saw a few of the extraordinary red balloons they inflate under their chins to attract mates and deter rivals.

Access to some of these islands is challenging at best, and soon my personal enthusiasm and optimism was laid bare. I was asked whether a new island was going to be one of my “dry landings” or one of my “definitely very dry” landings. Neither would get anyone ashore dry, but the answer simply gave people an indication of whether it might be too risky to even try and join me!

Thankfully it seems that the tsunami damage was limited. On a few of the southern islands there were signs of some “overwash”, with the shifting of branches and beach debris inland perhaps 5-10m on eastern sides of some islands. On Danger, and to some degree elsewhere, there was a fringe of dead vegetation, which might have been caused by the saltwater inundation. In Salomon one of the yachties who was present during the tsunami reported that it “struck” there during low to mid-tide and that the impact was a raising of the water to a level a little lower than the normal highest high tides.

One rather unexpected side-event was the discovery of an illegal encampment of Sri Lankan sea cucumber fishers. It was with a sense of high adventure that we first came across FOOTPRINTS on the beach in the north of Eagle Island. On the northern tip we came across an estimated 7000 sea cucumbers drying on the beach, and just inland a small encampment. The poor fishermen were hiding in the forest, but when it was clear we knew they were there, and were not officials they came out to meet us. A complex, but highly effective, message-relay ensued, by satellite phone to Anne Sheppard in the UK and then out to BritRep in DG. And a few days later the Royal Marines were despatched and, we have been told, arrested 12 Sri Lankans who were duly tried, fined, and have indeed paid their fine and been allowed to return home.

On the formerly inhabited islands there was a fascination, and of course a sense of sadness, about what had happened to the Chagossians. We had old photos of the former settlements and it was extraordinary to see the rapid assault that the coconut jungle has made on these villages. On Salomon the yachties have made a very nice job of clearing up the graveyard, partly in anticipation of the proposed visit by Chagossians (long planned, but regularly delayed). Discussions continued into the night about “what should be done?”.

And so it turned out that this motley team had gelled into a group of friends. Messages from expedition members, and from the crew, have all reiterated the theme – this was a very special, once-in-a-lifetime, visit.

But the trip also had something very serious to offer. It supported detailed and useful scientific observations above and below water. By chance perhaps, it provided a policing service. And it raised awareness – of course we talked extensively about the plight of the Chagossians, but also the plight of nature, of coral reefs and wilderness. Chagos will not be protected for ever by its remoteness and obscurity; the world has become too small. But on that boat going home we had all been transformed a little, and were now informed and passionate advocates for this very special place.

CHAGOS 1933 – 1942
The Islands as I Knew Them
Paul Caboche

This story begins in 1931. My father, falling upon hard times, left his native Mauritius after the infamous cyclone which ravaged the island that year to take on the administration of the Salomon group of islands. This was the most important of the three island groups under the control of Salomon-Six Iles-Trois Frères Company.

At that time, three companies ran what were known as the Oil Islands. The other two were Diego-Peros Ltd, which looked after Diego Garcia and Peros Banhos, and Agalega Ltd, which ran the two islands of Agalega (well to the west of the Chagos). The Directors of the three companies were virtually the same bunch of people. Also, the principal activity of all three of them was the harvesting (or, more exactly, gathering up) of coconuts and turning them into copra – the nuts were set to dry in the sun or dehydrated in kilns. Oil was also extracted from the copra for local use, by means of primitive donkey-driven mills.

However, each of these three companies had its own supply vessel, for the first the sv Saint Gerant (Captain Albert Nicolin); the second, sv Diego, a three-masted barque (Captain Adam); and the third sv Diolinda (Captain Voss). Later on sail gave way to steam. The Salomons group was the first to make the change, replacing the Saint Gerant with the ss Wajao, when the former was laid up. The Agalega Company followed suit when the Diolinda was wrecked on that island's coast. Then the Wajao in her turn was wrecked, on Agalega's North Island. The Diego-Peros Company kept going with sail until the Diego was wrecked on Eagle Island on 20 June 1935.

Thus it was that my father took passage to Salomon in the Saint Gerant. I was at school in Réunion until 1934 and did not visit the Chagos until (as a 17 year-old) I got the chance early in 1935 of a trip aboard the newly acquired ss Wajao. The vessel called at the Six Islands, then visited Nelson Island (to investigate whether it was worth exploiting the guano deposits), before going on to Salomon. There being no means of communication, my arrival came as a complete surprise to my father, but he suggested that I stay until the arrival of the next supply ship. That turned out to be the sv Diego, by whose visit we learned that Diego-Peros Ltd had taken over the company for which my father worked. The Director-General of the new company was undertaking a survey of his new acquisitions and asked my father to accompany him, allowing me to come along too. Thus I had a general tour of the Chagos on my way back to Mauritius. I contrived to get several more trips aboard the Diego, including what proved to be the ship's final mission, to transfer the workforce from Six Islands and Three Brothers, following the Directors' decision to close down production there. I was dropped off at Salomon with some of the workers, while the Diego carried on to Eagle Island on her ill-fated trip to pick up the remainder for transfer to Peros Banhos.ⁱ

The population of these islands consisted of between 250 and 600 men, women and children, depending on the atolls' size. The men, depending on their skills, were employed in the gathering of nuts (these were the épilucheurs), at the furnace, in building and boat maintenance, working the mills, and as crews for the boats sent to collect the nuts already prepared by the épilucheurs. I should mention that the islanders had between them virtually all the artisanal skills needed, whether for boat-building, metal-working,

harness-making or whatever else. These skills were passed on in the traditional way from fathers to sons. For example nails, keel- and chain-plates were made by heating and beating rods and sheets of varying sizes; and the boatbuilders would make use of 1:20 scale half-models to repeat established designs. All the boats for use in and between the atolls were constructed in this way. The women, for their part, were employed in breaking and de-husking the nuts in preparation for their transformation into copra and also in keeping the main islands clean. Those expecting babies were put on 'light duties' such as making coconut rope for repairing the shelters in "camp" (temporary accommodation away from the main centres), making coconut leaf brooms for export to Mauritius or burning coconut wadding to obtain the soda necessary for making soap.

In general, for those who wanted, there was a right to take leave in Mauritius every three years. The great majority – around three-quarters – would return again to the same atoll, but the management in Mauritius could and did shift workers from one island to another as the workload required. Barring contingencies, the supply ships visited the islands every three or four months and could give them passage. Many however let several years pass between such visits, while some people were born in the islands and never left or only did so at an advanced age. One example comes to mind, that of Jean Desiré, head ship's carpenter in the Salomon group, and his sister Clely. He first went to Mauritius at the age of 35, while she was about 45 when she made the trip. Others didn't go at all before they were deported in the 1970s. By the way, most of the islanders were of Madagascan descent, though some were part-Chinese or Indian and a few part-Mauritian, offspring of liaisons between bachelors among the managers and island women. Jean Desiré's fair skin and blue eyes declared him to be one such.

Life in the islands was simple. The personnel were paid monthly. They also received weekly, free of charge, basic foodstuffs such as beans, pulses, flour, cooking oil etc.; and they could buy from the company store such articles as cloth, tinned goods, wine, cigarettes or other goods not included in the list of foodstuffs already mentioned. People living on the islands could also keep poultry, maintain a small garden and plant vegetables. Fish were of course there for the taking. The company operated a bakery and sold bread to whoever wanted some. At ten-day or fortnightly intervals a pig would be killed and its meat sold for nominal sums. The same applied when a turtle was caught.

No money changed hands on the islands. What happened was that, on pay days, the company subtracted the amount spent on goods from the store and then either paid the individual the remainder or –as happened in virtually every case, credited it to his account in the company's books. Then when the person concerned went to Mauritius on leave, the Manager would give him a certain proportion in cash and give him a credit note for the remainder, to be cashed on arrival at Port Louis. Alternatively, the individual could ask the manager for a credit note in the name of someone to whom he wished to give money and the person concerned could present it at the company office and be paid in cash.

*Targets were generally set for the amount of work to be accomplished. For example the *éplucheurs* had to collect 600 coconuts per day, husk them and take them to a place where the boatmen could come and pick them up for transport to the principal island for turning into copra. At first glance, one might think that this work was demanding. The pluckers used to leave for the neighbouring islands on Monday mornings, then return on Wednesday evenings or Thursday mornings having fulfilled*

their quotas, and indeed having gathered and husked additional nuts, for which they would be paid extra. They didn't have to work again till the Monday following.

Upon receipt at the main island, the work of turning the nuts into copra began. This was done by the women. Each of them had to break open 250 nuts daily, remove the shells, spread them out to dry or send them to the kiln. Usually they would complete their tasks by around 2 p.m. Another team would be set to work making brooms for dispatch to Mauritius or 'bastin', the coconut cordage for binding the straw roof-coverings of their huts or for tying together the ribs of coconut leaves to make fencing. The daily quotas set were for six brooms or 30 fathoms of cordage. One team was set to work each day to keep the island tidy, by pulling out weeds. For this, the requirement was to deal with 6 rods per person per day, a rod being about 10 feet. This needed to be done, so that the pluckers could see the nuts and pick them up.

On the larger outlying islands, there were two or three dwellings which served to shelter the pluckers, one of them being reserved for a childless couple who would be in charge of the island, keep the pathways clear and sometimes kept a chicken run. To communicate a fire would be lit on the beach and the main island would respond by the same system, indicating receipt of the message (by day it was the plume of smoke that was seen and by night the actual flames). The code used was as follows: one fire meant that a load of coconuts was ready for collection – or that a turtle had been caught and a boat should be sent to retrieve it. Two fires meant that someone needed medical attention; three fires, that someone was dead. The system worked very well.

On the main island of each group the administration was established. There one would find a hospital with a medical orderly in charge, together with a midwife; a school with a teacher; a shop accessible to the inhabitants and (rarely occupied) a prison cell. Alongside the administrative buildings, there would be a boatyard, a forge, a timber yard-cum-carpentry shop and the dwellings for the management staff and the hands, who numbered, depending on the size of the island, between 250 and 600 'ilois', as they were called, included among them some who had never left the island on which they had been born. I well remember an incident which illustrated this fact. When the first steamship was due to come bringing us supplies, the news went round that a 'vapeur' was on its way and many who had never quit the island asked what form it would take – for, in Mauritian parlance, the word 'vapeur' meant 'something scary'. By the way, our custom in the Chagos was that the first person to spot the supply ship coming would be awarded a bottle of wine as a prize – with jubilation all round. On this occasion, some of those who'd never seen a steamer went into hiding and it was the hardest job in the world to get them to come out again.

Once a year there would be a visit by a Magistrate and also by a Priest. The former reported to the Government on what he had observed, together with his recommendations, the latter to his Bishop. Here I should mention that the Managers of these groups of islands had the authority, as duly constituted officers of the Civil Power, to conduct marriages and register births and deaths. In addition, they had authority from the Catholic Church to conduct religious marriage ceremonies for couples seeking this, recording their actions in official Catholic records and so making these marriages indissoluble. There is an authenticated case of a Manager who married his cook and whose family, when he got back to Mauritius, pulled out all the stops to have the union

annulled; but Rome refused, since the conditions of consent and authority were both satisfied.

Everyone who has heard of the Chagos has heard too of the Ségá, the famous local dance. The very notion of nightlong, moonlit dancing under the rustling palms, with the beat of drums half-blotting out the roar of the surf, and further stimulus from bonfires and drink, sets imaginations alight and provokes images more alarming than the usual reality. Nevertheless, in the absence of other opportunities for entertainment, these events could and did sometimes get out of hand. In 1937, my father, determined to avoid such excesses, imposed a temporary ban on the dances. Unfortunately for him, he did so shortly before that year's visit by a magistrate – to whom the islanders complained. My father explained the need for order and the temporary nature of the ban. Then the magistrate, as he waved goodbye, called out in his imperfect Creole "Don't worry. You will dance again!" The islanders, judging that their boss had been over-ruled, repaired a few nights later to the beach to celebrate. My father restored order and confiscated the drums, but was subjected to threats of violence such that I had to stay up all night to protect him. Mauritius was alerted and the magistrate returned to mete out punishment to the ringleaders. The account of his second visit and the penalties he imposed survives in the British National Archivesⁱⁱ as an example of serious trouble in these generally peaceful islands. While the magistrate praised my father for his devotion to the welfare of his employees, he carefully omitted any reference to his own part in precipitating the fracas. Perhaps this episode will serve to show the complexity of maintaining a small, isolated society, for all the simplicity of its daily life.

To end with a personal remark, regular readers of Chagos News will know that I was posted as radio operator in Diego Garcia in 1940.ⁱⁱⁱ Actually, it was my father who suggested, when I first arrived in Salomon, that I should study radio telegraphy to improve communication between the atolls and Mauritius; and it was thanks to the installation of my radio in Salomon that we were able to summon help in 1937. Who knows how the story might have ended otherwise?

ⁱ Editor's note. A first-hand account of the wreck of the *Diego* by Father Dussercle, one of her passengers, was printed in *Chagos News* numbers 7 and 8.

ⁱⁱ CO 167.896/16 Enclosure to Mauritius Despatch No.374 of 10 Nov 1937.

ⁱⁱⁱ Editor's note. 'Diego Garcia's Communications Role in World War II', by Paul Caboche, CN No. 24.

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