

# *Chagos News*

*The Periodical Newsletter of the  
Friends of the Chagos*

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## EDITORIAL

### **The Friends**

We give to a Charity, willingly. Some give money, some give time, some give expertise. Some give all of the above. When we started we made the subscription the minimum possible so that no one who felt the Chagos are worth protecting would be excluded. The subscription just covers two Newsletters a year. It is a bare minimum. Fortunately many Friends gave and give much more than £5 a year. One Committee member put in about £1,000 to get us off the ground. Three Americans gave \$500 between them. The BIOT Administration gave us £300. Several Friends have chipped in with cheques for £25 or more and more than once. Several people give more than the subscription every year. This is all excellent news. What is bad news is that we spend far too much time and money reminding members of the annual subscription. **Please** help by sending in December annual subscriptions for the following year.

### **The Way Ahead.**

One of our Committee, a former Commissioner BIOT, has been looking at future strategy. Do we want to have a large membership of mildly and temporarily interested people? Do we want to be an old boys club whose numbers diminish fast with age? Do

we want a quality group of long term supporters informed about the Chagos and dedicated to the successful future of those islands? Quality rather than quantity with a contingency plan to expand when Chagos comes under threat? All of the above? What do we think? Please send views on paper, 'phone and/or come to the AGM to discuss over a pint of beer.

### **Contents**

We have several articles of interest in this issue. **Andrew Emmonds** of MRAG has written us another excellent article on fishing in the BIOT area, this time about the Inshore Fisheries. **Alan Baldwin** writes from New Zealand about his Chagos experiences. We start a short history which will be continued. Firstly, however, we have a just received article from **Nick Wraith** the retiring Britrep in Diego Garcia.

### **Finally...**

The next News will be about the 1996 Chagos Expedition which starts 5 February but before then we hope to see as many as possible at the **AGM** on 3 October 1995.

*John Topp*

# OF BALLS AND BOOBIES....

*By Commander N J P Wraith JP Royal Navy*

## *British Representative Diego Garcia*

No, not a new guide to Diego Garcia (DG) but the closing remarks of the outgoing Commanding Officer, Navy Computer and Telecommunications Station Diego Garcia. Commander Robin BABB USN gave her leaving speech and, as only a female in today's gender free world could do, told the audience that she had been very wary of the "King of the Island" (BRITREP !) because he kept asking her to see his balls and boobies.

I can report from the Island that everything is in good shape. The natives remain friendly and the environment is improving rather than deteriorating. The past year has seen a procession of conservationists, environmentalists, animal lovers, cat and rat haters and 'ologists too many to enumerate. It is pleasing to note that they all (including John Topp !) left with good words for the way our tropical paradise is being maintained.

My year has been varied to say the least, interesting to put it mildly and challenging to get to the point! John Topp gave me a brief before I left and at the end passed me a piece of paper containing some rather obscure questions. Most seemed outlandish, could never happen during my tenure and anyway they would be recorded somewhere in the dusty files that the Services and the Civil Service are always reluctant to destroy. Not so!

An example of the "out of the ordinary" was the MV LIA P in late August 1994, a Greek registered vessel on her way from Brazil to Sri Lanka with a cargo of sugar. She was holed in the forepeak - the plates had just split apart due to age and poor maintenance - and was taking in water. For the next 6 weeks I had a view from my office window of a very rusty, sugar leaking ship as we ( our US cousins, sorry) flew Greek divers, engineers etc. to DG. The crew were on the verge of mutiny (they were not let ashore), the officers hated the Captain, nobody had been paid for 3 months and the Captain wanted to fly home. Eventually the repair was complete but the Captain refused to sail without a Surveyors certificate. So we flew in a Surveyor - and still the Captain refused to sail.

Tragically at this stage the Greek Port Captain who had flown to DG to supervise the repair had a coronary and died. The family wished to have the body repatriated for burial in Greece but it was quickly established that Singapore would not let the body through without embalming. So we arranged to fly two embalmers from Singapore and were in the throes of producing a makeshift "embalming table" when my Executive Officer remembered that there were full mortuary facilities in the

Contractors photo lab. The job complete, body, embalmers, Greek engineers, diver and Surveyor departed DG and three days later, witnessed by the incoming and outgoing BIOT Administrators who were visiting, the LIA P disappeared over the horizon. Lots of lessons learnt (and recorded !) and we continue to catch rather sweet tasting fish!

The Restricted Area (Plantation) is once again chained off. Until early June we had allowed unlimited access so long as people purchased a one dollar day pass. However the area was becoming littered, people were lighting fires and chopping down trees! The area is now open weekends and Public Holidays only and we have seen a marked improvement in the way the area is treated.

During John Topp's visit in January and February he had a work force clear the trees to the rear of the Plantation Manager's House. This area now looks much like it must have done when the Plantation was up and running. Two months ago, after a wait of four years, the Contractor fitted new windows to the Plantation Chapel. These are the same design as the originals. Subsequently the Mauritian and Filipino community, led by the three Chaplains, have spent four Sundays water blasting and spray painting both the inside and outside of the chapel. The floor has been reskimmed, tiles laid, the altar area refurbished and the surrounding area landscaped. A re-construction service is due to be held on 16 July.

The indigenous wildlife continues to flourish under the protection of numerous BIOT Ordinance - £500 fine for killing a Coconut Crab deters all but the stupid! The regeneration of the Coconut Crab seems to have been very successful. They can now be found on both sides of the island and are especially numerous within the Restricted Area. Both the Green and Hawksbill turtles continue to nest on the ocean side of the island. The Hawksbill from my amateur "turtle watching" appears to nest seasonally between October to March, whilst the Green turtle nests all year round. At Turtle Cove anything up to 30 young turtles can be seen grazing in the shallow waters.

Another success story is the Red Footed Booby. John Topp tells me that only a few were nesting on the far tip, Barton Point, during his tenure. They now nest as far down as Minni Minni on both the lagoon and ocean sides and the population is in the thousands.

I hope the foregoing gives you a flavour of life on Diego Garcia, 1995 style. I leave in a few days time having been relieved by Commander Paul Baker. I look forward to getting to know my wife again but will miss the many friends I have made and the beauty of DG.

Oh yes! The balls were glass fishing floats found on the beach - a great rarity and the Boobies are the feathered type!

## The Inshore Fisheries

The inshore fisheries of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), have been administered by the Marine Resources Assessment Group, on behalf of the BIOT Administration of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, from the time of the declaration of the Fisheries Conservation and Management Zone in October 1991.

BIOT encompasses the Chagos Archipelago, centred at 6°S 72°E, on the southernmost part of the Chagos-Laccadive Ridge. The Archipelago consists of five atolls and a number of submerged banks, the largest of which is the Great Chagos Bank and all of which are actively growing reefs. The islands of Peros Banhos, Salomons and Diego Garcia were originally inhabited and were minor producers of salt fish, mainly from the demersal fishery (bottom dwelling species), although some handlining for shark and predatory fish also occurred. In the early 1970's the atolls were evacuated, with the exception of Diego Garcia which is now a US. naval facility. These unpopulated islands and reefs are largely undisturbed, and up to the time they left the local people had imposed a minimal impact on the marine resources.

The climate is affected by the prevailing winds: from December to March, the wettest months, moderate winds are experienced from the north-west, while from June to September strong south-east trade winds blow. The transitional periods of April-May and October-November are periods of light variable winds and frequent calms. The area is subject to the South Equatorial Current, which flows westward during both of the major wind seasons.

BIOT contains the largest expanse of undisturbed reefs in the Indian Ocean, as well as some of the richest. About 200 species of scleractinian corals have been recorded. For corals, and molluscs, diversity may be higher than any other atoll group in the Indian Ocean. Despite the remoteness of this atoll group, diversity is not particularly high for algae (115 taxonomic groups) and fish (702 species). This lack of diversity in fish species is partly a result of the limited flat area of the BIOT reefs, their remote oceanic location and lack of obvious bottom sources of nutrients to drive primary productivity. This implies that the open ocean must contribute significantly to the productivity of the reef fish, and the oceanic waters of BIOT appear to be similarly low in primary productivity to other tropical open-ocean areas.

Similarly for fisheries, various information sources indicate that the Chagos are less productive, with lower fisheries yields than similar locations in the Indian Ocean. Fishing in BIOT waters, however, traditionally occurs in the SE Trade Wind period and because of this catch rates are depressed. If fishing was to occur in another period then potentially a higher fisheries productivity for these waters might be indicated.

A number of estimates of the area of fishable grounds within the Chagos Archipelago have been made, with that published by the United Nations Environment Programme and International Union for the Conservation of Nature, at 21,000 square kilometres, being the greatest. Scientific assessments by MRAG have assumed from calculations a fishing area of 7,500 Km<sup>2</sup>, and from information available from the fishery have derived an estimate of the sustainable yield in the range 1,260 - 1,650 tonnes per annum.

Fishing in the inshore waters of BIOT consists of a recreational fishery at Diego Garcia, by personnel stationed on the island, and at Salomons and Peros Banhos by visiting yachts. This fishing occurs inside and outside lagoons and is non-commercial.

The commercial inshore fishery is prosecuted by a very small number of licensed Mauritian mother ship vessels (about 4 in each of the last 4 years) together with their associated dories or catching boats. They undertake the 5-6 day journey from Mauritius in the period from May to September when poor climatic conditions, related to the South East Trade winds, limit fishing on banks nearer to Port Louis. Refrigerated mother ships equipped with blast-storage facilities capable of freezing up to ten tonnes of fish per day, deploy up to twenty dories, each crewed by a maximum of three fishermen using baited hooks and handlines.

Fishing is generally undertaken in shallow water (less than 50m deep) on the submerged banks or reefs surrounding the atolls of the Archipelago, and targets demersal species of the families Lutjanidae (snappers), Lethrinidae (groupers) and Serranidae (emperors). The vessels occasionally use trolling methods to catch pelagic (free swimming) species when moving between demersal fishing sites. Light winds and moderate seas resulting in the loss of approximately one fishing day in 10-15 are the norm for Chagos up to the end of July. The Mauritian Banks fishery, centred principally on the banks of the Mascarene Ridge, has operated since the beginning of this century, and data relating to the Chagos Archipelago as part of this fishery is available from 1977.

Ciguatera, an illness caused by eating fish which have an accumulation of toxins in their flesh from ingested marine dinoflagellates (a type of marine algae), and renders affected fish unsafe to eat, has been reported to occur from fish caught in BIOT waters in the literature. Recent studies by the Albion Fisheries Research Centre, and independently by fishing companies, however, have not found any affected fish. Nevertheless, certain species and individual fish over a certain weight cannot be landed or sold in Mauritius due to the greater probability of their carrying the toxin.

The terms and conditions of licensing attached to a BIOT inshore fishing licence are carefully specified to protect the marine environment from the impact of fishing activities. Fishing may only be conducted by hook and line (including handline, trolling and bottom set longline) and by hand held cast nets for the purpose of catching bait fish only. All other types of fishing gear are prohibited from use and the master of the vessel must ensure that no fishing operations are conducted inside the lagoons of the atolls.

The Marine Resources Assessment Group conducts scientific research on the fisheries in order to be able to provide scientific advice to the BIOT administration for the management of the fishery. Data are derived from two sources, a BIOT inshore fishing logbook which must be completed by all vessels as part of the licensing agreement and records obtained from the placement of scientific observers on some of the fishing vessels.

Analyses of logbook data, indicate that fishing during the 1991 - 1994 fishing seasons in BIOT has been concentrated in the Chagos Area of the Grand Bank, particularly the North Chagos Bank and Nelson Island, while outside this Bank fishing occurred at Peros Banhos and Speakers Bank. Large variations in catches, effort and catch rates between vessels and for the same vessels in different years

have been observed. These could be caused by the fact that the fishing crews employed during operations over different fishing seasons are not the same, the range of skill and experience of individual fishermen on a particular trip can vary considerably, and this is likely to have a significant effect on the type and volume of fish caught, and the effort expended by the vessels.

Catch rates observed in the Chagos area are approximately 46 Kg per man day, and are at the lower end of the range observed for the shallow waters of the Seychelles (46-175 Kg/man day), even when the use of electric fishing reels in the Seychelles are taken into account (increasing the catch per unit effort by approximately 20-30%). This value is also less than those reported for the Saya de Mahla and Nazareth Banks exploited by Mauritius, indicating as noted before that the Chagos reefs may be less productive.

Present catches are well below the estimated sustainable yield for the Archipelago and fisheries management policy is directed to restrict fishing effort in line with the principal concern of the BIOT Administration in the management of the inshore fisheries, which is the conservation of the delicate marine ecosystem of the Chagos Archipelago.

*Andrew Emmonds*

## Expeditions to Chagos 1972/5

by

Commander Alan Baldwin OBE

I must be the only person, or one of very few, who can claim to have visited Chagos, all the islands of Chagos including Blenheim Reef, repeatedly - but never to have visited Diego Garcia.

This came about by my involvement in two joint service expeditions, each of two and a half months duration, firstly in 1972 and then in 1975. I was Deputy Leader and Diving Officer in 1972 and the Leader and Diving Officer in 1975. There were specific military aims such as surveying for the teams but in both expeditions the emphasis was on diving. A small but distinguished scientific team participated in both ventures and both service and civilian team members worked happily together collecting and sorting coral samples, surveying the islands and recording the plant, bird and insect life. In 1975 a BBC team joined us to make a film in the World About Us series.

Our visits to the islands hold so many memories. I will never forget on Egmont how our ornithologist Mont Hirons longed for a platform built from which to film, for the first time, the incubation and hatching of the egg of a pair

of fairy terns. The structure rose higher and higher into the sky, under the direction of Major Don Phillips, until the last tree was cut to provide the final brace - the last tree on which the fairy terns had laid their precious egg! And another time when we set foot on Peros Banhos to find and read the last messages from the residents who were removed and transhipped to Mauritius. And the long night when, led by Dave Bellamy, we floundered about the barachois on Isle Sudest, Egmont, in pursuit of a rare axolotl which in the end turned into a rather common eel. And in 1975 our support yacht, the ketch Four Friends with Warren Blake as skipper, under the exhortations of Peter Crawford, BBC producer, to sail closer and closer, ran aground on an ebb tide - Four Friends that beloved ship now sadly lying at the bottom near a coral reef off Borneo. And those dives amid over 50 sharks in 'shark alley' at the south end of Egmont - all for a few bits of coral. And the pantomime on Egmont Christmas 1972. And the giant hammerhead....And..

Anyone visiting Chagos, the mysterious isles to the Maldivians, is never the same again. It changed all our lives. Twenty years after I last saw Eagle Island and Chagos from the deck of RFA Resurgent, with Four Friends in the foreground, I can recall the scene with crystal clarity. What is it about the Chagos that has such an impact? It is, I believe, the utter solitude of these unbelievably beautiful islands.

## Brief History of the Chagos Archipelago

### Part 1 - **Discovery**

Until the beginning of the 16th century the islands of Chagos lay undiscovered by the European world. If the seafaring Malays or Arabs found them before then, they left no record. The first recorded sighting probably came from a Portuguese sailor named Pedro Mascarenhas in 1512, at a time when his country was trying to open up trade routes around the Cape to the Indies. Thereafter several of its different islands were seen, but they were not used except, perhaps, as landmarks by lost captains well away from their normal route close to the coast of Africa with its lucrative places of trade.

The Dutch and the English were as interested as the Portuguese in the Indies trade, and established similar trade routes. At that time the Portuguese were a powerful seafaring nation who forced others to sail East away from Africa, so that by the early 17th century many were sailing from the Cape more directly to India, across the central Indian Ocean. This was quite uncharted territory. Its perils to seafarers were illustrated by a voyage of Sir James Lancaster who in 1602 was on his way to India when he was startled to find himself in only 5 fathoms of water. He turned about to avoid shoals but found himself trapped in a maze of reefs interspersed with deep channels. His ships wandered about for days "in exceeding danger and could find no way to get out" until they finally escaped by following a northward deep channel. The ships had been trapped by the Great Chagos Bank, entering it over its northern edge not far from the Three Brothers. Lancaster's account was widely circulated and did a lot to cause deep mistrust and fear of these waters later on.

In the late 17th century it was the turn of the French to expand East, and by using Reunion and then Mauritius they almost controlled the African route to India. It was becoming apparent that while the direct route from Mauritius missed the riches of Africa, it also missed its armed opposition.

By this time several charts were available of the West and Central Indian Ocean, but early navigators had drawn a complex and conflicting array of islands and shoals. These were vastly out of scale, showing enormous hazards cramped in a sea almost too small to hold them. The awesome appearance of this Archipelago, and the fact that getting lost in those days was a common enough event, led to very exaggerated fears of navigating through it. Mariners developed an insuperable dread of this allegedly reef strewn ocean and some, particularly the French would sail long distances due East from Mauritius before turning North, to avoid it.

Towards the middle of the 18th century the necessity for good charts grew with increasing trade, and the French decided to chart the area more accurately. In 1742 a pair of ships departed into the Archipelago for this purpose but they found almost no islands. They did however find one new island where Chagos was believed to be, and placed it at a spot near the Three Brothers. Unfortunately, even allowing that the navigational aids of the day were poor, one of the Captains was not thought to be particularly competent as is shown by his return when, nearing what he thought was Rodriguez, he hit the coast of Madagascar. This placed his estimated position 900 miles out at the end with doubtless a substantial error through most of the preceding voyage as well, putting the location of his new Chagos island very much in question. The governor of Mauritius suspected his Captain's error and concluding that the island was near the Amirantes, sent a much superior navigator out 2 years later to check it. This expert duly aimed Northwest to meet it but managed to go Northeast instead until, rising one dawn, he found his ship surrounded by the 22 islands of Peros Banhos. His ship, the Elizabeth gave her name to the Channel he miraculously entered by. Turning about he sailed West still in pursuit of the unknown island. He found it eventually and it was named Mahe, in the Seychelles. This kind of navigational inaccuracy explained also how it was possible for a while to confuse the Three Brothers of Chagos with the Seven Brothers (or Sisters) 1,200 miles to the West. A second confusion between Chagos and the Seychelles occurred in 1755 when two English ships reported seeing Diego Garcia at a position which placed it in the Seychelles. This is all the more surprising when it is remembered that all Chagos islands are flat and low lying ,while the Seychelles are mountainous and volcanic.

*to be continued*

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