



The proposal to create a marine protected area in the Chagos Archipelago

Questions & Answers on IUCN's position

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What is the issue?

The Chagos Archipelago is located in the centre of the Indian Ocean about 500 km south of the Maldives. The archipelago comprises seven atolls with more than 60 islands. Claimed by France in the 18th century and used for coconut plantations, Chagos became a dependency of Mauritius from 1814, when France ceded Mauritius and its Dependencies to Britain, until 1965 when Britain excised the Archipelago from Mauritius and created the British Indian Ocean Territory. The archipelago is claimed by Mauritius as its sovereign territory.

The Chagossian population was originally brought to the archipelago in the late 1700s. Almost two centuries later, between 1967 and 1971, their descendants, numbering about 2,000, were forcibly removed from the area and relocated mainly to Mauritius and the Seychelles to make way for the construction of a military facility on Diego Garcia.

The legality of this has been challenged in UK courts and is currently pending a decision at the European Court of Human Rights. Chagos is today, with the exception of Diego Garcia which is occupied by a military base, uninhabited.

The marine ecosystems of Chagos are considered uniquely healthy and of importance as a biodiversity refuge for the Indian Ocean. As such it has received broad recognition as a conservation priority.

In 2009 the UK government announced a consultation on whether to establish a marine protected area in the Chagos Archipelago, inviting stakeholders to respond with comments on three possible scenarios as well as more generally on alternative options, the impacts, costs and benefits of protection, and other measures to protect the environment in Chagos. The consultation ended on 5 March 2010.

Is the establishment of a Marine Protected Area in Chagos ethically defensible?

IUCN has provided recommendations with respect to conservation in Chagos based on broad consultation and with the aim of securing the greatest global benefits of the Chagos

archipelago. Actions that maximize the environmental health of the Chagos archipelago and the functions and services that it provides will greatly enhance their value and will serve the best interests of all concerned parties.

Ultimately it is not within IUCN's power, nor is it IUCN's role, to take a decision regarding the establishment of a marine protected area (MPA) in Chagos. However, through provision of advice IUCN seeks to promote best practice. In doing so IUCN stands behind the ethical principles for sustainable development as defined in the Earth Charter.

Which issue has primacy: conservation or sovereignty?

Providing recommendations with respect to conservation of the Chagos environment does not require IUCN to take or endorse (nor does it imply that IUCN has taken or endorsed) a position with respect to issues of sovereignty over the archipelago. IUCN doesn't see the consultation on the future of Chagos as ignoring or preempting the discussions on the sovereignty on the area; on the contrary, IUCN sees the consultation as an opportunity to include in such discussions a substantive reflection about what the parties should commit to, and what the global community expects from them.

IUCN recognises the need for involvement of all relevant stakeholders in any decision for the establishment of a MPA, and considers it essential that the outcome be reached through due consideration of the views of all such stakeholders and fully respecting their rights.

Both the UK and Mauritius have repeatedly stated the need for sound environmental management and reaffirmed their commitment to a healthy Chagos [see e.g. Note Verbale from the Permanent Mission of Mauritius 29 January 2010 and the joint communiqué by the delegations of the Mauritian and British Governments 21 July 2009 annexed to the MPA consultation document]. In this sense, IUCN is confident that any final decision on the sovereignty negotiations will confirm the commitment of the British and Mauritian parties to the establishment of a marine protected area on the entire Archipelago.

Is establishing a Marine Protected Area incompatible with the recognition of the rights of the Chagossians?

No. IUCN fully supports the recognition of the rights of the Chagossians; but such rights apply to their area of traditional use, not to the archipelago as a whole. Further, traditional use rights are not incompatible with protected areas even in the stricter protection categories.

By virtue of traditional occupation and use of lands and resources of the Archipelago across six generations since their arrival, the Chagossian community acquired customary rights over such lands and resources, within an area that is today difficult to assess but certainly represents a very small portion of coastal land and contiguous coastal fisheries.

The rights of the Chagossians to this area of traditional occupation and use should be respected, based on which they should be given options that may include return to their traditional lands for those who so wish. However, this would have no effect on the wider archipelago, whose area of about 540,000 square kilometres could and should still be fully protected.

Marine Protected Areas are classified into six different categories depending on the degree/type of protection they afford and activities they allow. While some types of MPAs explicitly prohibit

all extractive use, others are created to help sustain people that depend on an environmental resource and the ways in which they interact with nature through livelihood, culture or religion. (For more information see the IUCN *Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories*, 2008).

As a rule of thumb, the greater the degree of protection, the healthier the ecosystems and their functionality are. A full closure of the Chagos archipelago and surrounding waters would undoubtedly maintain and even further improve environmental health. While the Chagos Archipelago remains closed to extractive uses, such closure would not deprive the Chagossian community from the use of natural resources for livelihood, cultural or religious purposes.

Irrespective of possible future developments with regard to the settlement of the disputes on the sovereignty and the rights of the Chagossians, a measure to protect the entire area would benefit all stakeholders under current conditions and would lend itself to adjustment in the future in accordance with the outcomes of such disputes.

Reefs are already protected. Why then prevent fishing, which brings an income?

Global fishing for tuna has led to a great reduction in abundance around the globe. The protection of the entire Environmental Preservation and Protection Zone (EPPZ) and the Fisheries Conservation Management Zone (FCMZ) of Chagos would provide needed relief for tuna and other pelagic species in the Indian Ocean. 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, which still occurs, and it does not serve to reduce bycatch. The loss in revenue from fishing licenses is clearly outweighed by the potential conservation and other long-term benefits of halting all extractive use.

What is IUCN's role with respect to a possible Marine Protected Area in Chagos

IUCN has more than 1,000 Members and 11,000 volunteer scientists and experts grouped into six Commissions, supported by more than 1,000 staff all over the world in a professional Secretariat.

IUCN's expert Commissions are the worlds' foremost network of technical expertise with respect to many environmental and sustainability issues, including protected areas on land and at sea. IUCN sets standards for best practice concerning all aspects of protected area management.

IUCN is a transparent, democratic membership union and, while it has official positions on environmental issues, that does not stop our Members, as well as our Commissions and their members, from openly debating issues that we all care passionately about.

IUCN's mandate is given by its membership, which approves IUCN's programme of work and Resolutions on specific issues. Recent relevant Resolutions from the World Conservation Congress in Barcelona, 2008, include the following:

- 4.035 Strengthening IUCN's work on protected areas
- 4.036 Best practice protected area guideline for ecological restoration
- 4.038 Recognition and conservation of sacred natural sites in protected areas
- 4.041 Following up on actions called for by the 2nd Latin American Congress on Protected Areas and Other Protected Areas (Bariloche, 2007)

- 4.045 Accelerating progress to establish marine protected areas and creating marine protected area networks
- 4.048 Indigenous peoples, protected areas and implementation of the *Durban Accord*
- 4.049 Supporting indigenous conservation territories and other indigenous peoples' and community conservation areas
- 4.050 Recognition of indigenous conservation territories
- 4.052 Implementing the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- 4.062 Enhancing ecological networks and connectivity conservation areas
- 4.072 Private protected areas and nature stewardship
- 4.074 Climate change and overexploitation of natural resources – inclusion in the IUCN Programme
- 4.079 The European Union and its overseas entities faced with climate change and biodiversity loss
- 4.080 Mobilizing action to build resilience and assist adaptation to climate change of coral reefs and marine ecosystems, and people that depend on them

What has IUCN done in Chagos?

IUCN participated in the Chagos 2006 scientific expedition, carrying out a baseline survey of marine invasive alien species using standard port survey methods but with lower sampling intensity. The survey, conducted as part of a project aimed at assessing isolated island environments in the Indian Ocean, found no invasive alien species in over 1,000 samples collected. This is a unique finding and testament to the environmental health of Chagos.

IUCN has been involved in assessing and reporting on coral reef health and resilience in Chagos through the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network. Reports are available online.

IUCN submitted in February 2010 a response to the UK Foreign and commonwealth Office consultation on the possible establishment of a Marine Protected Area in Chagos. The submission was compiled through an open and transparent process with input from the IUCN Secretariat as well as IUCNs Commissions and Members, including the World Commission on Protected Areas, the Species Survival Commission, and the Commission on Ecosystem Management. The submission is available at www.iucn.org/members.

IUCN will continue exchanging views with all stakeholders interested in the future of the Chagos Archipelago, and will actively support a process of consensus building to reach the best possible conservation outcome for the area, with due respect to the rights of all such stakeholders. IUCN will remain ready to collaborate to the best of its abilities in supporting such a process.

For more information

Please visit www.iucn.org/members, click on “News for Members” and scroll down, or [click here](#) to go directly to the Chagos section.