

Big ocean, big opportunity, big responsibility

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In terms of global marine biodiversity, the UK's Overseas Territories (UKOTs) have it all: kelp forests, seamounts, polar seas, coastal mangroves, seagrass meadows, extensive fringing reefs, a floating sargassum island, and the world's largest coral atoll, supporting abundant resident and visiting marine species. There are moonlight spawning sites of grouper in the Cayman Islands, humpback whale breeding grounds in the complex of deep seas and banks around the Turks and Caicos Islands. Add to this feeding areas for several whale species in the South Atlantic, possible nurseries for sharks, for example, blue sharks in Tristan da Cunha, whale sharks in St Helena,

and marine turtle foraging and nesting sites across many UKOTs, including globally important sites on Ascension Island. How could anyone not want to know more about these diverse places and their extraordinary wildlife?

With the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of UKOTs covering nearly 7 million km², the UK is said to have the fifth-largest marine estate in the world (not including British Antarctic Territory, which has different arrangements under the Antarctic Treaties). Over-exploitation of marine resources, pollution, invasive species, and climate change threaten the abundance and diversity of marine life in the vast majority of this sea-space. Root causes will not be overcome quickly or easily, but nature-based solutions are a key part of protecting the livelihoods and wellbeing of many UKOT coastal communities (also UK

Baitfish and squid over seagrass bed in Flatts Inlet, Bermuda. © Bermuda Government Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

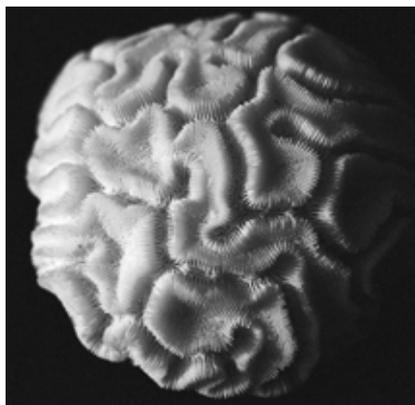
citizens) and their national economies. Yet, for many, the need for assistance in various forms is enduring. The Pitcairn Islands cover about 836,000 km² of the Pacific Ocean, with a population of around 40 residing on Pitcairn Island.

The UK Government has a shared responsibility with the UKOTs for this biodiversity of global importance. As the sovereign power, the UK is internationally accountable for the UKOTs. It ratifies international agreements on their behalf. It shows laudable commitments to biodiversity, but at times lacks corporate memory, and must be constantly reminded how important this partnership is. Many UKOTs are making global pledges and being exemplary global leaders, but internationally they can have difficulty acting alone, for example, signing maritime treaties and accessing big ocean finance.

In the open ocean the challenges are complex. The UK has an important role to play: for example, liaison with other jurisdictions and negotiating international agreements. Where there are small, or no, human populations, NGOs represent the biodiversity even more prominently; all governments should be subject to constructive scrutiny, as they don't always get things right.

Whale sharks off St Helena. © St Helena National Trust, www.trust.org.sh





Haunting image of a dead grooved brain coral *Diploria labyrinthiformis* skeleton which has succumbed to SCTLD. © Myriah Wood for the Turks and Caicos Reef Fund tcreef.org

Partnerships between official and NGO bodies are essential and have been at the centre of the most successful conservation stories. For over 30 years, the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum (UKOTCF), a UK charity, has: helped local people form NGOs and organize themselves; facilitated development of environment strategies; designed, found resources for, and co-run projects to fulfil these, and raised their profiles in the UK and beyond. It is the only organization devoted solely to conservation, environmental education, and sustainable use across all UKOTs and Crown Dependencies. Sharing experiences and pooling resources are priorities and, since 1999, UKOTCF conferences have brought together hundreds of conservation practitioners, governments, researchers, students, and others. At the first online conference in 2021, there was a sense of both urgency and despair for marine and other biodiversity, particularly as a result of coastal development and new emerging threats, but also the hope and belief that biodiversity can and will recover.

Can we prepare for future threats?

It seems new threats to marine biodiversity are around every corner—or archipelago.

Around 2010, the alien invasive lionfish was wreaking havoc in the Caribbean. Today, it is on the menu (literally) and it has largely become accepted that it must be managed. But how do we deal with new threats, such as

Box 1. Coastline development

Natural ecosystems are fundamental to the economies and livelihoods of local human communities, particularly where land meets sea. In several Caribbean UKOTs, the consequences of coastal developments left them exposed to the catastrophic hurricanes of 2017.

Early incentives enticed foreign investors to (over-) develop a tourist industry and physical development dramatically increased from 1960 to 1970. Sand was removed from beaches, sold, exported, and used for building materials.

Wetlands, linking land and sea, were dredged and developed into marinas, extensive stretches of mangroves were cleared for developments, and fill from cutting into hillsides was often used to reclaim this low-lying land.

There were short-term gains to the long-term detriment of the environment—and ultimately the economy. This continues.

Sustainable development, careful planning and, where possible, restoration of natural

systems is the only route to avoid economic catastrophe for those UKOTs with coastal communities. In some territories, environmental impact assessments (EIAs) are not mandated under law for any projects, big or small. In others, there is a requirement in law but no regulations to implement. In some cases where EIAs are undertaken, they can be inadequate and misleading.

This is echoed in the South Atlantic. Emma Harte, Marine Conservation Officer at Falklands Conservation, explains: 'The pristine inshore marine environment of the Falkland Islands supports globally important biodiversity and underpins community livelihoods. It is threatened by environmentally unsustainable development, such as the current proposal for industrial-scale open-pen salmon farming. Global standards of marine protection and management are needed to ensure that this unique environment persists.'



The Falklands' marine environment supports globally important biodiversity. © Sacha Cleminson, courtesy of Falklands Conservation, www.falklandsconservation.com

stonely coral tissue loss disease (SCTLD), which has emerged with little warning?

Well, we have to throw everything we can at it: strong, effective non-government and government partnerships, armies of volunteers, facilities to isolate important species under threat, research and other evidence, high-level support, campaigners, and so forth. When there is no time to waste, to 'be ready' requires constant flows of resources. In the case of SCTLD, where urgent action is required, it is of global importance as it could inform future disease outbreaks.

The UKOTs are teeming with wildlife, yet in 2022, people living next to, or near, the ocean experience daily challenges which threaten the marine environment. Partnerships with the UKOTs will contribute towards meeting international targets for preventing biodiversity loss and making a start on putting things right.

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