

Consultation on whether to establish a Marine Protected Area in the British Indian Ocean Territory

A response from Wildlife and Countryside Link

March 2010

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together over 30 voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife, the countryside and the marine environment. Taken together our members have the support of over 8 million people in the UK.

Link welcomes the opportunity to express our support for establishing a marine protected area in the British Indian Ocean Territory. Individual Link members will also be responding in support of the proposal as well as submitting additional comments and, in some cases, concerns. This joint response is supported by the following 9 organisations;

- Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust
- Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- The Mammal Society
- Marine Conservation Society
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- Shark Trust
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society
- WWF – UK

The waters around the Chagos Islands are by far the richest marine ecosystem under UK jurisdiction, supporting an incredible diversity of wildlife, including corals, reef fish found nowhere else in the world and hundreds of thousands of breeding seabirds. The Chagos archipelago supports at least 60 species listed on the IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species. Link therefore welcomes the UK Government's consultation on extending conservation protection for the Chagos Islands and its surrounding waters.

Among the three options under consideration in this consultation, **Link strongly supports Option 1 - a full no-take marine reserve for the whole of the territorial waters and Environmental Preservation and Protection Zone (EEPZ)/Fisheries Conservation and Management Zone (FCZM)**. Only this option would guarantee full protection for the Chagos archipelago, its reefs, lagoons, waters and the wildlife they support.

Currently, less than one percent of the world's oceans are fully protected from extractive uses. Designating Chagos a full no-take zone out to the 200 nautical mile limit would create the largest marine protection area in the world, achieving significant gains for global and UK targets for marine environmental protection and would establish the UK as a world leader in marine conservation.

Fully protecting the entire 544,000 square kilometres would protect and preserve this important and healthy ecosystem in its entirety from degradation, allowing marine life to thrive and recover, in particular tuna and pelagic shark species. It would also maintain it as a reference site for future scientific research and study, helping to improve coral science, climate monitoring of atmospheric gases and ocean acidity, as well as our understanding of changes to the ocean environment caused by pollution and overexploitation of fisheries.

Stopping the fishing of tuna would not only help preserve species that are currently being over-exploited, but also halt the wasteful bycatch, which involves well over 100,000 non-targeted fish each year from Chagos waters alone.

Link supports option 1 because a larger marine protected area would cover more habitat types a greater area of each habitat type, larger populations of animals and plants and, as a result, a larger fraction of the total ecosystem would receive full protection. Crucially a bigger marine protected area would minimise the effects and impacts from external factors, such as pelagic fishing for tuna and other species. All of these factors would increase both the effectiveness of the reserve and the benefits of the reserve, and thus support the case for option 1.

Whilst Link is aware of the legal challenges brought by the Chagossian groups against the UK Government, we believe that the Chagos islands and their surrounding waters need conservation protection now and that this will be beneficial under all future scenarios. We therefore believe the Chagos should be designated a full no-take marine reserve “without prejudice” to the outcome of this legal process. Conservation arrangements should be modified if necessary in light of a change in circumstances in regard to access by Chagossian groups.

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