

CHAGOS ENVIRONMENT NETWORK

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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A Quarter of a Million Call on UK Government to Create World's Largest Marine Reserve

London—More than 275,000 people and leading scientific and conservation organisations from the UK and around the world have called on the UK government to establish a protected area in the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), which is comprised of the Chagos Islands and its surrounding waters.

If established, the Chagos Protected Area would be the largest marine reserve in the world and play a vital role in fulfilling the UK's global international conservation commitments.

The support for a marine reserve comes as the UK government closes its three-month public consultation period today on future management of the Chagos Islands. The government will now consider the creation of a Chagos Protected Area, a designation that would safeguard the rich marine biodiversity of the islands and their surrounding waters by prohibiting extractive activities, such as fishing. A final decision is expected sometime this spring.

“Britain has an historic opportunity to protect this very special and rare place, which is comparable in importance to the Galapagos Islands or the Great Barrier Reef,” said William Marsden, chairman of the Chagos Conservation Trust and a member of the Chagos Environment Network (CEN). “The public and the scientific community have spoken, and now it is up to the government to secure the UK's ocean legacy.”

The CEN is a collaboration of leading conservation and scientific organisations seeking to protect the rich biodiversity of the Chagos Islands and its surrounding waters, including The Chagos Conservation Trust, The Linnean Society of London, The Marine Conservation Society, the Pew Environment Group, The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Zoological Society of London, and Professor Charles Sheppard of the University of Warwick.

The Chagos form an archipelago comprising 55 islands spread over 210,000 square miles – an area twice the size of the UK's land surface. Due to their remoteness, the islands have some of the cleanest seas in the world and contain as much as half of the Indian Ocean's remaining healthy coral reefs, making it one of the most ecologically sound reef systems on the planet.

“The world's oceans are under increasing stress from overfishing, climate change, and pollution. Few areas around the world still exist that are largely unspoiled, and the waters around the Chagos Islands are one of them,” said Alistair Gammell with the Pew Environment Group, a member of the CEN. “A decision to designate this area as a highly protected marine reserve would make the UK a global leader in ocean protection.”

In addition to thousands of people in the UK and around the world, several leading scientific, conservation organizations, including some from the Indian Ocean region, have also given their support to the CEN petition. These include the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Greenpeace UK, British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (BIAZA), and Fauna and Flora International (FFI).

If the marine protection proposal is accepted, the Chagos Islands would provide an important global reference site for research in crucial areas such as ocean acidification, coral reef resilience, sea level rise, fish stock decline and climate change.

The waters around the Chagos Islands, out to their 200 mile nautical limit, contain the world's largest coral atoll and many thriving species of corals and reef fish. At least 60 species listed on the IUCN's Red List of Endangered Species live in these waters. The area also provides a safe haven for dwindling populations of sea turtles and hundreds of thousands of breeding sea birds, as well as an exceptional diversity of deep water habitats, such as trenches reaching nearly 20,000 feet (6000 metres) in depth.

New research by the Zoological Society of London indicates that along with illegal fishing, legal fisheries have contributed to a substantial decline in reef sharks in the waters of the Chagos Islands. The analysis estimates that legal fisheries have led to a 90 percent drop in reef shark populations, and over 50 tonnes of open-ocean shark species are caught accidentally every year. Another recent study, commissioned by the Pew Environment Group, examined the economic value of the Chagos Islands and its surrounding waters and found that while small profits could be made from expanding fisheries in the area, the islands' economic value is far greater as a unique and well-preserved haven in the Indian Ocean.

“A no-take marine reserve for the Chagos Archipelago would provide a safe refuge for tuna, billfish and sharks in the Indian Ocean. Its establishment would also significantly aid the recovery of the Indian Ocean's drastically reduced fish populations, which would help enhance food security and promote sustainable livelihoods in the region,” said Professor Charles Sheppard, University of Warwick and BIOT Conservation Advisor. “Importantly, while the Archipelago remains largely uninhabited, a no-take reserve would provide much greater protection for these valuable resources than is currently afforded, and would undoubtedly prove to be of great benefit to any potential inhabitants of the Chagos, should they return sometime in the future.”

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The Chagos Environment Network (CEN) is a collaboration of leading conservation and scientific organisations seeking to protect the rich biodiversity of the Chagos Islands and its surrounding waters. This press release is supported by the following CEN members: The Chagos Conservation Trust, The Linnean Society of London, The Marine Conservation Society, the Pew Environment Group, The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Zoological Society of London, and Professor Charles Sheppard of the University of Warwick. For more information, please visit: www.protectchagos.org

Petition numbers have been collated from the Chagos Environment Network petition (www.protectchagos.org), Care2 (www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/271759692) and Avaaz (https://secure.avaaz.org/en/save_our_oceans/)