

QEB 264/1		
RECEIVED BRITISH INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORY		
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From: Commander J M W Topp Royal Navy (Retired)

The Administrator
British Indian Ocean Territory

Diego Garcia
15 February 1994

See QEB 026/1 (11)

1. Following your letter of 22 December 1993 I visited the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) for one month from 18 January to 15 February 1994. The answers to your specific questions in that letter are below starting seriatim with a review and report on progress made on the recommendations in my last report dated 1 March 1993 with reference paragraphs in brackets.

2. Although all my recommendations were accepted by the Commissioner in his letter of 25 March 1993 and my second visit confirms their validity, there has, over all, been little implementation and this is disappointing.

3. East Point Plantation (paragraphs 3-7). The Managers house has visibly deteriorated inside and even more urgently needs repair. Worksheets and costings to the tune of \$15,000 were fully prepared over a year ago. Unfortunately the outgoing Base Operating Support Contractor, IPAC, did not implement the work before leaving and the new Contractor, BJS, has been learning the ropes and concentrating, very sensibly, on its contract. BJS also, and understandably, refused to accept the negotiated work sheets and costings of its predecessor. [REDACTED] has pushed for this work to be done and I have iterated his efforts but the work is a low priority for BJS and ROICC who negotiate and oversee on our behalf. You may feel a letter from the Commissioner to BJS, copy to CONSF and ROICC, will expedite the manoeuvre. Meanwhile I have urged the BJS Program Director and ROICC to action.

4. The Chapel and Managers Chapel remain in good shape but the roof of the Copra Warehouse collapsed in May and had to be removed. The other two buildings in the restoration plan, namely the Company Stores and Accountant's Office, continue to deteriorate and the sooner the whole approved work plan is implemented the better.

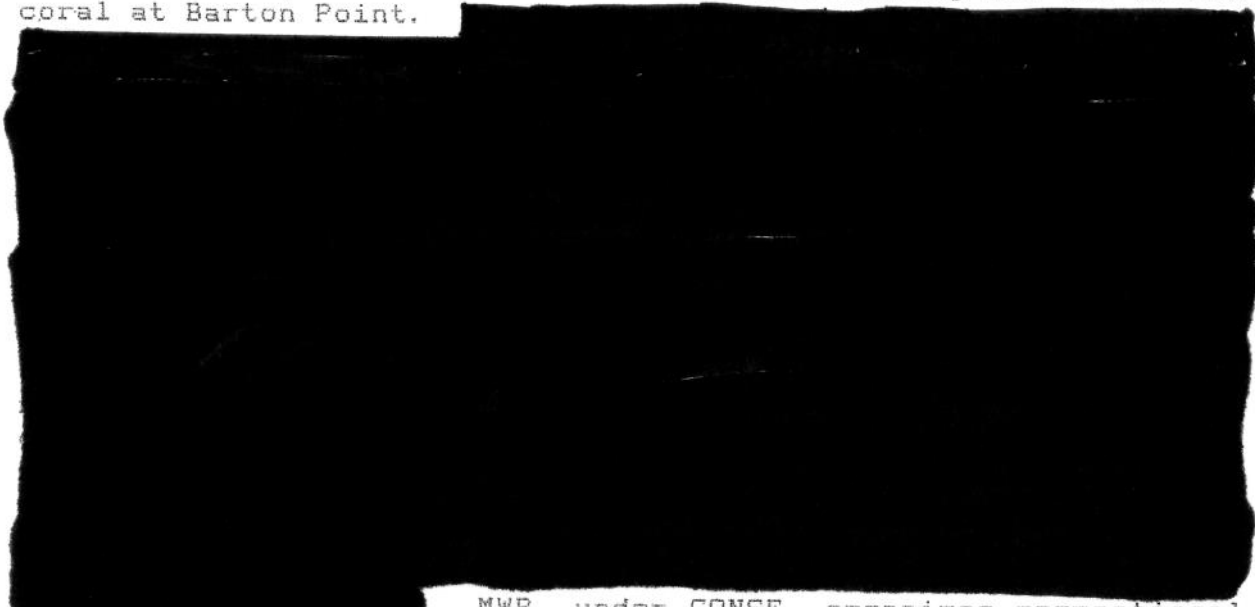
5. Maintenance (paragraphs 5-8). The Plantation grounds and the Cemetery are in excellent condition and [REDACTED] deserves credit for having achieved this through voluntary labour and the expenditure of only \$200. I recommend that a contract be put out for 10 men for two days to coincide with my next visit when I can supervise some selective work which needs a knowledge of which species is which.

6. Museum and Archives (paragraphs 8-15). There has been no progress and a unique opportunity to use the exceptional wildlife photographic skills of [REDACTED] has been lost as he has left the island. However he has left a few suitable photos behind.

NATURE CONSERVATION

7. Restricted Area (paras 16-22 and Annex C).

It was immediately clear on arrival that the most urgent task was to confine through [REDACTED] the eastern movement of boats to the line indicated at Annex C of my last report. Indeed I became aware of the urgency of this problem from conversation at the departure lounge of Singapore Military Airfield and onboard the USAF KC10 to Diego Garcia. It has now been fully implemented as indicated in the statement dated 24 January 1994 and attached at Annex A. There was a little complaint but it dissipated as it was appreciated that we were adamant, the matter was not negotiable, and that Police Waterborne Patrols were enforcing. This sensible firmness was backed up by public relations talking including several meetings and dinners with CONSF and showing him the broken coral at Barton Point.



MWR, under CONSF, organizes recreational activities and facilities, such as over powerful motor boats with 115 HP engines, without regard for conservation, and causes damage; it should be made responsible via CONSF and it should submit to the Commissioners Representative proposals that might cause damage for approval or rejection.

8. In my last report at paragraph 19 I said the Restricted Area is defined by land, but not by water limits. In fact the 1976 Diego Garcia Agreement depicts and defines the Specific Area by shading

on a map. If all that is not verse is prose, and all that is not Specific is Restricted, then the Restricted Area includes the entire lagoon.

9. A USN Petty Officer mans the Harbour Operations Tower. He has powerful binoculars and a good view of the lagoon. He is aware of boat limits and if he sees an infringement he telephones the Marina people who send out a boat, if available, to intercept the trespasser. While this situation continues there seems no need for Ports and Harbour legislation. An infringement is of course an offence under Article 176A of the BIOT Code. If on the other hand the US do not accept the argument of paragraph 8 then legislation to protect and conserve the southern half of the lagoon, the east and north lagoon shallows is needed. This can be achieved by including as Restricted the area suggested in my original report (para 20) and as shown in [REDACTED]'s memorandum at Annex A to this letter. Further legislation will be required to protect the ocean reef. Alternatively you may decide on blanket legislation to cover all salt water in and around Diego Garcia with waivers for deep water berthing and the lagoon coast from Eclipse Point to Point Marianne. [REDACTED] this may be the way ahead.

[REDACTED] Regulations are not guidance but law. In the interest of good relations on island clear law may be the best solution. Certainly if we introduce legislation for conservation it should be unmistakably clear and rigid so that protection of reef and underwater flora and fauna can not be over ridden. We should avoid pathetic legislation such as SSSIs in UK and make clear to US authorities that it is just as much their duty as ours to enforce conservation legislation. This may be an appropriate moment to put all our existing conservation associated legislation together in one place and see whether it is adequate. Perhaps [REDACTED] and I can do this together. Such a compendium will form a useful annex to the Draft Conservation Plan.

10. [REDACTED] tells me the divers no longer operate off the reefs of the Restricted area. Likewise the USMC now train in the Restricted area only occasionally and with permission. The track from East Point Plantation to Barton is now impassable to vehicular traffic and will remain so.

11. Fishing (paras 23-27 and Annex D). Several fishermen have approached me to say Diego Garcia is overfished. I showed some of them the Annex D figures, the source of which has left the island, and was advised the figures were good and possibly under estimated. This is worrying. We need a scientific study of present resources quickly. Meanwhile it may be wise, according to

fishermen, to allow fishing by boat only on say, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. I am not keen to impose such a rule without a proper scientific study and [REDACTED] entirely agrees. Neither of us knows enough about fish stocks and populations; neither of us wishes to restrict a very popular recreational sport. Such a move would be bad for UK/US relations on island unless there was a sound scientific argument to prove that conservation of fish stocks was necessary.

12. Oil Spills (para 36). Did the US give you a report at the November Talks?

13. Environmental Standards (para 37). This recommendation has completed the circuit, is practiced and popular.

14. Flora (paras 38-43). Last year I discovered 7 wild species new to the island since May 1986. This year I found 10 more. Mostly these species enter with sand, gravel and aggregate imported for construction and landed at Port Marianne Pier where they spread and are spread around the island, or the Wharf. On the one hand this is interesting, on the other worrying.

15. One new species I noted last year is *Buchnera hispida*, a foot tall, 5 small mauve petalled plant parasitic on grass. It has now spread to cover the length and breadth of the whole west side of the island and is just rounding the corner towards 'T' Site. (It is winning the race against the frogs which have reached only the south end of the runway). *Buchnera hispida* does not seem to have reduced the other plant parasitic on grass, *Striga asiatica*, and there is still grass. The long term effect is unpredictable; it may be benign, malign or neutral. *Buchnera* may expand then contract in its number and distribution. What can we do about it, or other new species? Probably nothing and you will argue that if there is not a solution there is not a problem. Meanwhile I will observe and report this and the other 16 new species.

16. One thing we can do is remind our allies that deliberate or careless importation of plants and seeds is to be avoided. The enemy, as usual, is ignorance. Thus CONSF, who I like, showed me a packet of bird seed he was handing out to the local (feathered) birds. Birdseed is usually a mixture of grass seed. There are 9,800 species of grass in the world. Diego Garcia has 24 (plus two new this year), half of which were not noted prior to US arrival. Diego Garcia is a delicate isolated ecology. Just as plague massacred Europeans and European diseases massacred American Indians so the wrong introduction here can have a devastating effect on existing species. Meanwhile I am glad to report that the Americans have now actually listened to my advice on *Casuarina equisetifolia* (Ironwood trees) and are pulling up the seedlings.

17. Fauna (paras 44-48). The number of donkeys seems to have reduced. The imported land birds have increased and are tamer. I took some new photographs of the horse. The shallow pools of fresh water at 'R' and 'C' sites are teeming with tadpoles which I do not recall observing before but I have a bad memory.

18. I continue to fear the introduction of alien fauna (c.f. para 15 above). The US is aware from bad experiences in Hawaii and, for example, brown snakes in Guam. It takes only a couple of P3 aircrew to bring frogs from Cocos [REDACTED] and you have a plague of frogs because there are insufficient predators here. It takes only the failure of an AMC flight crew to spray before landing for a malarial mosquito to join the island. It takes only careless examination of incoming cargo by sea for Black Widow spiders to become native here. The SS CLEVELAND does a 37 day round trip of GUAM, SINGAPORE, DIEGO GARCIA. I have asked Wharf workers, some of whom remember me from 10 years ago, whether they check containers and off loaded cargo for snakes or insects, and of course they do not. Please see paragraphs 42 and 43 of my last report. [REDACTED]

19. Donkey Gate (para 48). The donkey gate fence extension on both ocean and lagoon reef sides is badly damaged and effectively non-operational. It needs urgent repair or we may find donkeys on the airfield again, to which pilots, I understand, object.

20. Golf Course. There are two plans for a 9 hole golf course. The site chosen is between Sea Breeze, Palmsville and the ocean side coral road. There is no environmental objection to this so long as the corridor of green trees and undergrowth to the east of the site is not diminished. The area looks small to me. I suggested 'T' Site if the obsolescent antennae there becomes obsolete which they may in a year or so. If 'T' Site is reduced to 'care and maintenance' with the antennae retained for contingencies then the time frame for maintenance should be assessed and arrangements made to remove the antennae and install a golf course when appropriate. Another alternative is the area east of the USAF South Apron and north of the USAF Tent City. This is a larger, although damper, area than the selected site and would make the Air Force feel at home. Currently there are no funds available for a golf course. If funds become available a plan will be submitted to us for approval.

21. New Construction Projects. Plans for the New Pier are attached at Annex B. The pier is 300 feet long, on stilts, and extended from the rump of an old pier. The stilts will be wooden. The pier will last about 20 years. I can see no conservation objection. Other objections are not within my remit.

30. BRITOPS. The 2 Royal marine Officers led a party of 9 with CONSF, for his first visit, and myself as passengers. We spend one day inspecting EAGLE Island and Three Brothers and a second day inspecting PEROS BANHOS and SALOMONS. EAGLE has not been visited for some years. It is little changed from my visit of 1984. It is still infested with rats so only very few Terns nest there. Coconut crabs, chickens, turtles, spiders and ants were seen by the visiting party and all the flora appeared unchanged. The rat free BROTHERS were as usual teeming with nesting birds. Middle Brother had plenty of the endemic butterfly *Juonia villida* var. *chagoensis* and a number of other insects. The small lagoon, as last year, contained 28 x 7 foot sharks and to avoid wildlife disturbance we decided not to swim. PEROS BANHOS and SALOMONS appeared unchanged since my visit last year.

31. Britops was as ever most enjoyable. CONSF also thoroughly enjoyed himself, mainly snorkelling. The Captain, Officers, crew and USN members of the MV HAUGE, were most friendly and it is clear that the arrangements for BRITOPS are working very well. This access to the other islands is essential to keeping an eye on conservation.

32. Permit me to draw attention to paragraph 43 of my last report. It summarises our conservation problem in Diego Garcia. Conservation is not a word properly understood by the USN who translate it into environment and environment is largely that which affects only one species namely *Homo sapiens* rather than the other 8 million [REDACTED]

There is a cultural conceptual difference here between the USN and ourselves. If we can include conservation as we understand it in the USN Diego Garcia mission then our problem could be solved, for when Americans adopt a cause there is no people more enthusiastic and energetic. [REDACTED]

33. [REDACTED] has supported my visit in every possible way and could not have been more helpful. The same applies to the whole of NP 1002 which he leads and which seems in very good heart. I am most grateful to them all.

JM Topp

J M W TOPP
CONSERVATION CONSULTANT