

pa OTI 264/001/00

Mr. Santt (6)

BIOT: Conservation General

From : Commander J M W Topp Royal Navy (Retired)

1. X is working. 4/1/00
comment re where follow
up with FFI robustly.
Diego Garcia

19 March 2000

The Commissioner,
British Indian Ocean Territory.

2. Various points for follow up /
noting.

Dear Commissioner, ^{22/3}

3. Pl consider - ref.

1. I visited BIOT briefly from 6 - 19 March. Your hardworking Representative, [redacted] produced an excellent Programme which made best use of my short stay. The news from BIOT is good.

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2. Environmental Awareness. This is greater, especially at upper levels, than I have witnessed on previous visits. Doubtless your comments at the last UK/US Talks have helped but I think credit must also go to your present Representative who has taken at least two important initiatives. Firstly he jointly chairs quarterly Natural Resources Management Plan, Diego Garcia (NRMP) meetings. The main issues are discussed among the key people and progress monitored. Even if progress in NRMP implementation is still limited, and it is, at least the subject is highlighted. The USN in DG maintains that their problem is getting money and this is probably true. If CINCPACFLEET has an allocation of, say, \$2 million a year for environmental affairs then a certain amount may be provided for DG when application is made. If, however, there is a crisis elsewhere, for example an oil spill in Guam, then the DG money is reallocated to the crisis. It is only when the money arrives for a specific NRMP item in DG that the money is ringfenced. I recommend you maintain pressure on the US at Talks.

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3. Turtles. [redacted] also chairs occasional Turtle meetings, one of which I attended. These are informal, in his quarters, and at his beer account expense. In January/February last year [redacted] of Fauna and Flora International (FFI) led a turtle project in Diego Garcia for a proposed sum of 29,898 pounds sterling. I was informed of this project too late to advise. I would have advised against the manner and did advise against the cost which was reduced to 25,665 pounds sterling. One year later there is nothing to be seen: neither educational materials, nor the information boards. There has been no scientific report published. FFI has failed to meet the contract requirements and I recommend you require FFI to reimburse the two FCO Departments that contributed. FFI failure led to dwindling interest in turtles on island except where local Friends of Chagos made an effort, and this is where [redacted] initiative is so important. He got in touch with [redacted] the 1996 Expedition turtle expert, awakened activity in the project and has achieved results.

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4. Alien Plants and Gardens. The police are concerned about the number and variety of alien plants species on island. They point out that according to law alien species may not be brought in. They sent to me in London 4 floppy discs with over a hundred jpg computer photographs requesting names and status of the plants depicted. All the photos were of alien plants, mostly ornamental UK house plants that grow outdoors in Diego Garcia, many of which have been imported, usually by [REDACTED] during the last 20 years. A few plants are grown on a small scale for food. Some ornamental plants were imported before 1970 and have naturalised. The police gave me a guided tour of the [REDACTED] villages to look at the plants and gardens.

5. Nearly all these plants are listed in my Chapter 17 of the *Ecology of Chagos* which book you generously launched in the FCO last year. This list shows 40 native species out of a total of 280 species.

6. The police consider these alien plants should be removed.

7. My view is that the plants are here, they will probably do little harm and they would be very difficult to remove. The destruction of intricate worked gardens and the removal of these plants would bring immense odium, severely alienate the community, especially the Filipinos, and be a public relations disaster.

8. It is usual for humans to bring their plants with them, both for ornament and food. Usually cultivated species do little harm as their cultivation has made them less robust and less likely to naturalise. Far more damaging are accidental human introductions which often naturalise, do not have their normal competition, run riot and become weeds, sometimes pestilential weeds. We can't get rid of these which are far more dangerous. The other dangers are the pathogens brought in with the plants – viruses, bacteria, fungi. Introduced diseases are a real risk. Likewise soil, when a cubic metre can contain 10,000 nematodes and any number of pathogens. Much of the present proliferation of plants is the result of local propagation rather than new material being illegally imported.

9. The [REDACTED] largely behave themselves very well in Diego Garcia. They are well disposed towards the British, so it seems foolish to alienate them. They have a hard life. Their pay has been reduced recently by up to about 15% and many who know me have complained. Gardening is a way of improving their lifestyle here, and they enjoy it. It is much better they spend their free time gardening than doing something worse.

10. I have put the above to your Representative and he largely agrees.

11. I recommend you maintain the *status quo*, remind the community of the law and dangers of introducing alien species and tighten Customs vigilance. Anyone who wants to introduce a new species, should apply in writing to your Representative. If approved (I am happy to advise) seed or plants will need originating **government** certification of disease free material. Certificates from Singapore are likely to be acceptable but not from the Philippines.

12. Sand and Aggregate. The island has about 7 months of sand and aggregate for building left and will need to import more very soon. Last time this happened a shipload of uncleaned material was landed at Point Marianne. When I arrived in 1993 I found then and subsequently over 20 new species of flora. I asked where the material had come from and was told Singapore. This did not accord with the species found so I asked for the paperwork to be chased back to source which turned out to be Lumut, Perak, Malaysia. Everything then fitted into place. I do not know what insects or what else came in. The US agreed that this material should have been cleaned before arrival.

13. I have asked CONSF who is in overall command, ROICC who will put out the contract, and the BOS Contractor who will probably be the contract agent and others to ensure that all building material is properly cleaned before embarkation at point of origin so that on arrival in Diego Garcia no alien flora or fauna will be introduced. Point Marianne pier is now probably too silted for a ship to come alongside, so the building material is likely to arrive in open containers and be landed at the main wharf. We should make certain the US Navy acts correctly this time.

14. I took this matter as an opportunity to remind people of the risks of containers being loaded and unloaded unsupervised especially from such places as Guam whence the dreaded Brown Tree Snake is seeking to expand its empire. I also mentioned that the only direct physical link between Guam and Diego Garcia is the B52 and its attendant tankers.

15. Fuel and Oil Spill Recovery. You will have seen the Executive Summary provided by the US Navy who undertook the contract study to urge the USAF to greater effort. I hope we have thanked the USN. It will take a long time to remove 1,683,700 gallons of fuel floating on the water table and 857,000 pounds of hydrocarbon mass in the soil. The yet longer-term geo-bio-chemical effects remain unclear. Meanwhile 10 airfield water wells remain out of action. Remedial work is going on but I recommend you maintain the pressure at UK/US Talks level.

16. The Donkey Gate. Remains in urgent need of repair especially on the ocean side. (See para 9 of my 1998 Report). It really is high time the US got on with this.

17. Tidal Current Measurement Buoys. Currents at the entrance to the lagoon are unpredictable and hazardous especially to large merchant ships at slow speed. The USN will apply to place two buoys to measure current rates, times and directions. Recommend you approve and also a laser leading light at Number 3 Beacon.

18. Environmental Impact Assessments. I looked at all the detail of those over the last year and some that will appear soon. The system is working well. Most proposals are well prepared and your Representative has an excellent scheme for handling the proposals.

19. Rats and Cats. The original plan I hatched with [REDACTED] the Applied Biology Program Manager to PACNAVFACENGCOM, several years ago was to remove first rats, then cats. Then we moved to doing both simultaneously. Now the cats are being removed. I didn't see a single cat during my visit. The rats are due to follow but it will be 3 or 4 years before they are eradicated. I asked various people to expedite the manoeuvre as much as possible. Nonetheless I have faith in [REDACTED] and Rome was not built in a day. Of course, when rats are eliminated there will be a big tick in the US/UK Diego Garcia box.

20. Litter. Transparent white plastic bin liners are used for all sorts of purpose in Diego Garcia and sometimes end up in the lagoon. Unfortunately turtles can mistake them for a favourite meal of jelly fish and choke. It would be nice if the US used biodegradable plastic sacks.

21. Recreational Fishing. Although I originally suggested a study in my 1993 Report, the monitoring and analysis is being done by MRAG who are probably the best people to do it. I am concerned to hear from reliable sources that CONSF caught and kept a 235 pound Billfish. It was an on island US team that suggested a mandatory catch and release program for all billfish in the area. I forwarded their letter with my 1996 Report. Recommend a catch and release scheme be introduced as soon as possible and that MRAG implement. We may need to do the same for sharks. We are killing about 100,000 sharks a year in the world and the shark population will not sustain this loss for long. Sharks are to the sea as tigers are to the land.

22. BRITOPS. I enjoyed a well conducted Britops 13 - 17 March visiting Salomans, Peros Banhos and Chagos Bank atolls. The news is that I detected no change from previous visits and if the aim is conservation then that is the best possible news. There were 12 yachts at Salomans and they were not all in the sacrificial anchorage area. There were 4 yachts at Peros Banhos. All yachts should be briefed on conservation laws and Strict Nature Reserve areas. We found a stranded dead Sperm whale on Eagle Island. I explained to the [REDACTED] who was in command, that your Representative in his capacity as Coroner is also responsible for Wrecks and stranded Whales which are the Queen's prerogative and the whale should be taken to Diego Garcia for disposal at Her Command. Unfortunately my powers of persuasion failed and I fear the whale has by now been eaten by sharks.

23. Coral. Last year I spent 10 days with [REDACTED] snorkelling around the entire Chagos archipelago, meeting sharks and assessing the massive coral bleaching. My cursory look this year is of no scientific value. My impression is that there is no obvious deterioration. On the two seaward slopes examined last year that I saw this year at Salomans and at Eagle Island, there was no improvement; they seemed exactly the same. If there had been recovery I would have seen quite a few new colonies in a square metre. The one place where I think I saw distinct recovery is near the pier at I. De Coin in Peros Banhos where there was a cold current when I was there. Some new growths were up to 8 cms. I saw no other lagoon recovery in several places visited in Diego

Garcia, Middle Brother and near I. de Passe in Salomans. Water temperature seemed colder this year which will help coral recovery and this may be due to rougher weather. The HDAS team (my last year Report contains detail) are now installing the equipment and laying the cable. I have asked the divers and engineers to assess the coral state and look for signs of recovery.

24. The whole of Chagos may be likened to a human who suffered a major traumatic road accident in 1998. A shallow assessment was made in 1999. What is needed is an in depth study to assess what has changed in the complex underwater ecosystem: coral loss and recovery in quantity and species, and changes in other components such as fish. I also have a niggling fear about erosion. This need not be expensive. A really useful assessment could be made with 2 pairs of divers in less than 4 weeks.

25. Length of Visit. My visits for 7 years have been 4 – 6 weeks. Two weeks is too little.

26. I am fortunate in knowing BIOT very well indeed. I know the geography, history, ecology, people and politics. It is easy for me to detect any change and assess the current situation. Even so, two weeks is a rush and leaves no time for botanical study which is a very time consuming science. It leaves little time to observe birds, seek insects, inspect the marine scene, check the meteorology and oceanography, investigate pollution, examine environmental impact assessments. It does not allow time for the weather which often prevents planned activities. It leaves no time to stand and stare. It leaves too little time for mutual education. A large part of my activity here is listening to people and education. Key people may be off island for two weeks and I do not see them. The curse of Diego Garcia is lack of continuity. Constant education is essential for people who spend only a year and through ignorance, not stupidity, damage the environment. If you employ me for another year as your Conservation Consultant I recommend a minimum BIOT visit of 3 weeks. Each week I spend in BIOT costs you 7x\$25. If you employ a new Conservation Consultant I recommend a minimum of 1 month after 3 months research in UK. I will be happy to help his education unless he is the likes of [REDACTED]

27. During my visit I have had every courtesy and co-operation from the US Navy who have provided me with all the data I have requested in a most friendly manner. NP 1002 has given me every possible support in every way including a warm welcome throughout my stay. I am most grateful to them all. Diego Garcia has a happy feel about it at present and it is a privilege and a pleasure to visit.

JM Topp

CONSERVATION CONSULTANT