

OTI 264/001/01
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Summary report handed to friend of Chagos and US authorities.

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

Diego Garcia
16 March 2001

**The Commissioner,
British Indian Ocean Territory.**

RECEIVED IN REGISTRY		
02 MAY 2001		
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1. I visited BIOT from 19 February to 16 March and spent the first three days calling on the Diego Garcia principals, all of whom made me very welcome. On the 22 February 4 scientists arrived for the underwater survey. We embarked in the Fishery Protection Vessel, PACIFIC MARLIN, on 23 February and spent 10 days visiting the other islands. On return to Diego Garcia further dives were made. Coral mortality on ocean reefs is as deep as at 40 metres in places and recovery is slight but elsewhere the mortality is less and recovery faster. Damage is least in the lagoons. The terrestrial ecology is in normal health.
2. My calls on principals highlighted that everyone is well aware of environmental matters and most are making efforts. The Natural Resources Management Programme Diego Garcia (NRMP) remains behind schedule [*Ed: measured by activity in some areas only. It is ahead of schedule measured by total expenditure*] and pressure in this area should be maintained.
3. Department of Defense (DoD) employees [REDACTED] an environmentalist who has been on island for 9 years, and [REDACTED] a biologist who has been on island for 6 years, provide much valuable environmental continuity. The value of their contribution should not be underestimated and they remain committed to the task.
4. Lagoon. 22 merchant ships were based in the lagoon, which provides only 21 berths. This is more than ever before. During my call on the Senior Commodore and in the presence of his flagship Captain and Chief Engineer, the XO and secretary of NP 1002, I suggested the time was ripe for a pollution inventory as it is in the interests of all to maintain a clean lagoon. We should add up what is being discharging into the lagoon whether sewage, laundry waste water, oil and grease being rained off ship fittings, washing paintwork, cleaning ship, scamping or whatever. The Commodore readily embraced the idea. It will not be expensive to execute and will alert us to possible risks. If nothing else it will be environmentally educational.
5. Ballast Water. The discharge of ballast water brought from another area has caused world wide problems. The USA is well aware from such examples as the death of fish in the Great Lakes. There can be hundreds and sometimes thousands of species in a ship's ballast and the discharge of these into a new environment can be devastating. Sea water has been used in the past but interestingly Swire Pacific Offshore have a notice displayed in Pacific Marlin saying use fresh water for ballast in future. (Sea Water Ballast. SAY NO. Sea Water Ballast may be convenient but it provides a highly corrosive environment in ship's tanks. Unless absolutely necessary sea water should not be used for ballast. Use fresh water.) Recommend you invite the US to ensure that no ballast water to be discharged within 50 nautical miles upwind or up current of the Chagos Archipelago.

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6. Erosion. At a pleasant meeting with the Resident Officer in charge of Construction (ROICC), his Deputy and the two [REDACTED] DoD employees mentioned above, I highlighted the problem of erosion of the coast. Since the USN first arrived in DG, lagoon and coastal erosion has been a problem. It has been learnt many times that if 'scavvy' is removed, the coast goes. Now the situation is aggravated by global warming. Temperatures have increased and most likely will continue to do so, sea levels are rising and there are more storms. The recent coral mortality is also significant as it directly causes erosion.

7. I put it to both the USN and the USAF that it is in the interests of all to make certain that any erosion threat to the airfield especially but also other facilities is detected as early as possible. The first step is to survey the western ocean coast of Diego Garcia. Erosion here has already threatened the main road in this area; the damaged section of coast was rebuilt, reinforced and replanted two years ago: this repair is already breaking down. There is also ocean coast erosion within a few metres of the 13 very large Fuel Oil Tanks. Here a line of Ironwood trees (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) have rather pushed out the 'scavvy' (*Scaevola taccada*) which anyhow was too thin a strip.

8. A survey should include diving at selected points to establish a datum now so that any future surveys can determine trends. (BRITREP has 20% of the allocated diving time for work on the Hydroacoustic Data Acquisition System (HDAS) and agreed that this effort would be best expended on establishing this datum in that area

9. One of the NRMP listed items which has still to be addressed is the study of the 4 miles of ocean reef south of Simpson Point and along the airfield where reef flat rock was blasted to provide a base for construction. This should now be made a priority. The NRMP recommendation is 'Conduct baseline survey of dredged reef area and 'if required, establish additional monitoring stations on reef, and 'Continue monitoring/maintain stations'.

10. It would be a worthwhile exercise also to collect and compare overhead photographs of Diego Garcia during the last 30 years. Many of these were by satellite and what was very highly classified in the 1970s may now be available at unclassified level. This work would best be done by the US who have the data and the analysts.

11. USAF Oil Spill Recovery. [REDACTED]

Recommend you press the USAF to pursue the faster even if more expensive route.

12. ROWPU. I was shown the USAF Reverse Osmosis Water Production Unit and assured that it was highly unlikely ever to be used (so why have it in DG? Well, if there is an operational emergency... which is precisely what does so much environmental damage). Last year the plan was to put ROWPU residual discharge through the existing sewage lagoon. Now the USN, reasonably, does not want the highly saline discharge to kill the working bacteria in the sewage lagoon. Hot highly saline discharge into the lagoon will do damage. The sooner the USAF recovers the Fuel Oil Spill, the sooner the 10 water wells in the Air Ops area will be restored.

13. Water. 87 water wells out of 122 are currently in use and these are sufficient to meet island demand. There may also be some loss from leakage. The Contractor tests for leaks by isolating sections and testing pressure. More meters are to be installed for monitoring. Diego Garcia uses about 250 gallons a day per person which is a lot and leaves room for reduction if there is a shortage. Water is supplied to ships in the lagoon, which is unnecessary because they can all make their own fresh water, except for Pacific Marlin.
14. Cat and Rat Eradication. The cat eradication plan started in August 1999 and is funded for 3 years. PACDIV pays the US Department of Agriculture Wild Life Services to execute the plan which is proceeding most successfully. I saw only one cat and there remain probably only a few to round up, these will be the most difficult. Although rats are being killed and the town area appears free, the rat eradication plan will not start until the cat eradication plan is finished. I was given a good brief on the cat eradication plan. I expressed interest in the number of frogs trapped as a by catch as we have no data on the frog population. This issue needs following up.
15. Turtles. Good work, led by BRITREP, is being done with turtles and most importantly many people in the community are involved. There is also much effort put into awareness of turtles and the environment through television, the local paper, and turtle awareness month in November last year, T shirts and other activities.
16. Nursery. It is good to see the nursery I started 16 years ago back in operation again after a long period out of action. It is being well managed by [REDACTED] who has been in DG for 16 years.
17. Composting. 16 years ago I suggested we should compost the leaf litter expensively collected every day to keep the place tidy. A shredder arrived after my time as BRITREP and was found years later rusted beyond repair. The current shredder has been awaiting repair for 6 months. Topsoil is needed and composting is the best way to produce it from an island that is 99% sand.
18. Solid Waste. The 15 acres of sanitary landfill lie 1.5 miles south of the runway. The incinerator broke down in January and the USN is seeking a replacement. If they go for the cheap option and buy a factory built rather than an engineered incinerator (which might take longer and use a different funding route) there are likely to be further breakdowns. The problem will then be, and already is to an extent, the life expectancy of the landfill. The better the incinerator the longer the landfill life which is currently likely to be about 5 years. The present landfill site does not meet Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) standards; it is not properly lined and there are no permanent monitoring wells.
19. EPA standards. On my present visit I found paper which said: "Being located overseas, the US EPA regulations do not apply on Diego Garcia." I suggested that this should be amended to read: "Being located overseas, the US EPA regulations do not legally apply on Diego Garcia but EPA standards do." This is not a trivial point. Recommend you write to the Americans seeking reassurance that EPA standards will apply in Diego Garcia.
20. Final Governing Standards (FGS). This book of 19 chapters provides specific standards for environmental protection on Diego Garcia. It is in the process of being revised. Now is the moment to act upon the recommendation in paragraph 20 above. The NRMPDG is also being revised. Recommend you invite the US to write it in such a way that it is releasable to NGOs.

21. Outer Islands. The programme for the 4 scientists and the 10 day visit on Pacific Marlin to the outer islands was most excellently planned and conducted by the Training Officer to NP 1002, [REDACTED]. The objectives in order of precedence were: to inspect the Outer Islands providing a security check and maintenance of British sovereignty, to exercise Customs and Immigration duties on any new vessels, to support a coral study by [REDACTED] and team and provide assistance to myself on my work on the islands.

21. The 13 islands I managed to visit were in very good order. Essentially they were very little changed from previous visits and whereas that may appear dull it is in fact excellent news. I make notes on the flora and fauna and can compare over the years. Good news is that seedlings of an indigenous tree, *Intsia bijuga*, were remarkably widespread on two islands in the Salomons. I also saw plenty of turtle nests. Bad news is that there appears to be erosion and this was especially noticeable on Middle and Western Brother, however, this is subjective reporting and not based on scientific measurement. The 12 yachts sighted seemed friendly and conservation minded but when not policed probably act illegally. We need to ensure that we are consistent over the years with our yacht briefings and make very clear which islands they may not visit and exactly what can and can not be done. Recommend clear written policy guidance be given to those on the ground.

22. BIOT. BIOT is now the most unpolluted place left in our planet. One quarter of the world's coral has already been lost and the US Government estimates that 70% could be lost in the next 50 years. I can not over emphasise the vital importance of conserving BIOT. It is an invaluable scientific benchmark for the world. BIOT is likely to be the last refuge from mankind for this ecosystem. It is already the best place left in the Indian Ocean.

23. It is indicative of the excellent relations between BRITREP and CONSF that both kindly came to greet my aircraft on arrival. Their relationship sets the happy tone of Diego Garcia. NP 1002 is in excellent spirit and at all levels could not have been more welcoming and friendly. I am very grateful to all and especially the Executive Officer [REDACTED] who produced my visit programme. Everyone did everything possible to make my visit well planned and easily executed.

CONSERVATION CONSULTANT
MARCH 2001