Blue Belt Programme

Annual Update 2023/24

UK Government

Introduction

The Blue Belt Programme is the UK Government's marine conservation initiative supporting the UK Overseas Territories.

Since 2016 the programme has worked with UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs) to support them in protecting and sustainably managing their marine environments, from tackling the serious problem of illegal fishing, to species extinction and combatting the impacts of climate change.

The Blue Belt Programme works closely with UKOTs in protecting and maintaining healthy and productive marine ecosystems. The programme plays a key role in supporting the UK Government's work to meet the new Global Biodiversity Framework agreed upon at the Convention on Biological Diversity, and global efforts to protect 30% of the worlds ocean by 2030.

The team was delighted to welcome the Cayman Islands as the newest UKOT to join the Blue Belt Programme this year. The programme will help protect and enhance ocean health around Cayman by supporting the Government to enhance marine management frameworks, address negative human impacts, and develop robust legislation and enforcement for marine protection.

The Cayman Islands joins the other UKOTs currently within the programme: Anguilla, Ascension, British Antarctic Territory (BAT), British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), Pitcairn Islands, St Helena, Tristan da Cunha, Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI), and South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI).

Together, this group of Territories is currently protecting over 4.4 million square kilometres of marine environment across almost every major ocean, making it the largest network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) of its kind on the planet.

This report covers the financial year 2023 – 2024, the eighth year of work across the Programme, showcasing the UKOTs' continued commitment to ocean protection and sustainable management of marine resources.

Blue Belt team delegation with representatives from Cayman Island Government

Working to protect
30%
of the world's oceans by
2030

Together, this group of Territories is currently protecting over 4.4 million square kilometres of marine environment across almost every major ocean

The UK Overseas Territories of the Blue Belt Programme:

1. Anguilla
2. Ascension
3. British Antarctic Territory (BAT)
4. British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT)
5. Pitcairn Islands
6. St Helena
7. Tristan da Cunha
8. Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI)
9. South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI)
10. Cayman Islands

The climate and nature crisis is the greatest long-term global challenge facing humanity, and the UK Overseas Territories are on the frontline. More frequent and intense extreme weather events, sea level rise, and ocean warming and acidification is threatening their unique biodiversity and impacting their communities.

As a longstanding supporter of the Blue Belt Programme, it has been a pleasure to read this latest annual report. I am delighted to confirm the Government's continued commitment to supporting the Overseas Territories to protect their vast and unique ocean ecosystems and, where appropriate, to sustainably utilise their natural marine resources.

I am also determined to further raise ambition, working in partnership with the Territories, civil society and communities to restore and protect the natural world against the threat of climate change impacts. Working together to a common goal we can halt and reverse the decline of nature and deliver a more diverse, resilient natural marine environment that will support generations to come.

Minister Stephen Doughty
Minister of State for the Overseas Territories and Polar Regions

Themes of work

The Blue Belt Programme provides a range of support and technical assistance to UKOTs, working across five themes:

Strengthening governance and management frameworks

- Enabling UKOT governments to protect, manage and conserve their marine environment through governance, legislation, enforcement and research plans.

- Protecting and conserving natural resources through management frameworks, such as Marine Spatial Planning.

Understanding and protecting biodiversity, and building resilience to climate change

- Understanding the environmental, social and economic benefits of the marine environment, and using evidence to support decision-making and adaptive management to protect and enhance the marine environment.

- Assessing the current and potential impacts of climate change on the marine environment and using evidence to inform adaptation and resilience strategies.

Managing human impacts

- Ensuring UKOTs with domestic fisheries meet the requirements of relevant Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RMFOs) and other regional organisations that have competence for marine conservation.

- Helping UKOTs in understanding the impacts and have measures in place to reduce the risk posed by marine plastic, litter and other pollutants to the marine environment.

Supporting compliance and enforcement

- Enabling detection and deterrence of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing and other activities that may regularly impact the marine environment, through cost-effective compliance and enforcement assistance and innovative technology.

Capacity building and ocean literacy

- Ensuring UKOTs have the skills, resources and financial support to develop governance and management frameworks that are sustainable, securing long-term protection for the marine environment.

- Enabling UKOTs to demonstrate the benefits of long-term protection and enhancement through ocean literacy.

Strengthening governance and management frameworks

The Blue Belt Programme facilitates the creation and maintenance of governance, legislation, management and enforcement plans to support the UKOTs in meeting their environmental commitments. Robust management frameworks help to ensure environmental protection of marine environments for future generations.

Delegates at SGSSI MPA Review Symposium

- In Anguilla, the Blue Belt team drafted a Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) roadmap which will help support the Government in protecting the marine environment and minimising conflicts. In addition, the Blue Belt team provided advice on enhancements to Anguilla's Fisheries and Marine Parks Ordinances and funded a consultant to draft revisions to these laws. This revised legislation will enable the conservation and sustainable management of fisheries and improve management of Marine Parks, which protect important habitats and species.

- With funding from the programme, the new Tristan da Cunha Environmental Data Portal (hosted by the British Antarctic Survey) was launched. This new portal is a resource for Tristan Government to manage and share its environmental data with researchers from around the world.

- The Blue Belt team assisted St Helena Government to complete a protected area management effectiveness assessment, with the results used to determine management priorities for the future. This will ensure that the MPA continues to be well managed, providing benefits for the environment and local community.

- The St Helena Government worked with Blue Belt team to take forward their new regulations on marine tourism and interaction with marine life, which establishes a licensing system for marine tour operators. The team developed guidance for government officers to use when reviewing licence applications, to help ensure that tourism activities do not disturb St Helena's unique wildlife.

- The Blue Belt Programme assisted the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI) to undertake its five-year MPA review. This included the funding of a science symposium with attendees from across industry, academia and Government organisations. The programme supported GSGSSI to undertake a protected area management effectiveness review and a benchmark assessment of the regions' research and monitoring plan to assess progress since the last MPA review and remaining knowledge gaps. The review resulted in additional protections being agreed, bringing the area designated as fully no-take to nearly 450,000km². This represents an increased no-take area of over 36% of the MPA.

- The South Georgia Patagonian toothfish fishery recently celebrated its fourth MSC recertification with high scores in the assessment process, meaning it has now been certified as sustainable since 2004. The programme supported the process using outputs from novel research undertaken over the past two years - such as the use of fisheries vessels as research platforms to deploy longline mounted camera systems to investigate seabed ecosystems - providing a practical example of how Blue Belt Programme research can have direct application in fisheries management.

- The Blue Belt team has worked closely with the TCI Government to develop a national Marine Spatial Planning Framework, supporting evidence gathering, initial consultations and a legislative review. This has fostered relationships across TCI government and established recommendations to effectively implement marine spatial management, which is crucial for sustainable coastal development and long-term environmental protection.

- The Blue Belt team worked with the Government of Pitcairn Islands to assess the effectiveness of Pitcairn MPA management and agree ways to improve this for both people and the environment. The Blue Belt team also produced an annual report to share the progress over the previous year and assisted development of an operational plan to determine the overall operation and management of the MPA.

- During a visit to Pitcairn Island the Blue Belt team worked with the local community to understand the benefits the MPA brings to the island, identify potential new projects to increase these benefits and develop an understanding of the community's views of the rules. The team also developed questions to be added to the visitor questionnaires to help the Government of Pitcairn Islands understand the desire of visitors to explore the marine environment.

SGSSI fully no-take area increased to nearly 450,000km²

Blue Belt team holding a workshop on Pitcairn Island

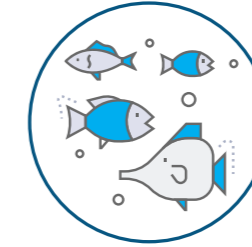# Understanding and protecting biodiversity, and building resilience to climate change

The Blue Belt Programme works with UKOTs to understand the environmental, social and economic benefits of the marine environment, and uses this information to support evidence-based decision making and adaptive management to protect these environments into the future.

UKOTs are estimated to be home to up to 90% of the UK's endemic biodiversity

- This year the programme has supported Caribbean UKOTs to address the challenges posed to coastal communities from large influxes of the brown seaweed sargassum:

  - The programme advised the Government of Anguilla on how to collect and store sargassum samples for chemical testing to explore use in agricultural fertiliser, which if viable would provide an economic incentive for its removal and reduce the risk posed to coastal communities by large influxes.

  - The Blue Belt team is supporting TCI with the development of a sargassum management plan. To inform this, the Blue Belt team assisted the delivery of workshops across TCI aimed at facilitating the sharing of knowledge related to sargassum mitigation and adaptation across the Caribbean. Additionally, the workshop explored the potential opportunities and benefits of sargassum utilisation which could transform this recurring challenge into a source of economic and environmental sustainability for the region.

- The programme funded the purchase of an inshore patrol and survey vessel in Tristan da Cunha which will support a range of activities, including scientific research and fisheries patrols to support marine management.

- The Blue Belt Programme continues to fund a PhD which is investigating models used to estimate toothfish populations in SGSSI. Through researching the inclusion of spatial variability in different aspects of fish life cycles – such as migratory and behavioural patterns – this research will provide a better understanding of fish population size and movement within the region's MPA, helping to support sustainable fisheries management.

- The Blue Belt Programme provided funding to assist the Ascension green turtle survey and specific research projects on turtle behaviour. Ascension is home to one of the largest green turtle colonies on earth and this data will help inform future management of this regionally important species. Satellite tags were also funded on Ascension for seabirds as part of a research project aiming to better understand seabird distributions and their interactions with fisheries. Many of Ascension's seabirds range much further than the MPA boundaries and this project will help to fill data gaps to integrate the MPA within the wider seascape and improve protections.

- The Blue Belt Programme supported an expedition by the Pitcairn Island community and Natural History Museum scientists to Ducie Island. Ducie Island is known as an important bird nesting ground for key species within the Pacific including the Murphy's petrel. The expedition team collected information on the bird populations and water samples to analyse for eDNA. The results of the eDNA analysis will inform our knowledge of the species present around Ducie Island, ultimately supporting MPA management.

- The Blue Belt team is working with the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) to advise on the challenges of their changing coastline. This year a coastal process team visited Diego Garcia to assess the erosive hotspots with on island personnel collecting and establishing beach profile data across the whole island. This data will inform the Coastal Management Plan Blue Belt are developing with BIOT, which will guide future coastal management decisions.

Satellite tag is attached to green turtle on Ascension Island
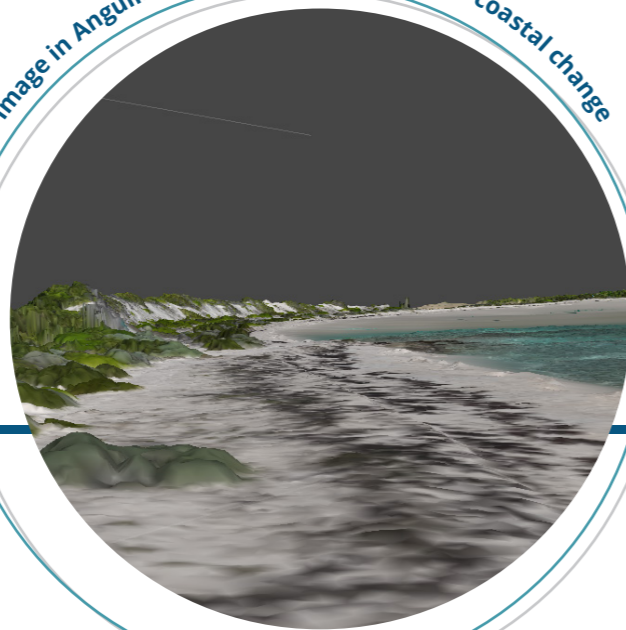
Sargassum influx on TCI beach

In the British Antarctic Territory, the Blue Belt Programme has funded scientific expertise to support analysis and advice to the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR). Working with the British Antarctic Survey, the Blue Belt has supported the development of an Antarctic krill risk assessment. This work is required to help achieve multilateral consensus on sustainable Antarctic krill fishing quotas that effectively protect krill eating predators such as whales and penguins.

Tristan da Cunha Government successfully completed an offshore survey around Gough Island aboard the MFV Edinburgh with funding from the Blue Belt Programme. During the survey, research deployments included the use of Baited Remote Underwater Video Systems (BRUVS). The data collected from the survey will inform the ongoing management of the waters around Gough.

The Blue Belt Programme is also assisting UKOTs to assess and monitor the impacts of climate change on their marine environments and provide necessary evidence to inform resilience strategies.

In SGSSI, the Blue Belt is working British Antarctic Survey scientists to assess what impacts climate change might have on the marine environment and ultimately how this could affect the region's commercially important fisheries.

Data collected on the two recent expeditions to the outer islands within the Pitcairn Islands MPA informed an assessment of the resilience of tropical corals to climate change impacts. This analysis looked at different metrics including coral diversity, coral disease, and reef associating fish populations. Pitcairn's location within the Pacific means that it avoids the worst ocean heating associated with coral loss. By furthering our understanding of the corals within Pitcairn, appropriate management can be implemented to ensure their long-term survival.

The Blue Belt Programme assessed the effects of potential climate change impacts on the abundance and distribution of key species in St Helena. The report indicated that annual sea surface temperatures are expected to remain suitable for most reef fish, though impacts from changes to nutrients are expected to affect population dynamics. This work will now feed into local engagement materials to help build local understanding about climate risk and sensitivity within St Helena waters.

In Anguilla, the Blue Belt team delivered survey tools for more effective coastal change monitoring. This will develop a baseline understanding of how Anguilla's coast functions, helping to improve spatial planning and policy measures in the coastal zone, including adaption to climate change impacts.

Beach profile image in Anguilla, supporting monitoring of coastal change

Managing human impacts

Human activities, from fishing to tourism, can have a diverse range of impacts on the marine environment. The waters of the UKOTs are important to local communities and international visitors for economic, social, cultural purposes.

St Helena's pole and line fishery

Fishing boats in Tristan da Cunha

The Blue Belt programme has worked with UKOT governments to assist in identifying and minimising impacts on the marine environment whilst enabling sustainable economic activity.

- In Anguilla, Blue Belt is assisting with a scoping study to understand pollution sources and risks across the islands and to inform future monitoring and mitigation measures.

- A micro-recycling pod for Tristan da Cunha was funded by the Blue Belt Programme, alongside recycling bins and training in maintenance and operations. This new infrastructure and island capacity to operate and maintain the system will enable plastic waste collected from the shorelines to be recycled long term.

- The Blue Belt team assisted TCI in developing measures to manage tourism interactions with marine wildlife. After holding workshops with wildlife tour operators, the team developed a marine wildlife interaction policy and a novel certification scheme for wildlife tour operators. To accompany the policy, Blue Belt also supported the creation of a revised whale and dolphin code of conduct for all marine users and guidelines for tourist operators to underpin the new certification scheme.

- The team completed analysis of microplastic pollution from deep-water samples in Ascension, the first study of its kind, supporting on-island efforts to grow understanding of the impacts of plastic pollution on the MPA.

- In Anguilla, the Blue Belt team has created a new habitat map and conducted a review on the vulnerability of important marine habitats from human activities. This will be used to inform development of the updated marine spatial plan to minimise human impacts to vulnerable marine habitats and species.

With Blue Belt Programme assistance, UKOTs with fisheries ensure they are managed sustainably in a variety of ways, striking a balance between environmental protection and the socio-economic requirements of the local community:

- The Blue Belt Programme has provided support for meeting attendance and UKOT engagement with Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs), including the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT). This engagement helps to improve UKOT visibility and compliance with RFMOs. Sustainable fisheries are important to UKOT economies and cultural traditions. With Blue Belt Programme assistance, relevant UKOTs ensure their fisheries are managed sustainably in a variety of ways.

- In St Helena, the Blue Belt team helped update the St Helena fisheries profile by reviewing current fishing activities, stock and species status, undertaking fisheries research within inshore areas and at seamounts, and developing a software application to record and analyse catch data. Combined with recommendations provided by Blue Belt Programme on local fisheries management options, these measures will help St Helena manage local total allowable catch levels of important fish stocks.

- In Anguilla, a new log has been developed to improve the collection of data for the fisheries department, which will enhance and further underpin evidence-based management of the fisheries, which are vital to Anguilla's sustainable blue economy.

- Pitcairn subsistence fishers have been collecting valuable data and physical samples from their catches. With support from Blue Belt this data is building a picture of the state of the subsistence fishery around Pitcairn and helping to improve the understanding of the localised biology of key species. The results from this study will feed into the management of the fishery and ensure long-term sustainability.
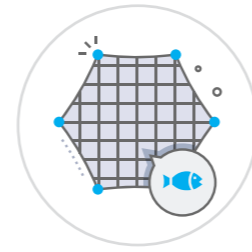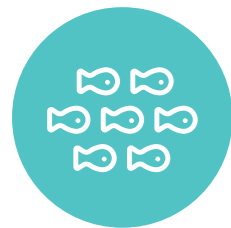
Supporting compliance and enforcement

The Blue Belt Programme assists the UKOTs with managing and regulating their MPAs by providing a range of support, from providing training, innovative technology and the use of satellite imagery to detect and deter possible illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

- The Blue Belt team has continued daily risk-based remote surveillance across the EEZs of all participating UKOTs this year, analysing over 75 million km2 of satellite imagery and assisting UKOT governments with international flag state liaison and vessel activity verification. International and regional maritime partnerships have also been established and strengthened this year, to further UKOT capacity to detect, deter and respond to IUU fishing.

- The Blue Belt Programme began daily remote surveillance of the Anguillan waters to look for illegal fishing activity, commissioning OceanMind to complete a historical review of satellite images and recommended actions to minimise the risks from illegal fishing in Anguillan waters..

- The programme funded equipment to trial Remote Electronic Monitoring and inshore Vessel Monitoring Systems in TCI, with technical specialists training TCI officers to use these systems and assist with their installation. The team also worked with regional experts who understand the challenges of operating in the Caribbean to assess the feasibility of introducing the 'Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool' (SMART) system in TCI. This expands the tools and experience TCI has to monitor, manage and enforce their fisheries.

- Throughout the year the Blue Belt team remotely monitored vessels within Pitcairn's MPA in a variety of ways, including through a new and successful collaboration with the Royal Navy and Royal New Zealand Air Force for surveillance patrols. This regional collaboration and support will enhance Pitcairn's ability to monitor its vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

- The Blue Belt Programme continued to support BIOT to tackle illegal fishing activity by monitoring vessel activity and supporting work carried out by the BIOT Senior Fisheries Officer.

- The Blue Belt team developed a new marine compliance and enforcement technology strategy this year, focusing on building networks, regional partnerships and collaborations to keep UKOTs at the forefront of innovation, and ensuring technology is fit for purpose, cost effective and long lasting.

- As part of the UK and UKOT delegation to ICCAT, the Blue Belt Programme played an important role in strengthening regional sustainable fisheries management, with catch limits being set for blue shark and the adoption of measures to prohibit the retention, transhipment and landing of whale shark and mobulid rays.

BIOT patrol vessel

Satellite image of Turks & Caicos Islands. Copyright: Ocean Mind

Capacity building and ocean literacy

The Blue Belt Programme aims to provide the UKOTs with the skills, capacity and financial resources to secure long-term protection for the marine environment. The programme also aims to improve ocean literacy within the UKOTs through community engagement and awareness raising, inspiring the next generation of future leaders and scientists.

- Fisheries enforcement officers from a number of UKOTs have been hosted in the UK to undertake training on compliance and enforcement practices, including:

  - A SGSSI Officer was trained on the principles of fisheries compliance and enforcement, vessel inspections, safe vessel boarding, and checking relevant catch and required documents.

  - Fisheries officers from TCI visited the UK for training to increase existing compliance and fisheries monitoring capabilities, develop relationships, and build an understanding of fisheries control and enforcement from a different perspective.

- UK marine enforcement officers also travelled to St Helena, where on-the-job training and advice was provided on boarding and landing inspections, helping to improve compliance practices within the local fishing industry.

TCI Officers watching fishing vessels arrive into Brixham prior to observing a vessel landing

The South Georgia Government Officer during fisheries compliance training

- The Blue Belt team and key partners provided a range of in-person training to Pitcairn islanders to support long-term management of their MPA. This included:

  - Funding professional videographers to work with the Pitcairn community to support their on-island communications and engagement strategy.

  - Providing community training in intelligence reporting to support compliance and enforcement work, enabling the community to be involved in the protection of their marine environment.

- Relevant training was provided to the Blue Belt funded Pitcairn MPA officer, strengthening their essential role the continued management of the Pitcairn marine environment.

Blue Belt team with Pitcairn Government partners

- In Tristan da Cunha, the Blue Belt Programme has provided recommendations for fisheries management training, scoped online videography courses to support communications and engagement, and provided funding for Tristan Government staff to complete sea survival training.

Highlighting the benefits of sustainably managing the ocean, and increasing ocean literacy among local and international communities also underpinned Blue Belt Programme support to UKOTs this year:

- With Blue Belt support and funding, Ascension and St Helena held awareness raising events for local communities:

  - On Ascension, the second successful marine festival was held, with almost 200 community members attending to celebrate and learn more about Ascension's unique marine environment.

  - The latest St Helena marine awareness week event provided an opportunity for every school child on the island to go out to sea to experience marine environment first hand.

- A ground-breaking primary school twinning project was launched between St Margaret's (Lowestoft, UK) and Two Boats (Ascension) schools, with an ambition of working together to find out more about each other's marine environment, the species that live there and what they can do to protect and restore nature. By providing students with an understanding of the importance of our oceans and how to protect them, they will be able to make informed and responsible decisions regarding the ocean and its resources in the future.

- The Blue Belt Programme continued to assist UKOTs in understanding and accessing long-term funding and finance to support UKOT-led marine management and sustainable island economies, in partnership with Finance Earth:

  - The Blue Belt team hosted cross-territory meetings and produced quarterly newsletters that have covered a range of topics from Blue Carbon, to biodiversity credits, to MPA financial planning. This has enabled global and UKOT learning on sustainable financing mechanisms to be shared, and has built awareness of UKOT-relevant funding and finance opportunities.

  - To complement this, the Blue Belt team have been reviewing new funders and investors that might support existing or new UKOT projects, developing a tracker to communicate funder status and learning to all UKOTs.

  - The Blue Belt team has begun working with TCI Government and the Government of Anguilla to understand their funding status and start exploring sustainable financing options for their marine protection and management activities.

- The Blue Belt Programme developed MPA Financial Plans for St Helena and Pitcairn governments. This has helped build understanding of the long-term costs of effectively managing their large-scale MPAs and begin planning for how the long-term funding gap can be closed, including through trialling new funding mechanisms and cost-saving strategies.

The ability of UKOTs to mobilise funding and resources to continue their exceptional work long-term is critical for ensuring their global impact and legacy on ocean protection and management.

Students at St Margaret's undertake Blue Belt Programme twinning activities with Ascension

Children attending St Helena's Marine Awareness Week

Sub-programmes

Since 2021, the Blue Belt Programme has also delivered two sub-programmes which support the Programme's core objectives and work with a wider group of UK Overseas Territories.

The team delivered training as part of Blue Belt Ocean Shield

Global Ocean Wildlife Analysis Network

A global network of Baited Remote Underwater Video Systems (BRUVS) is supporting 13 UKOTs to monitor their marine biodiversity and habitats.

Working with delivery partner Blue Abacus, the video data collected from across the UKOTs provides detailed insights of marine ecosystems, such as habitat type, species abundance and size. This data is then used to directly inform ongoing management and protective measures.

This year fieldwork took place across a number of the UKOTs, from Bermuda to the British Antarctic Territory (BAT). Training was provided to UKOTs to support local capacity, and 12 reports were produced with analysis of the data collected and key findings.

Highlights of the findings included the numerous recordings of critically rare oceanic-white tip sharks in the Cayman Islands – which made international news across media outlets – as well as groups of Adelie penguins in BAT. A scientific paper focussing in this global network of video systems is due for publication in the coming months.

Outreach activities to promote the network and support ocean literacy were also developed this year. A new collaboration with ZSL's Instant Wild platform will now means BRUVS footage from the UKOTs is available for citizen scientists across the globe to view and identify marine species for themselves.
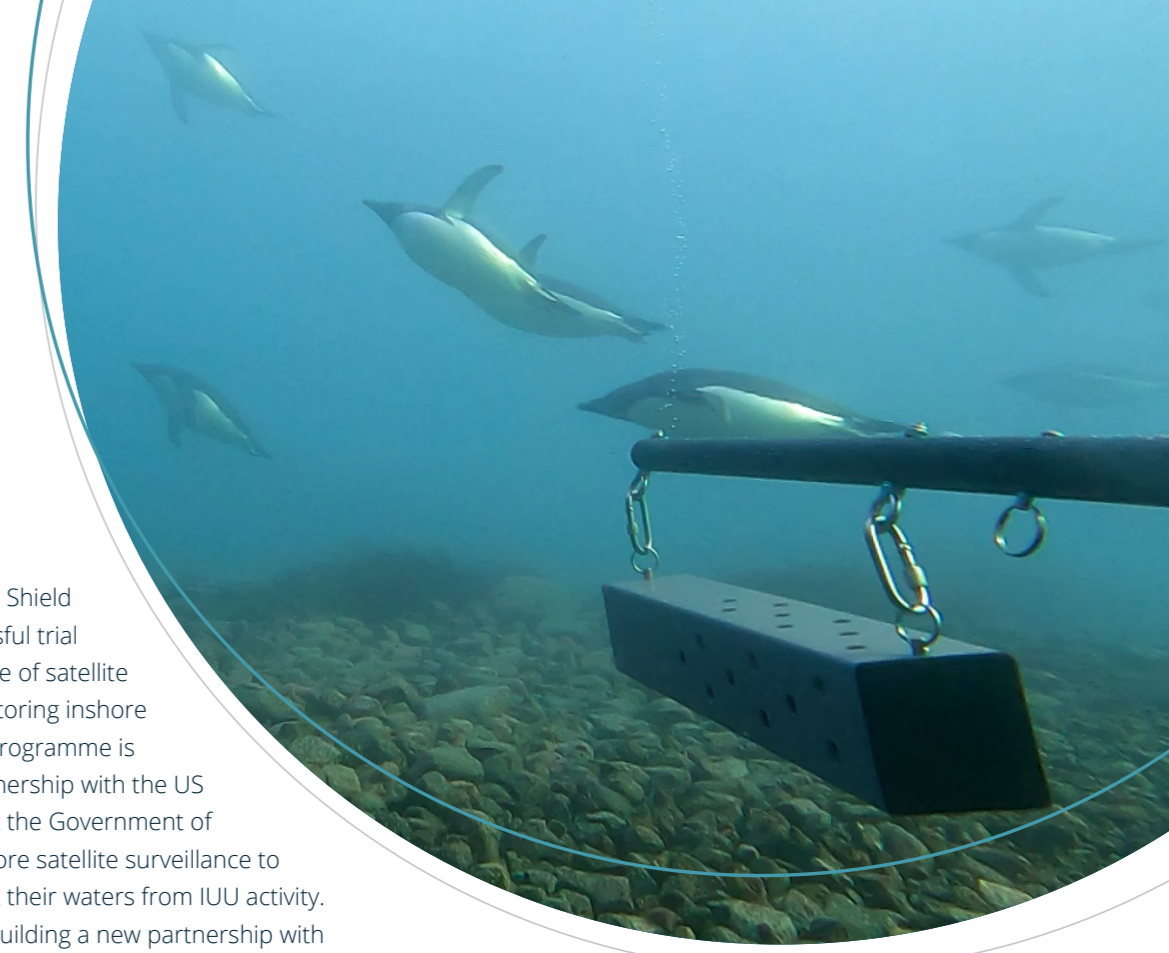
Blue Belt Ocean Shield

Blue Belt Ocean Shield is a sub-programme of Blue Belt offering maritime awareness to assess and understand the activities that may impact the health and sustainability of the maritime environment. Such activities include but are not limited to IUU fishing, commercial and recreational vessel activity and marine development projects. This sub-programme is currently supporting the Government of Bermuda.

- The Blue Belt programme developed and delivered an ICCAT observer training programme to support Government of Bermuda in meeting its ICCAT obligations. The observer covered three billfish fishing tournaments throughout July 2023 documenting catches and landings.

- The Blue Belt Ocean Shield undertook a successful trial to investigate the use of satellite surveillance in monitoring inshore fisheries. The sub-programme is also working in partnership with the US Coastguard to assist the Government of Bermuda with offshore satellite surveillance to monitor and protect their waters from IUU activity. The programme is building a new partnership with the joint Maritime Security Centre and Newcastle University to trial passive acoustics devices in Bermuda in 24/25.

- The team provided advice to the Government of Bermuda on strengthening their fishing licensing regime to increase the protection of important shark species.

The Blue Belt Symposium

This year the Blue Belt programme hosted and facilitated a landmark international event, entitled The Blue Belt journey: Celebrating the past, charting the future.

The team brought together UKOT representatives in London with UK Government ministers, non-governmental organisations, academics, and other partners to reflect over three days on the Blue Belt Programme's successes and its aims and ambitions for the future.

Throughout the opening day, representatives from each Blue Belt Programme Overseas Territory presented on their own unique experiences, achievements and challenges surrounding the protection of their ocean environments. These presentations included the announcement from the Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands of further protective measures for their vast MPA.

Learning lessons for the future

On day two, the symposium focused on shared reflections and lessons learnt in the protection and sustainable management of UKOT marine environments. Presentations and discussions focused on innovative techniques for marine monitoring, exploring sustainable financing solutions and different approaches to engaging local island communities.

On the final day, discussions focused on the future priorities for the Blue Belt Programme moving forward. Sessions were chaired by Territory representatives on the importance of global marine protected networks; the need for sustainable island economies and the role of innovative technologies to improve marine protection.

Between sessions, delegates were able to find out more via exhibition stands. These included displays of the incredible biological speciments collected during Blue Belt Programme Discovery expeditions, as well as artwork from the Ascension Island youth MPA committee, highlighting work done locally to increase ocean literacy.

Following a successful three days, the Blue Belt Programme delivery partners will now work with the UKOTs to reflect on the insights gathered and identify future priorities for the Programme.

Luc Clerveaux, Turks & Caicos Islands Government

Delegates at the Blue Belt Symposium

Speakers at the Blue Belt Symposium

Chanelle Petty Barrett – Permanent Secretary
Remone Johnson- Fisheries Officer

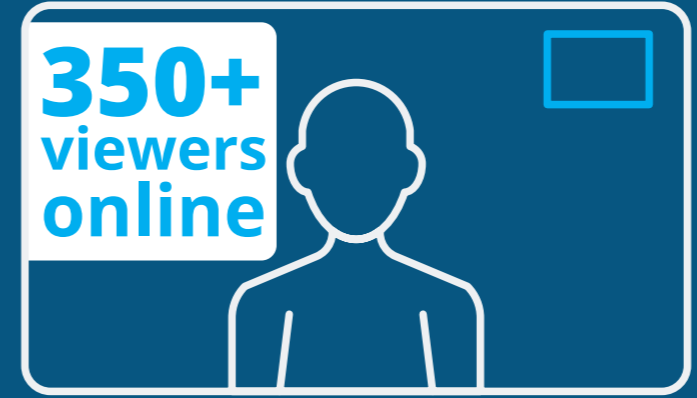Ramone Johnson of Anguilla Government speaking at the Blue Belt symposium

15 sessions on a wide range of topics, including:
Innovative methods for marine monitoring and surveillance, sustainable financing, and social, cultural and economic impacts and value of MPAs

50+
speakers
from UKOTs, academia, NGOs and policy makers

180+
delegates

350+ viewers online

14 UKOTs represented

The event was opened with a personal written message from His Majesty King Charles III, who praised the UK Overseas Territories and the Blue Belt Programme:

> *As custodians of some of the world's most important marine habitats, the Overseas Territories have an outsized role in protecting our oceans. Meeting many of the leaders of your Territories at Buckingham Palace last year, it was clear to me that this is a responsibility that you have assumed with great commitment, creativity and care. As you come together today in London, I can only send you my heartfelt good wishes and hope that your Blue Belt Programme continues to build on that record through further and enhanced collaboration.*
>
> *In helping to protect several million square kilometres of ocean, the Blue Belt represents a vital contribution not only to the fight against climate change – after all, our oceans represent the world's largest and most important carbon sink, absorbing some 90 per cent of the heat generated by rising emissions – but also to the urgent need to protect and enhance marine ecosystems as part of the commitment to protect 30 per cent of the global ocean, by 2030, agreed to by all parties at the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2022.*
>
> *The Programme is thus a source of great admiration and pride for us all, and we owe you a deep and enduring debt of gratitude as you work to preserve this essential legacy for future generations.*

His Majesty King Charles III

Comments from attendees:

> *It made me proud to have been involved in my own small way! We do really need a few positive stories about the planet at the moment and I think the Blue Belt is a great one*

> *An extremely well organised symposium delivering real benefits*

> *It was great to have UK Overseas Territory reps chairing sessions, being on panels and being integral to the event*

> *All presentations were extremely informative and engaging*

Tiffany Simpson, Ascension Island Government

Looking ahead

Last year the Blue Belt of marine protection continued to grow, welcoming Cayman Islands as the latest UKOT to join the Programme. Together, these UKOTs are protecting 4.4 million square kilometres of marine environment across every major ocean on the planet.

As the global community continue to work towards the target of protecting 30% of the world's ocean by 2030, this group of Territories are setting an example in robust, effective and sustainable marine management and protection.

As the Programme progresses into its ninth year, the Blue Belt team will continue to support the UKOTs in maintaining this world-leading approach. From cutting edge research projects and the establishment of new management tools, to increasing ocean literacy and managing the impacts of human activity, the Blue Belt is actively supporting UKOTs.

Throughout 2024/25 the Blue Belt Programme will develop a future focussed strategy for the years ahead. In collaboration with the UKOTs, the strategy will aim to ensure the Programme continues to meet their needs and UK Government commitments around marine protection and sustainable management.

As 2024/25 marks the final year of this current spending review, the Blue Belt Programme will undertake an evaluation process of the previous three years, which will define progress against key objectives and the impact statements according to each programme theme.

UKOTs are protecting

4.4 million
square kilometres of marine environment

More information about the Blue Belt Programme

The flagship Blue Belt Programme is a leading marine global marine conservation programme, supporting the UK's ambition to protect 30% of global ocean by 2030 and driven by United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

During 2023/24 the Blue Belt Programme was funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and supported by two delivery partners, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas) and the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), on behalf of the UK Government. Cefas and MMO provide knowledge and expertise in fields of applied marine science, management, technology, and enforcement.

The delivery partners also work with other UK Government bodies and non-governmental organisations to ensure the UKOTs receive the best technical advice, scientific knowledge and support available to protect and manage their marine and coastal environments.

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