

Blue Belt Programme

Annual Review
2024/25



Introduction

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

Initiated in 2016, the programme has worked with UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs) to support them in protecting and sustainably managing their marine environments. This underpins the UK Government’s commitment to protecting 30% of the world’s ocean by 2030, as agreed at the Convention of Biological Diversity and contributing towards other international targets.

Between 2022-25 the Blue Belt Programme’s overarching vision was: **“The UK Overseas Territories are protecting and enhancing ocean health to halt biodiversity loss, enable sustainable growth, ensure climate change resilience, and to connect people with the natural environment.”**

- There are currently 10 Territories within the Programme:¹
- 1. Anguilla,
 - 2. Ascension Island,
 - 3. British Antarctic Territory (BAT),
 - 4. British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT),
 - 5. Pitcairn Islands,
 - 6. Cayman Islands,
 - 7. St Helena,
 - 8. Tristan da Cunha,
 - 9. Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI), and
 - 10. South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI).

¹ The Programme has been implemented in eight Territory jurisdictions, covering 10 biologically distinct regions.

Together, these Territories are protecting over 4.4 million square kilometres of marine environment across every major ocean basin, making it one of the largest networks of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) of its kind on the planet. Looking back over the ninth year of work across the Programme, and forward towards the ten-year anniversary, gives the opportunity to showcase the UKOTs’ continued commitment to ocean protection and sustainable management of marine resources.



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

“The support from the Blue Belt Programme has been fundamental in the delivery of much of the work we do on Tristan”

- Tristan da Cunha

“Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the success of Pitcairn’s MPA is attributable to the support provided by the Blue Belt Programme, for which we are profoundly grateful. Without the professional and technical expertise provided by Blue Belt, we would not have achieved the prestigious Marine Conservation Institute (MCI) Blue Parks Award – never mind at the highest level! Blue Belt has breathed new life into this UKOT, and it is my hope that the Programme will continue its mission of support to all UKOTs in both great oceans of the world. From Pitcairn, thank you”

- Pitcairn Islands

“Having the Blue Belt Programme gives the St Helena government confidence in the work being undertaken on St Helena. Blue Belt has allowed us to be organised and planned in a sequential manner, not jumping ahead, and to a timeline that is aligned with our resources and capacity. The work undertaken as a result of the Programme has facilitated community and political buy-in at a pace that facilitates strong understanding and support.”

- St Helena



Our ocean is a home to countless species, a regulator of our climate, and a resource for millions of people. Through the Blue Belt Programme, the UK and our Overseas Territories have created a global legacy in ocean protection.

Since 2016, we’ve safeguarded over 4 million square kilometres of ocean – from Antarctic waters to tropical coral reefs. Each protected area comprises its own thriving ecosystem, enabling marine life to flourish and coastal livelihoods to prosper.

The Blue Belt Programme showcases what can be achieved when scientific expertise meets local knowledge, and when political commitment meets community passion.

As we approach the Programme’s tenth anniversary, I am immensely proud of the Programme’s legacy and achievements, but our work continues. These unique and diverse waters remain central to the UK’s international environmental leadership – and a beacon of hope for our planet.

Minister Doughty
UK Minister for Europe, North America and Overseas Territories



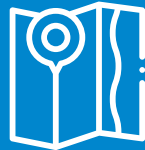
Themes of work

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

1

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.



2

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.



3

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.



4

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.



5

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.

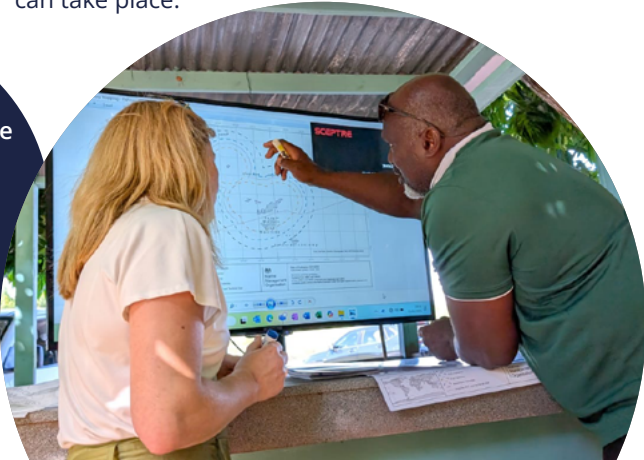


Strengthening governance and management frameworks

The Blue Belt Programme supports UKOTs in fulfilling their environmental commitments by helping develop and maintain effective governance structures, legislation, management approaches and enforcement strategies. These comprehensive management frameworks are essential for protecting marine environments and preserving them for future generations.

- Ascension Island Government made significant progress towards the final part of its environmental legislation, with the Inshore Fisheries Management Bill now ready for its second public reading. The Conservation and Fisheries Directorate (CFD), with support from the Blue Belt Programme, have established a consultation group bringing together Ascension Island Government and the local fishing community, enabling greater involvement with policy and management development, ensuring co-management of the inshore fisheries going forward.

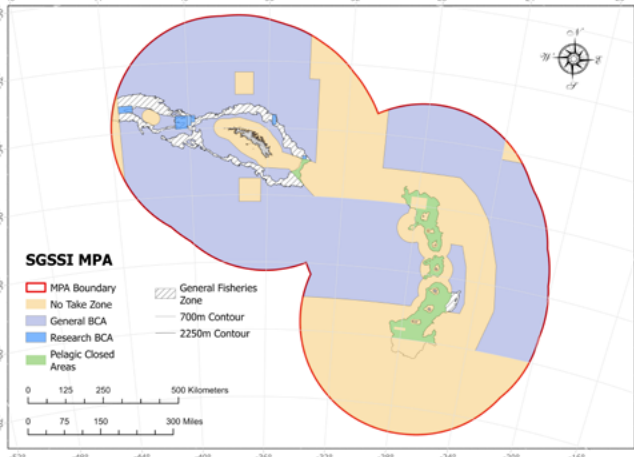
The Blue Belt Programme carried out a series of stakeholder workshops to raise awareness of MSP and how it can benefit Anguilla



- Ascension Island Government’s Marine Team have strengthened their data collection from recreational fishing activity with support from the Programme. This data is contributing to a better understanding of Ascension Island’s fish stock and the co-management of the inshore fisheries.
- In South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI) the Marine Protected Area (MPA) affords spatial and temporal protection, ensuring the highly precautionary fisheries (for toothfish, icefish and krill) have minimal impact on the environment. Following the latest MPA review, enhanced protection measures have been signed into law through new ordinances drafted with support from the Blue Belt Programme. Now, over 470,000 km² (almost 38% of the MPA) is designated as a fully protected “no-take” zone where no fishing of any kind is allowed. Additionally, 709,000 km² (over 57% of the MPA) is formally designated as a “benthic closed area”, where no longline fishing for toothfish can take place.

- The Programme has also helped update the MPA Management Plan for SGSSI, replacing the previous version from 2013. This new plan reflects significant advances in our understanding of the SGSSI marine environment, outlines the protection measures for effective marine stewardship, and addresses the challenges of managing these unique ecosystems in the face of climate change.
- The Blue Belt Programme assisted St Helena Government to produce their first MPA Annual Report. This highlights the extensive work undertaken in 2023-24 to underpin the effective management of the MPA. It will be published on the St Helena Government’s website to highlight their work on a global stage.
- Progress on the renewal of the concession for the Tristan da Cunha Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certified lobster fishery has been a key focus of the Blue Belt Programme’s work. Decisions around the competitive tendering process were announced in May. The sustainable lobster fishery serves as the main economic resource and a critical food source for the island community.

- The Government of the Pitcairn Islands developed a nature-based tourism strategy with assistance from the Programme. This strategy maps out steps to develop three new sustainable marine nature-based tourism opportunities to allow the local community to increase the benefits generated from their MPA.
- The Programme also completed a comprehensive MPA review in 2023-2024 which sets out all aspects of work being undertaken in Pitcairn’s marine space and identifies progress towards Pitcairn’s marine objectives as set out in their marine management plan.
- In the first full year of Cayman Islands being part of the Blue Belt Programme, extensive work has been undertaken to identify enhancements needed for sustainable ocean use and protection. This includes consultations on fisheries management and vessel monitoring with other partners in Cayman, including the Coastguard, Customs and Border Control, Port Authority, and the Department of Environmental Health.



The new MPA map for SGSSI. Almost 38% of the MPA is now fully designated as a fully protected ‘no take zone.’

- The Turks and Caicos Islands Department of Environment and Coastal Resources (DECR), supported by the Programme, held Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) workshops with personal water-craft operators. These workshops discussed current competition between marine activities in popular areas and brought marine users together to discuss potential zoning options. More general MSP marine usage workshops were also facilitated on South Caicos and Grand Turk.

- The Programme has been supporting DECR in Turks and Caicos Islands to develop a national framework for managing their Protected Area network. The draft framework is due to be finalised in 2025-2026. Ongoing training on Protected Area Management Effectiveness has also been provided to DECR.
- The Blue Belt Programme continue to assist the Government of Anguilla with the development of their MSP initiative. Workshops were held with representatives from the Government, NGOs and marine stakeholders to raise awareness of MSP and the potential benefits to Anguilla of adopting a strategic planning approach.

Lobster tagging in Tristan da Cunha



MSP workshop in TCI



Understanding and protecting biodiversity, and building resilience to climate change

Through collaboration with UKOTs, the Blue Belt Programme assesses the environmental, social and economic value of marine ecosystems. This knowledge informs evidence-based decisions and adaptive management strategies, ensuring these precious environments remain protected for generations to come.

- In Ascension Island, the Blue Belt Programme has contributed to the five-yearly seabird census and further tagging work. This census tracks bird population changes over time, crucial for monitoring impacts of climate change, rodent predation, and disease. It also helps assess if conservation efforts are increasing populations, particularly the endemic Ascension Frigatebird.
- A new ecophysiology laboratory, funded by the Blue Belt Programme, was installed on Ascension Island. Ecophysiology is the science of how organisms respond to environmental conditions and the laboratory will therefore allow the Ascension Island Government to study the effects of climate change on key local species, like grouper, as well as a range of potential future applications.
- An assessment of the impact of longline fishing gear on the seabed ecosystem has been provided to the GSGSSI, with this information supporting fisheries and spatial management within the SGSSI MPA. The Blue Belt Programme provided this assessment after analysing six years of video and stills camera footage collected using fisheries longline mounted camera systems. The analysis provided modelling and mapping of the distribution of vulnerable seabed ecosystems of South Georgia; the potential impact of fishing activity on these ecosystems; and an assessment of how this information can be applied to effective marine management. Additionally, this ongoing Blue

Belt-supported research formed a key part in the SGSSI toothfish fishery maintaining very high scoring during last year's MSC fisheries certification.

- The Blue Belt Programme supported vital training to the St Helena Government in monitoring tools including microscopes for ichthyoplankton surveys and data storage loggers for inshore long-term monitoring sites to help with local fish stock assessment and advice for sustainable management.
- In partnership with Fishmongers' Hall and Exeter University and supported by Blue Belt Programme scientists, a new PhD student has started work on a project on Tristan da Cunha with the Tristan Fisheries Department. This project will seek to understand the role and impact of an invasive fish species, silver porgy, in the wider ecosystem around the Tristan islands. The student recently completed their first field season on Tristan and will return later in 2025.
- The Government of Anguilla's fisheries team received funding and bespoke training for a Blue Robotics Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV). The ROV assisted in collecting vital data which will improve their understanding of the condition of their Marine Parks and assess fish and shellfish stocks to inform sustainable fisheries management.

- The Blue Belt Programme supported the Government of the Pitcairn Islands to gather and analyse visitor data to help understand visitors' interest in new marine based activities and identify potential barriers to accessing certain activities. The report also looked to understand visitors' awareness of the Pitcairn MPA and its associated values. The report provides the Government of the Pitcairn Islands with baseline data that can be used to identify changes in trends over time and help them evaluate the effectiveness of measures they put in place.
- Pitcairn's Henderson and Ducie islands have been named as Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs) by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), marking them as critical sites for shark conservation. This recommendation was part informed by shark population data collected and analysed with support from the Blue Belt Programme.



Training in new fish monitoring tools including microscopes for ichthyoplankton surveys on St Helena was provided

Over the last two years, the Programme has undertaken a full resilience assessment of the coral reefs across the Pitcairn Islands MPA. Using data collected in 2021 by the island's community, the assessment highlights areas that may be of higher risk to climate change impacts. This data will also act as a baseline for future monitoring to detect any early signs of impacts from climate change.

- The Blue Belt Programme provided a scoping study to identify options for an enhanced ocean protection strategy in the Cayman Island's offshore waters. Options included the provision of Area-Based Management Tools, and strengthening of existing regulations such as the ban on fishing for sharks and rays. This work identifies areas of high biodiversity importance to improve or maintain ecosystem resilience in the future.
- A virtual Marine Biosecurity workshop event was facilitated. It brought together representatives from the UKOTs with scientists and technical experts to discuss the importance of marine biosecurity for the UKOTs, share learning and identify areas for improvement to help inform future approaches.



Collecting coral fragments in Pitcairn to be assessed



A new ecophysiology laboratory has been installed on Ascension Island

Managing human impacts

Human activities, at the local, regional and international level, pose a unique combination of pressures and threats to each of the UKOTs' marine environments. Many of these are interconnected and exacerbated by climate change. Pollution, invasive non-native species, habitat loss and resource exploitation risk biodiversity loss in each Territory, whilst tourism and development pose both pressures and opportunities. The Blue Belt Programme has collaborated with local governments to identify and reduce environmental impacts while supporting sustainable economic activities in these marine areas.

- In a pioneering study, the Blue Belt Programme has investigated the stomachs of seabirds from Ascension Island for plastic pollution. Specifically identifying examples of meso- and microplastics. A worrying 85% of seabirds investigated had evidence of microplastics and other litter within their digestive tracts. This study is contributing to the Zoological Society of London South Atlantic Plastics Project in understanding plastic's impact on Ascension's seabirds.
- Funding was provided to the GSGSSI to undertake a scientific groundfish survey to review icefish densities and the distribution of juvenile Patagonian toothfish. This research underpins the sustainably

managed fishery in the region and is the latest year in the 37-year dataset. This year additional funding enabled the survey to sample new depths of over 700m. This survey improves GSGSSI ability to estimate future populations and refine models used to set fisheries quotas. Results from this survey provides evidence to maintain high MSC scoring for its longline toothfish fishery (specifically in relation to the impact of fisheries on South Georgia's wider ecosystems and habitats) and outlines what additional research and monitoring should be prioritised over the next five years.

- The Blue Belt Programme supported the sustainable management of St Helena's fisheries through local research and monitoring surveys including a review of tuna assessment methods, initial grouper stock assessment and lobster and dive surveys. The Programme also aided in the development of a fish egg survey which will be implemented in 2025 and 2026. These fisheries monitoring surveys enable St Helena Government to sustainably manage their fish populations by quantifying trends in fish abundance and diversity.
- The Programme assisted the St Helena Government to manage sustainable marine tourism within the MPA, including undertaking research to 'future proof' management measures. Funding was also provided for the development of a Smartphone app for marine tour operators, which will enable St Helena Government to monitor how well the management measures are working.

The Programme helped to understand the impact of cruise ships on water quality in the Cayman Islands



Frigatebird with fishing lure and line in its beak. Photo credit: Jonathan Holt



- Tristan da Cunha took an important step forward towards improved plastic management with the installation of the new recycling pod. Funded by the Blue Belt Programme, the recycling pod gives Tristan da Cunha the ability to process recyclable plastic to reduce waste on the island.
- Samples of water, sediment, and Sargassum seaweed were collected around Anguilla to assess pollution risks to coastal waters and evaluate Sargassum's potential use as a biofertiliser. The Sargassum was tested for heavy metals, organic contaminants, and nutrients. The resulting reports from these investigations present the Government of Anguilla with recommendations to support the effective management of marine and coastal waters and assist in the future regulation of using this seaweed as a biofertiliser.
- The Blue Belt Programme worked with agencies in the Cayman Islands to conduct broad spectrum water quality screening and literature review in order to understand the impacts of cruise ships on the marine environment. Nutrients, chlorophyll, organic and metal pollutants were measured with results supporting the Cayman Island Government to develop a water quality monitoring strategy.

A new recycling pod on Tristan da Cunha



Supporting compliance and enforcement

The Blue Belt Programme supports UK Overseas Territories in managing and regulating their marine environments. Comprehensive assistance is provided including training, introducing innovative technologies and using satellite imagery to detect and deter potential illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities.

The Blue Belt Programme took a total of 103.27 million km² of satellite imagery over the UKOTs' waters in 2024/25

- Surveillance of the waters around the UKOTs for potential Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing activity has continued. Utilising the latest technology available, a suite of remote sensing satellite-based tools continually scan these waters to identify any potential illicit activity.
- The Blue Belt Programme supported a learning and development exchange between St Helena and TCI. Two marine enforcement officers from St Helena

undertook joint training with officers in TCI and shadowed when carrying out their enforcement. The exchange helped to build working relationships and share

The programme continues to support the Areas to be Avoided (ATBA) around Tristan which were put in place to reduce the risk of vessel collisions with the islands.



Trend of Vessels Transiting the ATBAs since 2016

- knowledge in key enforcement skill areas between the two UKOTs. It also improved confidence amongst the St Helena officers.
- Ongoing monitoring and surveillance was undertaken throughout Tristan da Cunha's MPZ, including the Areas to be Avoided (ATBA), and seasonal satellite imagery. Two of the ATBA beacons funded by the Blue Belt Programme have been successfully installed on Tristan with one more to be installed next financial year on Gough Island. ATBA beacons ensure that the presence of the ATBAs is indicated on passing ships navigation systems. This helps vessels avoid those areas helping prevent environmental damage from vessel grounding and protecting the inshore ecosystem by reducing the risk of a pollution incident.

- There has been a significant decrease in vessels that transit the ATBAs since Blue Belt Programme monitoring started in April 2020 as ships are complying with the ATBA. This compliance is lowering the pollution risk to Tristan da Cunha.
- The first real-time collection of two types of satellite imagery across Anguilla's marine area to look for vessels fishing illegally were undertaken by the Programme. Out of a total of 64 vessels detected by the satellites, eight posed risks as potential illegal fishing vessels. Future satellite surveillance of Anguilla's marine area would improve our understanding of fishing activity, the risk of IUU fishing to the territory and what mitigation actions might be required. The Blue Belt Programme also trained Anguilla Government staff in the use of Skylight, a new AI tool that allows the user to visualise vessel activity patterns and set alerts for activity of interest. This approach is increasing the capacity of Anguilla Government staff to conduct their own surveillance of the activity in their waters.
- Remote surveillance of Pitcairn's MPA area has continued with no illegal incursions detected. A new automated alert system has been developed to inform the Government of Pitcairn Islands if any vessels pass within 12 nautical miles of any of their

An Area To Be Avoided beacon on Tristan



islands. In February 2024 the Royal New Zealand Air Force (NZRAF) provided two maritime surveillance flights of the MPA. The flights confirmed compliance with the MPA and offered an unique opportunity for intelligence collection and the ground truthing of new types of satellite imagery.

- In the Cayman Islands, remote surveillance was trialled over four Nassau Grouper spawning aggregation sites to monitor for vessels that might be fishing for grouper in the closed season, when fishing is strictly prohibited. The results are currently being analysed, which will help refine the approach in future years. Satellite imagery was also used to monitor the presence of "dark" vessels inside the Cayman maritime zone.

"Remote surveillance has given us a greater understanding of what's possible when it comes to IUU fishing and foreign vessel detection."
Kelly Forsythe, Blue Belt co-ordinator, in Cayman Islands

- The Blue Belt Programme has continued to support British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) with daily monitoring of vessel activity supplemented by remote imagery at times when the risk of illegal fishing is highest. The

Senior Fisheries Protection officer (SFPO) on board the BIOT Patrol Vessel said: "The satellite imagery offers a complementary overview of the area, when the Fishing Vessels are dark. The imagery and patrol plans are coordinated to increase the chances of interception if dark vessels are detected."

The Blue Belt Programme carried out 2721 AIS (Automatic Identification System) checks across the UKOTs in 2024/25. These checks monitor waters for suspected illegal activity

- The Programme assisted the UKOTs with counter IUU fishing engagement in a number of international forums such as the FiveEyes (FVEY) Maritime Domain Awareness Partnership 5 (MDA5) meeting. The FVEY forum offers

an opportunity to cooperate with UK allies such as the NZRAF surveillance flights at Pitcairn and the sharing of analysis between the five partners.

An aerial view of the Cayman Islands



Supporting Compliance with the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT)

- The UKOTs continued to improve compliance with ICCAT requirements and are now 89% compliant, with St Helena becoming fully compliant. The remaining gaps are being addressed with new legislation and the implementation of activities such as fisheries observer coverage.
- Following training, Bermuda has implemented the ICCAT fishery observer requirements. This is crucial for providing data that ICCAT uses to manage tuna fisheries at the Atlantic scale and provide survivability data for sensitive species such as sharks.
- As part of the UK delegation to ICCAT the Blue Belt Programme assisted with the negotiation and agreement within ICCAT of an Atlantic wide ban on the retention of Mobulid rays and Whale sharks, a health and safety measure for the protection of fisheries observers, and strengthening of regulations for transshipment - bringing it more into line with wider international requirements and reducing the IUU fishing risk to the UKOTs.
- Technical advice was delivered to Ascension and TCI Governments as they develop their new Inshore and Fisheries Protection regulations respectively. This is to ensure that current ICCAT requirements are enacted, and the legislation is future proofed against new requirements.

- A presentation on Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) trials being conducted in Bermuda at a REM technical working group in ICCAT was provided, showcasing the work of the UKOT and the Programme and contributing to future negotiations in this area.

DigitalGlobe©2023 Maxar Technologies

Satellite image from TCI ©2025 Maxar Technologies.

Capacity building and ocean literacy

The Blue Belt Programme provides UKOTs with essential skills, resources and funding to achieve sustained marine environment protection. The programme also works to enhance understanding of ocean ecosystems across the territories through community involvement and education, aiming to inspire young people to become future environmental leaders and marine scientists.

- Training was provided to Ascension Island staff in otolith processing and reading, giving the team on Ascension more ability to manage local fisheries sustainably. Data collected will feed into stock status assessments and contribute to the management of Ascensions inshore fisheries.
- The Blue Belt Programme enrolled two SGSSI Government Officers on the MMO Boarding Safety training. The officers conduct a wide variety of vessel boarding operations as part of their operational duties, involving various fishing vessels, small craft and numerous potential hazards in the sub-Antarctic waters around South Georgia. The MMO Boarding Safety training course covered basic and advanced boat operations such as VHF radio procedures, boarding and pacing, casualty recovery and night-time operations. The training supports the officers to conduct their role safely, building and refreshing knowledge.
- The Blue Belt Programme supported the development of climate change engagement materials which were used in the 2025 St Helena Marine Awareness Week to improve local understanding of climate change focused research and impacts.



Young Ocean Champions from Tristan da Cunha

- Four Young Ocean Champions from Tristan da Cunha were jointly hosted by the Blue Belt Programme and the Atlantic Guardians (RSPB, Blue Nature Alliance and Tristan da Cunha Government) project as part of their training in the UK. The Young Ocean Champions had an exciting and busy schedule including powerboat handling, a marine science bootcamp, and media skills training.
- Support was provided to Tristan da Cunha Government in designing marine education packs for school children in key stage 1 & 2. Funding was provided to enable members of staff to complete further professional training, including training as part of the fisheries management succession plan.

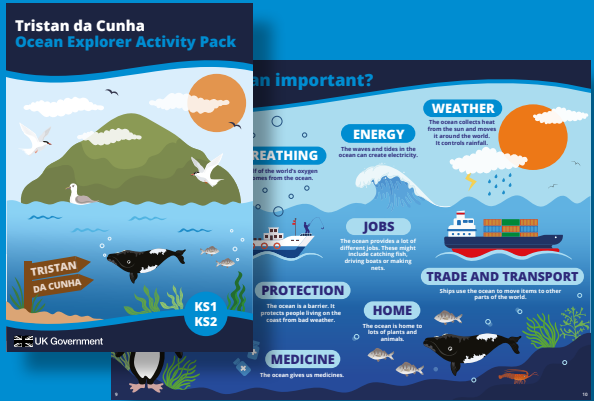
More than 70% of people in St Helena feel that the MPA has brought about a positive change – both for the community and the environment.

"If you protect the ocean, it will protect you. Take every opportunity that comes your way to make the world a better place." Shannon Swain, one of Tristan da Cunha's Young Ocean Champions

- Working in partnership with King's College London, the Blue Belt Programme produced two videos to promote Pitcairn's marine science base and to highlight their visiting humpback whale population.
- In collaboration with Swimming Head, the Blue Belt Programme produced a video on the data collected using Baited Remote Underwater Video Systems (BRUVS) in Pitcairn. This video will raise awareness of the amazing marine life found within the MPA to visiting tourists and cruise ships, to help them understand the research being carried out on Pitcairn's pristine marine environment.

Staff from UKOT governments and the Blue Belt Programme presented to more than 850 scientists and practitioners at international conferences in 2024/25

- Funding was provided to St Helena, Ascension Islands and Tristan da Cunha representatives to attend the 7th International Marine Conservation Congress (IMCC7) in South Africa. Representatives presented their work to over 800 scientists and practitioners from across the globe. The conference was a fantastic opportunity to showcase UKOTs' achievements with support from the Blue Belt Programme on the international stage.
- The Blue Belt Programme also presented at a special Pitcairn session at the Marine Alliance for Science and Technology Scotland conference (MASTS). The presentations successfully communicated work being undertaken to protect Pitcairn's unique ecosystem and promote the new marine science base.



Marine education packs were designed for children on Tristan da Cunha



The Deputy Governor of Pitcairn, Alasdair Hamilton, presenting at the MASTS conference

Work planning with the team on Ascension Island



Cross-UKOT support

Sustainable finance

- The Sustainable Finance Hub met five times in the year, bringing together representatives from the MMO, Cefas, JNCC, Defra, FCDO, Finance Earth, UKOT representatives and special guest speakers to help streamline collaboration and engagement. Learning was shared amongst Hub members, identifying important events and analysing funding opportunities. The Hub also facilitated specific knowledge sharing sessions, including a virtual learning exchange with the Caribbean Biodiversity Fund (CBF) attended by representatives from Anguilla, the Cayman Islands and TCI.
- The Hub has developed, updated and shared a funding tracker for the UKOTs which has assessed 72 funding opportunities (37 this year) against the type of support they provide, their eligibility requirements, geographical remit and overall relevance to UKOTs.
- Deep dives on topic areas (for example, biodiversity commitments models) related to the sustainable finance of marine protection and management, and of relevance to UKOTs, have been provided via the Hub's quarterly Sustainable Finance newsletter. This newsletter, circulated to UKOTs and interested partners, also provides updates on the Sustainable Finance workstream, relevant external training material, and snapshots of the UKOT funding tracker.



Southern elephant seals on Tristan da Cunha



Working directly with the UKOTs, the Blue Belt Programme, with support from Finance Earth, has also undertaken analysis of potential sustainable financing mechanisms, to better understand the potential opportunities in some cases support specific OTs with further exploring these mechanisms. This included:

- Working with St Helena to further explore user fee ringfencing and biodiversity commitment models to support long term MPA management, as well as developing a sustainable finance awareness raising piece to help engagement across St Helena Government.
- Exploring potential models for the establishment of a natural capital trust fund in TCI.
- Supporting Pitcairn to analyse the financial viability and profitability of their new Marine Science Base, as well as working with Ascension Island on business planning and financial modelling for their planned Ascension Scientific Hub.
- In Anguilla, the Blue Belt Programme conducted a sustainable financing options assessment. This identified potential opportunities to generate long-term revenue to support marine protection and sustainable growth of the island's economy.



A green turtle on Ascension Island

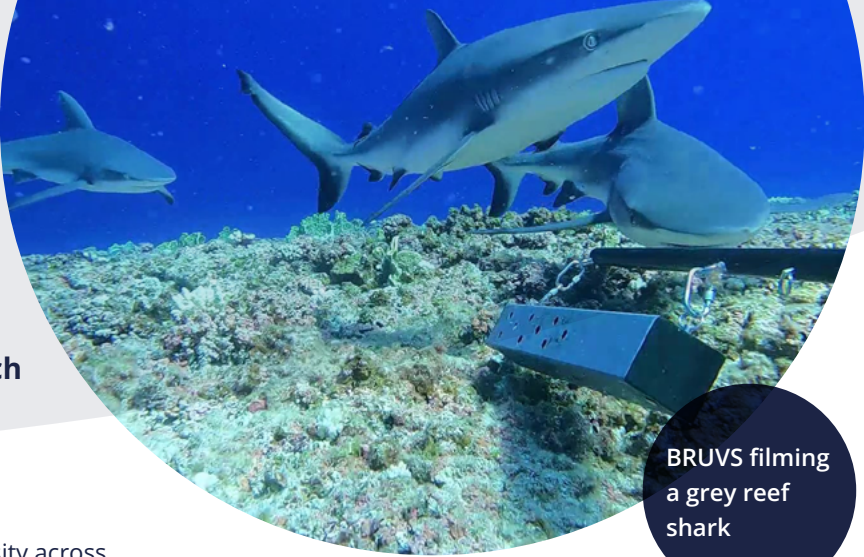
Sub-Programmes

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 UKOTs.

The Global Ocean Wildlife Analysis Network (GOWAN)

GOWAN is a network of Baited Remote Underwater Video Systems (BRUVS) that monitor marine biodiversity across 13 Territories. Working in partnership with Blue Abacus, the GOWAN collects vital data using non-intrusive methods, to inform policy, management and conservation efforts. The GOWAN provides all equipment, training and analysis, empowering the Territories to research their own marine ecosystems for the sustainable management and preservation of diverse marine ecosystems.

- The Pitcairn Islands' Ducie and Henderson have been recognised as Important Shark and Ray Areas by the IUCN. The designation was supported by GOWAN's findings of large populations of grey reef, Galapagos, and whitetip reef sharks.
- In Tristan da Cunha, GOWAN is monitoring invasive fish species at Gough Island. The South American silver porgy was accidentally introduced in 2006; however, footage shows it has yet to invade this southernmost island.
- In St Helena, work is continuing to assess the biomass and distribution of semi-pelagic species.
- GOWAN continues to captivate global audiences and inspire positive action to support marine ecosystems. In Ascension Island, educational games are engaging school children in learning about their local marine ecosystem. Footage captured by GOWAN was also used in the Cayman Islands UK Office's feature-length film Our Global Ocean – The Planet's Blue Heart.

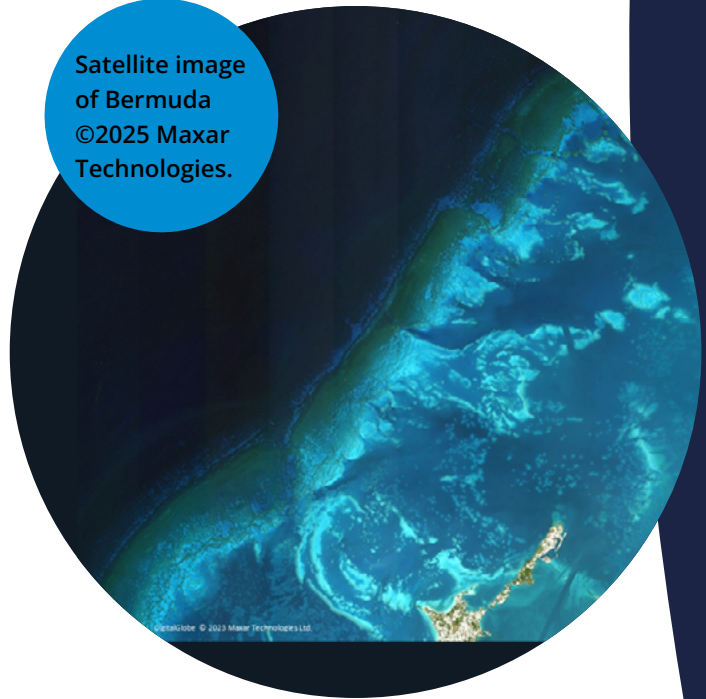


BRUVS filming a grey reef shark

Blue Belt Ocean Shield

The Blue Belt Ocean Shield is an integral component of the Blue Belt Programme but can also be accessed as a sub-programme for UKOTs that are not part of the Blue Belt Programme. The Blue Belt Ocean Shield is a maritime domain awareness programme that provides the tools to assess and understand the activities in the OTs' maritime domain that may impact the health and sustainability of the maritime environment. It is currently supporting Bermuda.

- The Blue Belt Programme shadowed the Government of Bermuda's fisheries enforcement activities to identify capacity building opportunities and shape future training and work to increase enforcement capacity.
- The Blue Belt Programme, in collaboration with the Joint Maritime Security Centre (JMSC) and Newcastle University, undertook a trial of low power passive acoustic detection and localisation. The aim was to demonstrate the systems can be used to monitor and alert to fishing activity in controlled areas for extended periods. Two units were deployed approximately 11km west of Bermuda for 25 days and controlled trials were conducted using Bermuda enforcement vessels to test capability. The system did not perform as expected due to high background noise from local reefs. However, the outputs give invaluable information on further development requirements not only in Bermuda but similar marine environments.



Satellite image of Bermuda ©2025 Maxar Technologies.

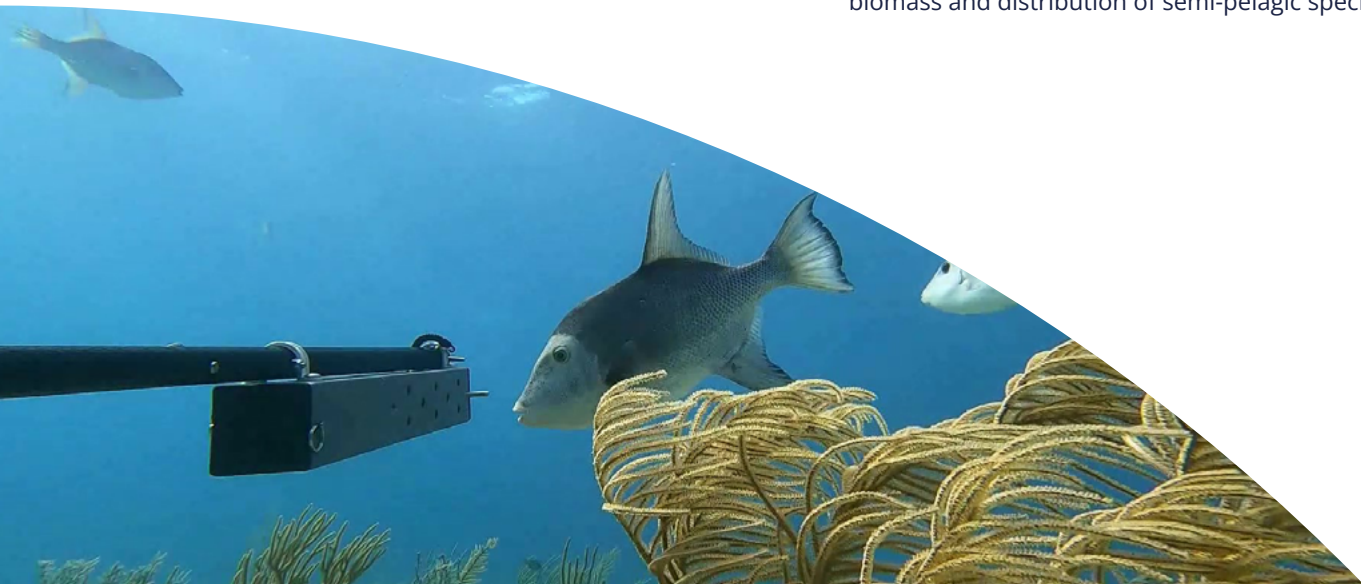
Looking ahead

The Blue Belt programme continued to safeguard marine environments across every major ocean basin last year.

As efforts progress towards protecting 30% of the world's ocean by 2030, these Territories demonstrate exemplary robust, effective and sustainable marine management and protection practices.

For 2026-2029 the Blue Belt Programme has updated its overarching vision and high level objectives around three core pillars – Nature, Climate and People. This builds upon UKOTs achievements in marine science, protection, management and enforcement. The refreshed approach outlines five-year impacts, scope and principles, complemented by updated governance and delivery methods to better support UKOTs.

These Territories demonstrate exemplary robust, effective and sustainable marine management and protection practices



More information about the Blue Belt Programme

During 2024/25 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). 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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