BLUE BELT PROGRAMME

UK Government

OCEAN OF IMPACT

10 YEARS OF THE BLUE BELT PROGRAMME

IMPACT REPORT | 2026

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01

A MESSAGE FROM MINISTER *STEPHEN DOUGHTY*

The ocean is one of our most essential support systems, sustaining all life on Earth. For millennia, it has shaped our culture, history and identity. Today, billions of people depend on healthy marine ecosystems for their economies and livelihoods, for food security, and the vital role they play in regulating the climate. When the ocean flourishes, its benefits extend far beyond the horizon – strengthening economies, stabilising the climate and safeguarding biodiversity.

For the past 10 years, the UK Overseas Territories, supported by the UK Government's Blue Belt Programme, have been working to protect and restore some of the world's most ecologically significant marine environments. Spanning over four million square kilometres of ocean, the Programme represents one of the most ambitious marine conservation efforts globally. It comprises Territories across nearly every major ocean basin, each home to unique and irreplaceable biodiversity, and whose partnership has been critical to the Programme's success.

Across the UK Overseas Territories, the importance of protecting marine ecosystems is deeply embedded in local priorities. The Programme has developed against a backdrop of escalating climate impacts and biodiversity loss, with extreme weather events, rising sea levels and warming oceans increasingly threatening both coastal communities and the natural environments on which they depend. In this context, the imperative to strengthen climate resilience, support sustainable blue economies and livelihoods, and address global challenges such as illegal fishing and species decline has never been more urgent.

I am immensely proud of this decade of collaboration between the UK and the UK Overseas Territories. The success of the Blue Belt Programme is a testament to their leadership, scientific expertise and enduring commitment to environmental stewardship. This collective endeavour forms a central component of the UK Government's contribution to the global commitment to protect at least 30% of the planet's ocean by 2030, in line with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework agreed at COP15.

As we reflect on the significant progress achieved to date, our focus is firmly on the future – advancing scientific understanding, strengthening international cooperation, and continuing to adapt and innovate to meet emerging challenges. This next phase of the Programme is marked by two significant milestones. First, we are delighted to welcome Montserrat as the fourth Caribbean Territory to join the Blue Belt family. Its commitment to robust marine management, the development of a sustainable blue economy, and protection of at least 20% of its maritime zone represents a powerful addition to our shared mission.

Second, we are launching our refreshed three-year strategy, structured around three core pillars: Nature, Climate and People. This framework will strengthen the Programme's global leadership in ocean conservation and enhance its capability to deliver long-term benefits for coastal communities and the natural environment. Together, these developments signal an ambitious new chapter for the Programme, one that builds on strong foundations while embracing the scale of opportunity – and responsibility – required to safeguard our ocean for decades to come.

STEPHEN DOUGHTY MP

UK Minister for Europe, North America and UK Overseas Territories

02

INTRODUCTION

The UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs) play a vital role in global ocean conservation. Though small in land area, they hold over 90% of the UK's biodiversity and are home to some of the most unique, fragile and irreplaceable marine ecosystems on the planet. Since 2016, the Blue Belt Programme has partnered with the UKOTs to protect and sustainably manage these critical ocean spaces – pairing UKOT leadership and stewardship with world-class scientific and technical expertise.

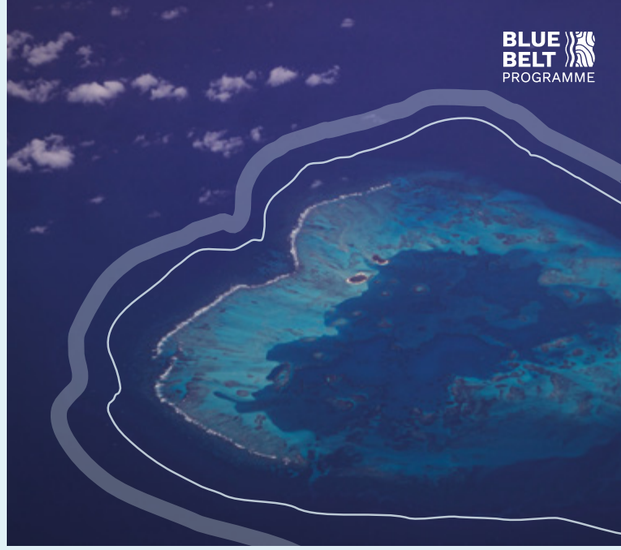
Pressures on the ocean have intensified in recent decades, from illegal fishing and pollution to widespread habitat loss. These challenges are being compounded by climate change: amidst accelerating warming, sea-level rise and ocean acidification, marine biodiversity is declining at unprecedented rates. Coral reefs, which support around a quarter of all marine life, have suffered mass bleaching as temperatures reach record highs.

These effects are felt acutely in small island territories. For UKOT communities, more powerful storms, dwindling fish stocks, eroding coasts and damaged reefs are already part of everyday life. Despite contributing almost nothing to global emissions, they are facing some of the world's most immediate climate and biodiversity impacts.

Global marine protection and management have struggled to keep pace with these growing threats. In 2016, only 5% of the world's ocean was formally designated as protected and few areas had the resources to ensure real on-the-water management. At the same time, Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IUUF) was threatening marine biodiversity, depleting shared resources and undermining local communities. Large stretches of the ocean floor remained unmapped, while many governments lacked the baseline data needed to manage their own waters.

Against this backdrop, the UK Government made a transformative commitment, announcing £20 million in dedicated funding to create the Blue Belt Programme, designed to support the UKOTs to protect and manage their vast and globally important marine environments.

The Blue Belt partnership has transformed the management of huge swathes of ocean, delivering lasting benefits for people as well as biodiversity. Across the UKOTs, healthy seas sustain livelihoods, underpin food security, and shield coastlines from the impacts of climate change. By strengthening governance, building local capacity, expanding scientific knowledge and improving long-term planning, the Programme has enabled UKOTs to protect their natural heritage while enhancing resilience and supporting sustainable, ocean-based growth.



Today, strengthened marine management spans 72% of UKOT maritime zones, including some of the world's largest Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). UKOT-led ambition and innovation in fisheries management, ecosystem protection and sustainable blue economy planning have earned three major international awards and recognitions, cementing the UKOTs' leadership in global marine conservation.

Closer to shore, work with UKOT Governments, schools and local community groups has celebrated the ocean as central to identity and future prosperity. These locally-led outreach and educational initiatives ensure conservation is rooted in community pride and sustained through the next generation of ocean stewards.

As the Programme marks its tenth year, underpinned by more than £60 million of sustained investment, it is proud to welcome Montserrat as its newest partner, joining Anguilla, British Antarctic Territory (BAT), British Indian Ocean Territory, Cayman Islands, Pitcairn Islands, St Helena, Ascension, Tristan da Cunha, Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI), and South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI). 2026 also saw the successful completion of the landmark Caribbean research expedition, Beyond the Reef, which explored the offshore waters of Anguilla, Turks and Caicos Islands and the Cayman Islands. As the tenth expedition in the Programme's history, it reflects the shared commitment of the UKOTs and the Blue Belt Programme to advancing world-leading marine science and conservation practice.

The Blue Belt Programme is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and supported by two world-leading organisations - the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas) and the Marine Management Organisation (MMO).

This report celebrates all that has been achieved over the past decade and charts an ambitious course for the future. It demonstrates how the Blue Belt Programme, working in close collaboration with the UKOTs, has safeguarded some of the most precious marine ecosystems on earth, strengthened resilience in the face of a changing climate and deepened the connection between people and the natural environment.

UKOTs

- Core Blue Belt Programme (including GOWAN and BBOS)
- Global Ocean Wildlife Analysis Network (GOWAN)
- Blue Belt Ocean Shield (BBOS) and GOWAN

500 MILLION KM²

of satellite imagery taken since 2021

10

major scientific expeditions

3

international awards and recognitions

4 MILLION KM²

of ocean supported by the Programme*

72%

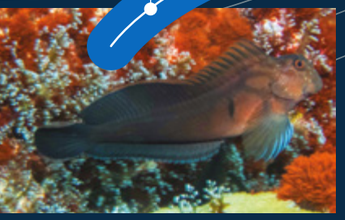
of UKOT maritime zones with strengthened marine management

*BIOT MPA is not included in this figure

03 10 YEARS OF IMPACT

2016

- The Blue Belt Programme is initiated by the UK Government, focusing support on UKOTs with designated large-scale MPAs – British Indian Ocean Territory*, South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands, and within the British Antarctic Territory – alongside those with ambition to do so: St Helena, Ascension, Tristan da Cunha, and the Pitcairn Islands.
- St Helena designates its entire Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as a sustainable use MPA.
- The Pitcairn Islands designate a highly protected MPA across its EEZ, with a small inshore zone for artisanal fishing.

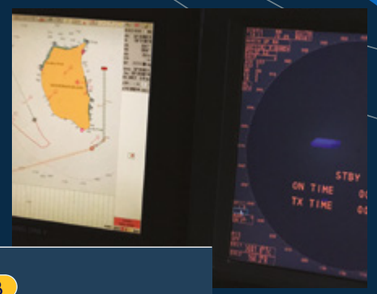


*The British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) has been an integral part of the Blue Belt Programme since 2016. Upon entry into force of the Treaty between the UK Government and Government of Mauritius concerning sovereignty of the Chagos Archipelago, sovereignty for the Archipelago will transfer from the UK to Mauritius, and the BIOT will cease to be a British Overseas Territory.

2018

The first satellite images are collected for the Blue Belt Programme as a tool to tackle IUUF in remote island locations.

The South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands MPA is enhanced following its first five-year review.



2019

- An expedition to the Pitcairn Islands captures over 4,000 images of the seabed around Henderson Island, gathering new data on the impact of plastic waste while removing six tonnes of plastic.
- Ascension Island designates its entire EEZ as an MPA.
- Two Discovery expeditions (DY99 and DY100) conduct comprehensive scientific surveys in Tristan da Cunha and St Helena and investigate benthic biodiversity in South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

2020

Tristan da Cunha designates 90% of its EEZ as a Marine Protection Zone (MPZ).

Photo credit: Government of the South Georgia & South Sandwich Islands

2021

- The Blue Belt Programme establishes the Global Ocean Wildlife Analysis Network (GOWAN), a global network of stereo baited remote underwater video systems that supports the observation and analysis of ocean wildlife. It operates across most of the UKOTs in the Programme in addition to Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, Montserrat and Gibraltar.
- Turks and Caicos Islands join the Blue Belt Programme, the first Caribbean Territory to do so.
- Operation Fafaia, the first community-led expedition, uses underwater cameras to monitor Pitcairn's outer islands and collect video data on deep-water tropical corals.

Photo credit: Cayman Islands Government, Department of Environment

2022

- Anguilla joins the Blue Belt Programme.
- St Helena opens its new state-of-the-art lab and marine centre, funded through the Blue Belt Programme.
- The DY159 expedition takes place to study seafloor topography and biodiversity in uncharted waters around St Helena and Ascension Island.

Photo credit: Paul Whomersley

2023

The Cayman Islands join the Blue Belt Programme.

The Pitcairn Islands MPA is awarded a prestigious Platinum Blue Park Award.

St Helena MPA is awarded 'Hope Spot' status by Mission Blue, acknowledging efforts to manage its marine environment.

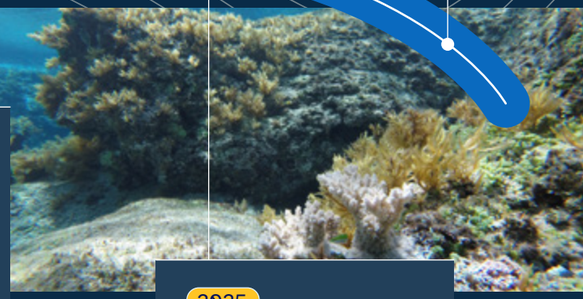
Operation Redfish works with the community in the Pitcairn Islands to monitor coral reef resilience in the outer islands.

2024

- A three-day symposium is held in London, bringing together the UK Government, UKOT representatives, delivery partners and stakeholders to shape future priorities for marine conservation.
- The Pitcairn Islands of Ducie and Henderson are designated as Important Shark and Ray Areas by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).
- The Tristan da Cunha Marine Protection Zone is awarded a Gold Blue Park Award.

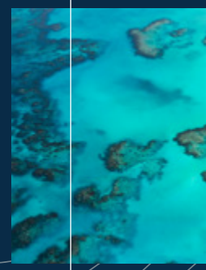
2025

Operation Gannet conducts coral assessments, habitat mapping and seabird tagging in the Pitcairn Islands.



2026

- The Beyond the Reef expedition is the first in the Programme's history to explore the Caribbean, studying the offshore waters of Anguilla, Turks and Caicos and Cayman Islands.
- Montserrat joins the Blue Belt Programme.



04

DESIGNATION AND MANAGEMENT OF MARINE PROTECTION

The first UKOTs entered the Blue Belt Programme with globally important marine environments but, in many cases, limited capacity to monitor, protect or champion them on an international stage. A decade later, that has fundamentally changed.

The creation and effective management of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), clearly defined areas of ocean where activities are carefully managed, has been a cornerstone of efforts to safeguard the UKOTs' ecosystems and support the communities that depend on them. Well-designed MPAs protect vulnerable habitats and species, enabling recovery, strengthening ecosystem resilience, and supporting biodiversity to thrive.

The Blue Belt Programme has played a central role in supporting the UKOTs to designate new MPAs and develop the legislation needed to govern them effectively. Key to this has been the co-creation of five-year Marine Management Plans, which set out clear priorities, objectives and actions tailored to each Territory with an MPA, reflecting their distinct environmental, social and economic context.

Throughout this process, the Programme has helped to ensure that designation on paper translates to protection in practice, by working with the UKOTs to embed management measures on the ground. This has included raising awareness of MPA regulations within communities, with establishing stakeholder groups that foster inclusive, locally led stewardship. Monitoring and Research Plans have provided the evidence needed to understand how ecosystems are responding, while Protected Area Management Effectiveness evaluations have been used to highlight where further improvements are needed

By prioritising science-based decision-making, the Blue Belt Programme has helped UKOTs respond to emerging challenges, particularly those caused by climate change, while maintaining the long-term health resilience of their marine environments.

4,309,000 km²
*COVERED BY BLUE BELT PROGRAMME**

FOUR TIMES
THE SIZE OF THE UK

MPAs/OECMs - Other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) are geographically defined areas that are not formally designated as protected areas, but still deliver long-term, effective conservation of biodiversity.

04.1 CASE STUDY

Protecting unique wildlife in Ascension Island

Ascension Island is a volcanic island situated in the tropical South Atlantic, home to one of the largest green turtle colonies on Earth and a key breeding site for Atlantic seabirds.

In 2019, the Ascension Island Council designated one of the world's largest MPAs, covering their entire EEZ of over 445,000 km². This decision was taken to reduce pressure on exploited fish stocks and help to safeguard diverse marine habitats.

The Blue Belt Programme worked closely with the Ascension Island Government and legal advisors to identify approaches to designate the MPA, providing supporting evidence and assisting with the development of the MPA Management Plan to secure the protection of vulnerable species and habitats.

Though no commercial fishing is allowed in the MPA, recreational fishing is permitted within 12 nautical miles of the shore. To support the sustainable management of these inshore waters, the Programme has helped develop an inshore fisheries monitoring strategy, including guidance on data collection and training of staff on otolith processing and reading. This has equipped the team to take an informed approach to managing Ascension's fisheries. Assistance with tagging studies, underwater video surveys and long-term environmental data collection is also improving understanding of targeted species, fish assemblages, habitats and changing ocean conditions.

The Programme has also contributed to the protection of regionally significant species by building the evidence base needed for future conservation action. This has included funding the regular Ascension green turtle survey and five-year census, alongside support for satellite tagging projects in 2023, 2024 and 2026 to identify turtle foraging sites in Brazil. This will support long-term advocacy for additional turtle protection beyond the Ascension MPA.

Importantly, thanks in part to local conservation efforts such as those undertaken in Ascension – which supports the largest green turtle nesting site in the South Atlantic – the IUCN reclassified the green turtle from "Endangered" to "Least Concern" in November 2025.

Satellite tags for seabirds were also funded as part of a project focused on seabird distributions and their interactions with fisheries, which has helped to fill vital data gaps and integrate the MPA within the wider seascape.

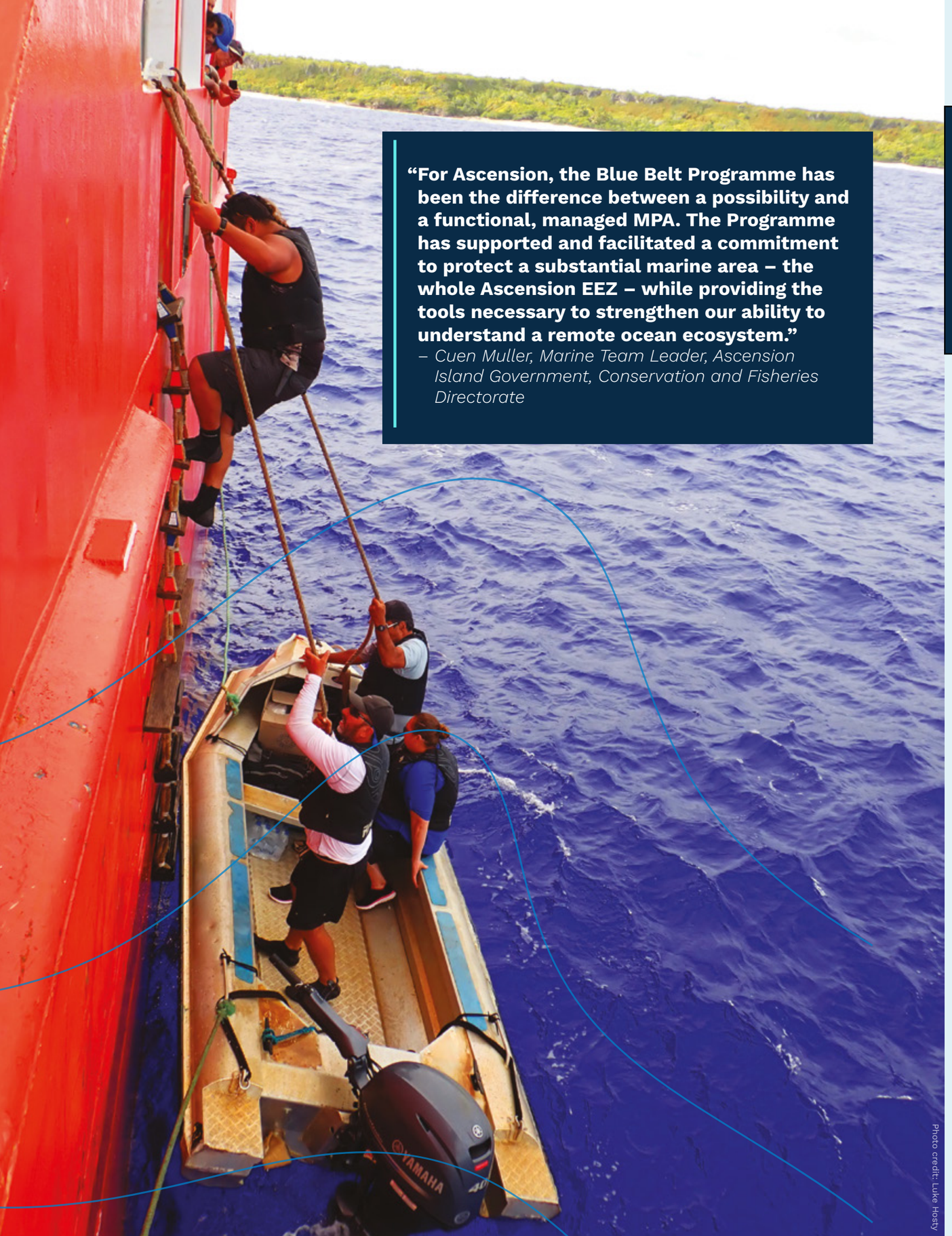


Photo credit: Luke Hosty

“For Ascension, the Blue Belt Programme has been the difference between a possibility and a functional, managed MPA. The Programme has supported and facilitated a commitment to protect a substantial marine area – the whole Ascension EEZ – while providing the tools necessary to strengthen our ability to understand a remote ocean ecosystem.”

– Cuen Muller, Marine Team Leader, Ascension Island Government, Conservation and Fisheries Directorate

05

STRENGTHENING CAPACITY, SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Effective marine conservation depends not only on well-designed MPAs and conservation policies, but on the people, skills and systems needed to deliver them. A core element of the Blue Belt Programme has been supporting the UKOTs with the training, facilities and resources required to achieve robust and sustained marine protection.

Across management and governance, enforcement, and research, the Programme has partnered with the UKOTs to combine local expertise with technical and scientific skills, assisting the Territories to lead in the understanding and protection of their marine environments.

This support includes funding critical staff roles in Anguilla, Ascension Island, Cayman Islands, St Helena, Pitcairn Islands, Tristan da Cunha and Turks and Caicos Islands, such as marine enforcement officers, fisheries scientists and engagement professionals.

At the same time, training has been provided to government staff and community members in areas including environmental monitoring, scientific deployments and surveys, and MPA management. Delivered in line with UK and international best practice, this ensures partners can use the tools and technologies needed to support evidence-based decision-making and effective compliance and enforcement.

The Programme has also contributed to local research through the funding of scientific facilities and equipment. In 2025, a new laboratory was installed on Ascension Island to focus on ecophysiology, the study of how organisms respond to environmental conditions. This has enabled the government to carry out crucial research on the effects of climate change on local species. In St Helena, the Programme funded a new Marine Centre, formally opened on World Ocean Day in 2022, which has provided significantly greater office and laboratory space for both local and visiting scientists.

Where possible, opportunities are created for the UKOTs to share their research internationally, helping to advance global conservation science. In 2024, funding supported representatives from St Helena, Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha to attend the 7th International Marine Conservation Congress in South Africa, where they presented their work to more than 800 scientists and practitioners from around the world. In 2023, several UKOT representatives were also funded to present their work at the 5th International Marine Protected Areas Congress in Vancouver.

Improved digital capabilities have further strengthened research exchange. With support from the Programme, the Tristan da Cunha Environmental Data Portal (hosted by the British Antarctic Survey) was launched in 2023, enabling the Tristan da Cunha Government to manage, store and share its environmental data with researchers worldwide.

05.1 CASE STUDY

Delivering technical advice in Anguilla

Anguilla is a tropical island in the eastern Caribbean Sea, known for its extensive coral reefs and marine life including turtles, seabirds, and large numbers of pelagic fish. It joined the Blue Belt Programme in 2022, with a commitment to science-based ocean governance.

Anguilla has recently experienced a rise in sargassum influx events, both on the mainland and its offshore cays. Large blooms of free-floating seaweed, partly driven by climate change and human pollution, pose a serious threat to marine ecosystems and coastal livelihoods.

In 2023 and 2024, the Blue Belt Programme advised the government on how to collect and store sargassum samples for chemical testing, assessing pollution risks to local waters and evaluating the potential of sargassum as a biofertiliser. The resulting reports have supported resilience planning for marine and coastal waters, enabling informed decisions on using seaweed in agriculture.

The Programme is also assisting Anguilla with marine spatial planning (MSP), to maximise its blue economy while protecting the marine environment and generating positive social outcomes. The first step was developing an MSP Roadmap, which provided a framework for action. Building on this, support is now being provided to deliver a pilot project, testing policies, tools and approaches within a defined area over a one-year period. Lessons learned will guide the future development and scaling of MSP in Anguilla.

To underpin this process, existing evidence and spatial data have been systematically compiled. The Programme has provided technical support to inform the development of new MSP legislation and funded a dedicated MSP Coordinator, helping to build in-country capacity and ensure sustained implementation.

> **"Since joining the Blue Belt Programme, an important early benefit has been the increased access to training, tools, and scientific information that support marine management, particularly in areas such as coastal monitoring and Sargassum assessment. Through access to technical guidance and exposure to emerging best practices in marine governance, staff are building capacity to address complex issues such as marine spatial planning and environmental monitoring."**
> – *Melissa Mead, Principal Assistant Secretary, Ministry of Economic Development, Industry, Commerce, Planning, Lands, Water and Natural Resources*

BLUE BELT PROGRAMME

05.2 CASE STUDY

Safeguarding Krill in the British Antarctic Territory

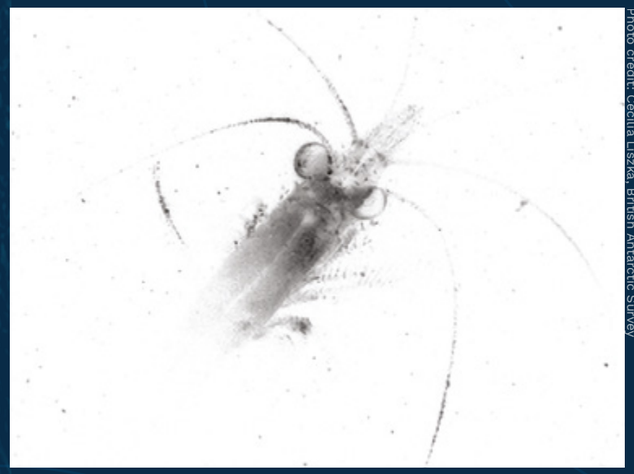


Photo credit: Cecilia Liszka, British Antarctic Survey

The waters surrounding the British Antarctic Territory are amongst the most biologically productive in the Southern Ocean. They sustain vast swarms of Antarctic krill, a vital food source for baleen whales, penguins and seals.

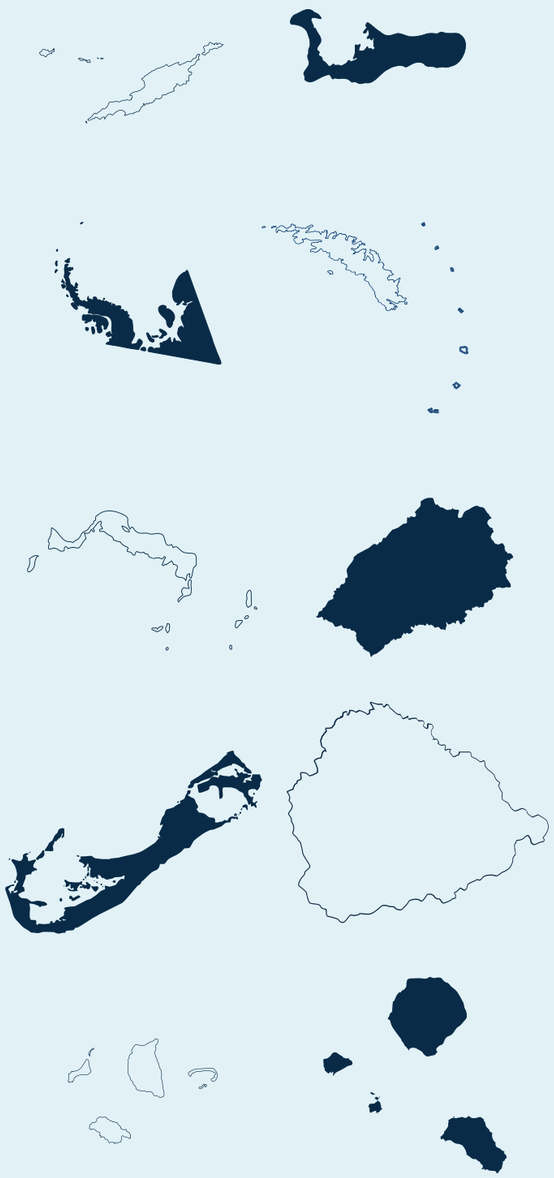
Through the Blue Belt Programme, the UK has invested in world-class scientific expertise to inform analysis and provide evidence-based advice to the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR). Established in 1982 as a fundamental pillar of the Antarctic Treaty System, CCAMLR was created to sustainably manage krill populations and the wildlife that depends on them.

In partnership with the British Antarctic Survey, the Blue Belt Programme has supported the development of a comprehensive Antarctic krill risk assessment. This work is essential for securing multilateral agreement on sustainable krill fishing limits, which ensure long-term protection for whales, penguins, seals and other predators whose futures hinge on a healthy and resilient krill population.

Nature
People
Climate

06

INTO THE OCEAN: EXPEDITIONS AND SURVEYS



In the past decade, the Blue Belt Programme has funded 10 scientific expeditions and surveys, conducting vital research into often unexplored areas of the ocean. Large-scale expeditions and smaller field campaigns have taken place in Anguilla, Ascension Island, Cayman Islands, Pitcairn Islands, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, St Helena, Tristan da Cunha, and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

Expeditions have sought to fill evidence gaps in marine biodiversity, seafloor topography and water quality, helping to answer key questions on local species and habitats, levels of pollution, and the impacts of climate change on ocean ecosystems. Across the UKOTs, their findings have directly informed marine spatial planning and underpinned new protection measures, enforcement capabilities and legislation.

The 2019 DY99 expedition to the South Sandwich Islands, for example, carried out the first systematic survey of the region's benthic biodiversity. The work addressed major gaps in understanding of the seafloor environment and the distribution and diversity of species within SGSSI's MPA. It documented marine biodiversity from depths of 200 to 2,200 metres, providing essential information to inform MPA management.

In 2022, the DY159 expedition to Ascension Island and St Helena brought together UK marine scientists and UKOT specialists to map unexplored areas of the seabed and assess offshore marine habitats in two of the world's largest MPAs.

This multidisciplinary survey improved understanding of offshore waters that had received little scientific attention, resulting in the discovery of two previously unknown seamounts. Its findings significantly strengthened the scientific evidence base for the MPA management and enhanced understanding of local species and habitats.

06.1

Beyond the reef: exploring uncharted waters

From January to March 2026, a landmark expedition was conducted in the Caribbean, exploring the offshore waters of Anguilla, the Turks and Caicos Islands and the Cayman Islands for the first time in the Programme's history. Until then, scientific research had concentrated primarily on the coastal waters of these Territories, while the deeper offshore regions remained largely uncharted.

Over a six-week period, 44 scientists from the Blue Belt Programme were joined by 18 scientists and marine managers from the UKOTs to collect much-needed data on the impacts of human activities, climate change and pollution on these ecosystems.

The expedition resulted in some spectacular discoveries that are rewriting scientific understanding of the Caribbean. This included the identification of a 4 km mesophotic reef north of Anguilla, and in the Cayman Islands, some of the region's healthiest reefs, which are seemingly free of stony coral disease that is impacting reefs elsewhere in the Caribbean.

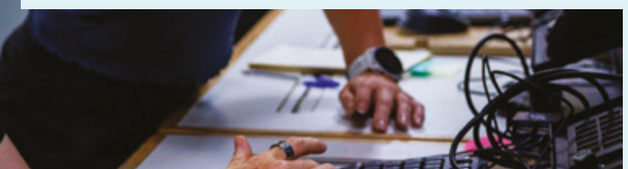
The crew mapped vast areas of the sea floor for the first time, building high-resolution maps to aid shipping navigation and improve knowledge of the ecology associated with underwater features like seamounts and ridges. Data was also collected on species abundance and distribution to assess the status of key fisheries. In the Cayman Islands, for example, the expedition collected samples and DNA traces to track populations of deep-sea snapper, a staple of local diets. This is the most comprehensive research that has been conducted for these fisheries and will enable sustainable fisheries management going forward.

At the same time, water quality testing was undertaken to understand the impact of climate change and human activity in the area. Scientists investigated contaminants including plastics and excess nutrients to understand key pollution threats, while baseline oceanographic data, such as ocean acidity and dissolved oxygen levels, was collected to understand the effects of climate change and the risks facing sensitive habitats like coral reefs.

To ensure this work continues beyond the expedition, scientists from the UKOTs received specialist training to strengthen long-term capacity in water and marine management.

"IT'S BEEN REALLY INSIGHTFUL AND EDUCATIONAL. HYDROGRAPHY IS SOMETHING I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO SPECIALISE IN. THE BEYOND THE REEF EXPEDITION HAS PROVIDED THE OPPORTUNITY TO BROADEN MY EXPERTISE AS A SURVEYOR AND BECOME MORE OF AN ASSET FOR ANGUILLA AND THE REGION."

– RICARDO ROCK, LAND SURVEYOR FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF LANDS AND SURVEYS, GOVERNMENT OF ANGUILLA



Furthering scientific understanding in the Turks and Caicos Islands

The Turks and Caicos Islands are a tropical archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean, known for their rich marine biodiversity and for being home to the world's third-largest barrier reef. This globally significant ecosystem underpins the health of surrounding ocean systems and is essential to the islands' long-term resilience.

During this stretch of the expedition, the Blue Belt Programme team was joined by five representatives from the Turks and Caicos Islands Government, who brought invaluable knowledge of local species and habitats.

In just 10 days, the team mapped more than 10,000 km² of previously unexplored seafloor, identified over 700 specimens, and captured more than 6,500 high-resolution images of the seabed.

Among the discoveries was a previously unknown oceanic ridge, stretching almost 70km long and rising 3700 metres above the sea floor, as well as a 300m wide blue hole which may be the deepest in the Caribbean. As the geography of the seafloor shapes the surrounding oceanography, these findings provide important insight into which areas are likely to support greater biodiversity.

The team also sampled and processed over 3,000 litres of water from depths of up to 5,000 m. The Laboratory Technician at the Department of Environment and Coastal Resources received specialist training on two new machines: a field-portable microtoxicology system and a spectrophotometric system, providing Turks and Caicos Government with the capacity to begin monitoring water quality in this way for the first time.

> **"This Beyond the Reef expedition project really underpinned the growing need for further understanding of our deep-sea seascape and biota here in the Turks and Caicos Islands. This collaborative venture provided us with an enriching and fruitful voyage, memorable experiences, and fortified the partnership between the Blue Belt Programme and the Turks and Caicos Islands Government.**
>
> **It was a great pleasure to have been part of that voyage and to be intimately involved with the processing of the information that will be generated and incorporated into not only our professional and scientific portfolios, but also for the communities there in TCI."**
> – *Christopher May, Outreach Officer, Department of Environment and Coastal Resources.*

700+
species identified

45
surveys completed in first five years

2000+
deployments across the network

90
BRUVS rigs delivered across the network

100K+
individual animals recorded

07

GLOBAL OCEAN WILDLIFE ANALYSIS NETWORK (GOWAN)

GOWAN

About

GOWAN is a global, standardised network of stereo baited remote underwater video systems deployed across the UKOTs. It is a collaboration between the Blue Belt Programme, Blue Abacus and the UKOTs.

The network operates across the following UK Overseas Territories: Anguilla; Ascension Island; Bermuda; the British Antarctic Territory; the British Indian Ocean Territory; the British Virgin Islands; the Cayman Islands; Gibraltar; Montserrat; the Pitcairn Islands; St Helena; Tristan da Cunha; and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

How GOWAN operates

GOWAN uses Baited Remote Underwater Video Systems (BRUVS) to monitor marine habitats and biodiversity, collecting vital data on species diversity, abundance and size. These non-intrusive underwater cameras can be deployed in both the open ocean to monitor pelagic wildlife such as tunas and ocean sharks, and on the seabed to monitor benthic habitats and ground fish species. BRUVS are well suited to remote and widely dispersed island territories, generating permanent visual records that can be verified, revisited and analysed over time.

In support of GOWAN, Blue Abacus has developed bespoke tools and systems to support field operations, data management and analysis – including a Metadata app to support the labelling and organisation of video data.

Over its first five years, the network has generated a consistent and comparable evidence base on marine biodiversity across some of the world's most remote ocean regions. This has replaced fragmented and opportunistic data with a coordinated monitoring approach that supports marine management and decision-making.

GOWAN's work is used by UKOTs to inform issues like fisheries management, including the influence of fish aggregation devices and the sustainability of existing and emerging fisheries; the identification and protection of key ecological features; and the detection of human pressures, including IUUF in remote regions.

BlueAbacus

07.1 CASE STUDY

Documenting endangered species in the Pitcairn Islands

The Pitcairn Islands are among the most remote inhabited places on Earth, and until recently, much of the surrounding ocean had never been systematically observed.

Through the GOWAN programme, BRUVS were deployed across the archipelago, documenting a strikingly high diversity of sharks and large fishes. Among the sharks recorded were grey reef sharks, listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List after substantial declines across much of their Indo-Pacific range. The cameras also captured hooks in sharks' mouths, showing that even the world's most remote islands are not insulated from fishing pressure.

The evidence gathered through these surveys contributed to the designation of Henderson Island and Ducie Atoll in 2025 as Important Shark and Ray Areas under the IUCN framework, recognising their global significance for shark conservation. Moreover, through GOWAN, Pitcairn now has visual evidence of both its extraordinary biodiversity and the extent of human impacts within its own waters.

Photo credit: Luke Hosty

08

COMPLIANCE AND ENFORCEMENT IN ACTION

500 million km²

of satellite imagery taken over UKOT waters since 2021

12,097

total daily activity checks completed across all UKOTs since April 2020

Across the UKOTs, the Blue Belt Programme provides critical, cost-effective assistance in compliance and enforcement, enabling Territories to detect and deter Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing (IUUF) and other activities that threaten the marine environment.

Since 2019, there has been risk-based, intelligence-led surveillance of the waters around the UKOTs for potential IUUF activity, utilising a suite of remote sensing satellite-based tools.

In addition to satellite imagery, partners have also been trained in use of innovative technologies. In 2024-25, the Blue Belt Programme team trained the Anguilla Government in the use of Skylight, a new artificial intelligence tool that allows the user to visualise vessel activity patterns and set alerts for activity of interest. This approach is increasing the capacity of government staff to conduct their own surveillance of the activity in their waters.

Given the challenges of conducting surveillance across huge marine areas, the Programme has conducted numerous trials to identify innovative tools which provide low-cost, long-term solutions. This has included drone trials in both Ascension and British Indian Ocean Territory and passive acoustic trials in Bermuda* and SGSSI.

* Bermuda is a member of Blue Belt Ocean Shield

SHAPING GLOBAL OCEAN GOVERNANCE

Over the past decade, the Blue Belt Programme has helped to drive meaningful change at the highest levels of international fisheries management. Through the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), a collaborative UK effort – led by Defra and delivered in partnership with MMO, Cefas, and UKOT members of ICCAT – has secured landmark protections for some of the ocean's most vulnerable species.

Historic protections for sharks and rays

The UK and Blue Belt Programme-led negotiations at ICCAT secured a full retention ban on basking sharks and great white sharks, agreed in 2025 and entering into force in 2026. This builds on an earlier UK-led success: a full retention ban on Mobulid rays, including manta rays, adopted in 2023 and in force since 2025. These measures represent some of the strongest protections ever secured for these species in the Atlantic and reflect years of sustained diplomatic effort by the UK delegation.

Stronger enforcement against illegal fishing

The UK and Blue Belt Programme also led the adoption of a strengthened Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA) measure, bringing ICCAT's enforcement standards in line with wider international best practice. When vessels engaged in IUUF enter port, this measure ensures they face a tougher, more consistent response, which is a critical step in protecting both fish stocks and the communities that depend on them.

Photo credit: Ness Smith

BLUE BELT PROGRAMME

INVESTING IN PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY TO PROTECT REMOTE OCEAN ECOSYSTEMS

Managing fisheries across some of the world's most remote and expansive waters is inherently challenging, but the Blue Belt Programme is demonstrating global leadership by using Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) to transform marine oversight. This technology overcomes logistical and capacity constraints through smart, camera-based systems that deliver robust, independent verification of fishing activity.

Trials in St Helena and Bermuda have already delivered results, presenting a clearer, more reliable picture of activity at sea, supporting stronger evidence-based management, and enabling data contributions to ICCAT that are strengthening regional decision-making. This demonstrates that the UKOTs are positioning themselves at the forefront of REM innovation and directly shaping emerging international standards.

REM is also playing an important role in conservation compliance, through verifying the safe release of non-target species – illustrating its value in protecting vulnerable species while sustaining fisheries.

The Programme is investing in people as well as technology: training fisheries observers to work alongside REM, collecting critical scientific data, and underpinning the development of domestic observer programmes. At the same time, Programme support is ensuring UKOTs have access to and influence within ICCAT's tropical tuna negotiations, helping secure sustainable management of valuable stocks and the quotas needed for local fisheries. This is reinforced by targeted legal and technical assistance, strengthening fisheries legislation and embedding protections for species such as sharks.

These efforts are combining innovation and on-the-ground impact to secure sustainable, resilient fisheries at scale, and for the long term.

08.1 CASE STUDY

Supporting world-class ocean stewardship in Tristan da Cunha

Tristan da Cunha is a remote volcanic archipelago in the South Atlantic comprising four islands. It is home to millions of seabirds including albatross and penguins, while surrounding waters provide important nurseries for blue sharks and sustain extensive kelp forests critical for absorbing carbon.

In 2020, Tristan da Cunha established its Marine Protection Zone with the support of the Blue Belt Programme, the RSPB, British Antarctic Survey and University of Plymouth. At 687,000 km^2, it is the largest no-take marine reserve in the Atlantic Ocean, covering 91% of Tristan da Cunha's EEZ.

Following designation, support was provided to develop a five-year MPZ management plan and key operational documents. In 2024, the MPZ received a Gold Blue Park Award in recognition of its outstanding conservation standards.

The Blue Belt Programme team has also worked closely with the Island Council on maritime risk management, identifying areas of heavy shipping traffic and reducing the risk of pollution events or shipping accidents. In 2020, two Areas to be Avoided (ATBA) were established that encourage vessels transiting through the MPZ to steer clear of sensitive marine environments.

This work was carried out in response to the 2011 collision of MS Oliva with Nightingale Island, part of the Tristan da Cunha archipelago, which resulted in over 1,000 tonnes of fuel oil leaking into the ocean. As Tristan da Cunha lies between two busy shipping routes, it remains vulnerable to similar pollution incidents in the future; however, the ATBAs play a valuable role in reducing this risk.

With assistance from the Blue Belt Programme, Tristan da Cunha Government has developed a comprehensive surveillance and reporting system to track activity within the ATBAs. Work has been undertaken to develop Virtual Aids to Navigation, a technology which helps to alert transiting vessels to the ATBAs and avoid hitting the island.

Thanks to these measures, there has been an 83% decrease in traffic transiting through Tristan da Cunha's ATBAs since 2020, significantly reducing the risk of environmental damage caused by a vessel grounding or pollution incidents.

The Programme has additionally provided guidance on the management of Tristan da Cunha's rock lobster fishery – the island's principal economic resource, certified by the Marine Stewardship Council since 2011. Support has included an independent lobster stock assessment, technical advice on tagging studies, and funding for a specialist legal team to underpin concession negotiations, helping to deliver the best possible outcomes for the community, the economy and the long-term health of lobster stocks.

> **"The Tristan Fisheries Department has found the Blue Belt Programme tremendously important, and without its support and funding would find long-term monitoring very difficult."** – *Rodney Green, Fisheries Department, Tristan da Cunha*

Photo credit: New Zealand Defence Force

BLUE BELT OCEAN SHIELD

09

About Blue Belt Ocean Shield

Blue Belt Ocean Shield is a maritime domain awareness programme which aims to assess and understand the activities that could impact the health and sustainability of the marine environment. These activities include Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IUUF), commercial and recreational vessel activity and marine development projects.

Launched in 2021, Blue Belt Ocean Shield supports the overall compliance and enforcement work provided by the Blue Belt Programme. As a sub-programme, it can also be accessed by UKOTs that are not part of the full Blue Belt Programme and is currently supporting the Government of Bermuda.

115

Rounds of satellite surveillance commissioned based on UKOT requests

45

surveys completed in first five years

09.1

Enhancing protected areas management in Bermuda

Since 2021, the Blue Belt Ocean Shield programme has supported the Government of Bermuda in strengthening the management and protection of its marine environment. This has included enhancing the Territory's ability to gather information on activities within its maritime zone and providing technical advice where vessels may not be complying with local management measures.

The Blue Belt Ocean Shield completed an initial IUUF risk assessment for Bermuda, identifying when and where illegal activity is most likely to occur, and the impact should it do so – helping Bermuda to target its surveillance measures more effectively. Building on this, the Programme is now working in partnership with the US Coast Guard to support Bermuda in using offshore satellite surveillance to improve oversight of its surrounding waters. Separately, the Programme has also supported a successful trial exploring the use of satellite surveillance for inshore fisheries.

In 2025, working alongside the Joint Maritime Security Centre (JMSC) and Newcastle University, the Programme delivered a trial of low-power passive acoustic detection and localisation technology in Bermuda's waters. By using propeller cavitation noise to identify and track vessels, this approach aims to provide Territories with a cost-effective alternative to traditional, more resource-intensive surveillance methods. The trial showed how the technology can be used and needs to be developed, both for Bermuda and similar marine environments.

10

MANAGING HUMAN IMPACTS ON OCEAN LIFE

Human activities at local, regional, and international scales continue to shape the marine environments of the UKOTs in profound ways. Many of these pressures are interconnected and increasingly intensified by climate change, which heightens ecosystem vulnerability and erodes the natural resilience of marine habitats. Yet, when responsibly managed, sectors such as tourism, fisheries, and coastal development present important opportunities to protect the marine environment while supporting sustainable livelihoods for OT communities.

In this context, the Blue Belt Programme has worked closely with UKOT governments to understand, mitigate, and manage the impacts of human activity on their marine ecosystems. By combining scientific evidence, technical expertise and long-term capacity building, the Programme supports Territories in balancing economic opportunity with enduring environmental stewardship, ensuring that development today does not come at the expense of the marine resources on which future generations depend.

Photo credit: Martin Collins

10.1 CASE STUDY

Developing sustainable tourism in St Helena and the Turks and Caicos Islands

Photo credit: Martin Collins

St Helena's clear, deep waters and diverse marine habitats make it a world-class destination for swimmers, snorkelers and scuba divers, while marine tours offer residents and visitors the chance to encounter humpback whales, dolphins and whale sharks.

Following the establishment of its MPA, the Blue Belt Programme supported the St Helena Government to introduce new regulations for marine tourism, ensuring that only activities which do not harm or disrupt species within the MPA are permitted. A new licensing system for marine tour operators was created, requiring them to undertake compulsory training to meet accreditation standards. In 2023, 15 tour operators successfully completed this training, each achieving the competency level required for accreditation.

In 2025, the Programme supported further research to inform the long-term management of sustainable tourism within the island's MPA. Funding was provided for the development of a smartphone application for marine tour operators, giving the government new tools to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of management measures.

The Programme has also helped the Turks and Caicos Islands Government strengthen oversight of tourism interactions with marine wildlife, including whales, turtles and dolphins.

This support has contributed to the introduction of a marine wildlife interaction policy, a tour operator certification scheme, and a revised whale and dolphin code of conduct for all marine users, ensuring that the benefits of marine tourism are realised while safeguarding the wildlife on which it depends.

BLUE BELT PROGRAMME

10.2

TACKLING MARINE POLLUTION THROUGH EVIDENCE AND ACTION

The Programme has worked closely with UKOT governments to identify, quantify and address marine pollution at its source.

On Ascension Island, the team conducted a first-of-its-kind study which analysed deep-water samples to assess levels of microplastic contamination.

This work was accompanied in 2025 by pioneering research examining seabirds for plastic ingestion, which found that 85% of seabirds investigated had evidence of microplastics and other litter within their digestive tracts. This research contributed directly to the Zoological Society of London's South Atlantic Plastics Project, helping to build a clearer picture of the drivers and extent of plastic pollution in the region.

The Programme has also supported action to remove pollution from some of the world's most affected ecosystems. In 2017, scientists found that Henderson Island, part of the Pitcairn Islands, had the highest recorded density of plastic debris on Earth. In response, the Blue Belt Programme provided financial support and scientific expertise to the 2019 Henderson Expedition. Over 11 days, the team removed six tonnes of plastic waste, captured more than 4,000 seabed images and conducted experiments to assess the impacts of plastic pollution on local wildlife.

Data gathered during the expedition – including coral reef mapping and microplastics analysis – informed the subsequent marine management plan for the Pitcairn Islands.

11

IMPROVING OCEAN LITERACY

People are at the heart of the Blue Belt Programme. From the outset, the Programme has worked with UKOTs to engage local communities in marine protection and demonstrate the long-term benefits of safeguarding their ocean environments.

In partnership with UKOT Governments, the Programme has supported a wide range of community initiatives that strengthen understanding of these unique marine ecosystems and foster lasting connections with conservation. Educational resources and activities have also inspired young people aged 5–13 to explore their marine environment and consider future careers in marine science and environmental leadership.

Since 2022, the Programme has co-funded Ascension Island's annual Marine Festival, helping transform it into a flagship event that builds practical awareness of how human activities affect the marine environment.

In St Helena, the Programme has supported the island's Marine Awareness Week, which in 2023 gave every schoolchild the opportunity to experience the marine environment firsthand through a trip to sea. In 2025, following a scientific assessment of climate impacts on key species, the team created new climate-change engagement materials for schools and community groups.

In Tristan da Cunha, four Young Ocean Champions were jointly hosted in 2024 by the Blue Belt Programme and the Atlantic Guardians project for UK-based training, including powerboat handling and a marine science bootcamp. The Programme also worked with the Tristan da Cunha Government to develop marine education packs for Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 students.

Photo credit: Cayman Islands Government, Department of Environment

11.1

DEEPENING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE CAYMAN ISLANDS

The Cayman Islands joined the Blue Belt Programme in 2023 with ambitious plans for sustainable ocean management. Its waters sit above the Cayman Trench – the deepest point in the Caribbean Sea – and support reef and deep-sea ecosystems, open-ocean fisheries and a thriving marine tourism industry.

In 2025, the Cayman Islands Department of Environment, working in partnership with the Blue Belt Programme, produced an interactive 29-page Deep Sea Discovery Pack – the first resource to present Cayman-specific deep-sea animals and habitats in an accessible format for primary school students.

Using clear text and engaging illustrations, the Discovery Pack introduces children to the remarkable marine wildlife of the Cayman Islands, the pressures facing the ocean, and the actions individuals can take to protect local ecosystems. It explains Cayman's nearshore and offshore environments, from shallow reefs to deep-sea vents and the Cayman Trench, while also helping them to understand Marine Park rules and how the Department of Environment is ensuring that the ocean is protected today, tomorrow and for the future. As part of ongoing work, the pack will be rolled out across schools in the Cayman Islands.

Photo credit: Cayman Islands Government, Department of Environment

Photo credit: Cayman Islands Government, Department of Environment

"One moment that stood out to me was seeing how clean the water is around Tristan, there's also far less plastic than before, and fewer ships like tankers passing by. It made me realise the Blue Belt Programme is making a real, visible difference. It makes me really happy to know that people care about the ocean and are taking action to protect it. As someone who loves the ocean and marine life, it means a lot to know these ecosystems are being protected and that the marine species have a better chance to thrive."

– Shannon Swain, Young Ocean Champion, Tristan da Cunha

12

FINANCING THE FUTURE OF MARINE PROTECTION

In 2022, the Blue Belt Programme launched a sustainable finance workstream to support the UKOTs in identifying and accessing additional funding sources. This work aims to strengthen long-term financial resilience for marine management, ensuring that UKOTs can access and mobilise the resources needed to continue their exceptional work in ocean protection.

In January 2023, the Programme initiated a multi-year partnership with Finance Earth to provide specialist technical research and guidance. Through this collaboration, UKOT governments have been supported to assess viable financing mechanisms and, where appropriate, explore these options in more depth.

In St Helena and the Pitcairn Islands, the Programme has supported the development of MPA financial plans to better understand the long-term costs of effective management and identify ways to close gaps in funding. By identifying novel revenue-generating opportunities such as ocean biodiversity commitments, the Programme has helped the UKOTs understand the steps required to move towards implementation.

Elsewhere, support has included developing model scenarios for an Environmental Trust Fund in the Turks and Caicos Islands, as well as undertaking feasibility assessments and supporting business case development for potential infrastructure projects in Anguilla, Tristan da Cunha, and Ascension Island. These activities are strengthening the sustainability of marine protection efforts and enhancing the resilience of island economies.

The Programme has also prioritised knowledge sharing and collaboration through the establishment of a sustainable finance hub. This hub has brought together the UK Government, arm's-length bodies, and UKOT representatives to discuss long-term financing opportunities and projects across the territories. It has also played a role in identifying and tracking grant and philanthropic funding opportunities, assessing a total of 83 funds against criteria such as eligibility, geographic scope, and relevance to the UKOTs.

Photo credit: Government of the South Georgia & South Sandwich Islands

The following spotlights demonstrate how three UKOTs have delivered lasting change for their marine environments, in partnership with the Blue Belt Programme. Each Territory has charted its own course, from designating some of the world's largest MPAs to building local scientific capacity, strengthening enforcement, and pioneering sustainable blue economy models.

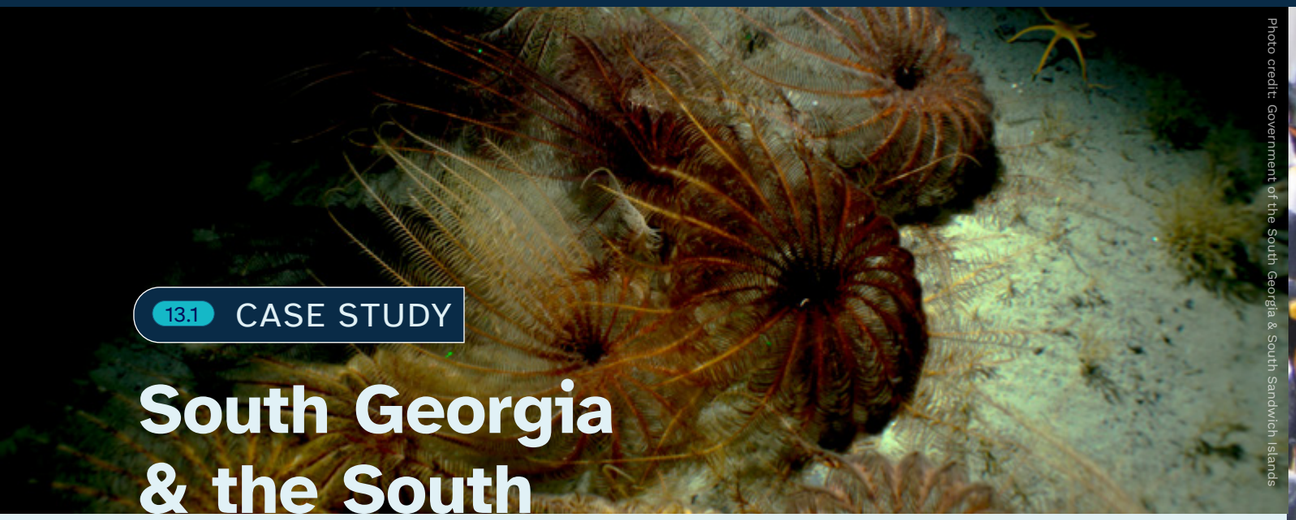


Photo credit: Government of the South Georgia & South Sandwich Islands

13.1 CASE STUDY

South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands

South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI) is an archipelago in the Atlantic sector of the Southern Ocean, which supports some of the highest densities of wildlife in the world, including penguins, seals, and whales.

SGSSI's MPA, established in 2012, was one of the first large-scale MPAs globally to commit to regular reviews from the outset. The Blue Belt Programme supported the Government of SGSSI with its first five-year review in 2017–2018, which led to strengthened protections including expanded no-take zones, seasonal closures to safeguard breeding wildlife, and a ban on the carriage of heavy fuel oil.

A second review in 2024–2025 introduced further measures signed into law in April 2025, with the Blue Belt Programme providing support on the drafting of new ordinances. Over 470,000 km² (almost 38% of the MPA) is now designated as "no-take" zones where no fishing of any kind is allowed.

470,000km²
now designated as 'no-take' zones

Photo credit: Government of the South Georgia & South Sandwich Islands

The Blue Belt Programme assists the Government of SGSSI in the ongoing surveillance of its MPA, using airborne and remote sensing satellite to assess for IUUF incursions and other potential threats to the marine environment. Government officers have been trained in at-sea vessel boarding and inspections, equipping them with the skills to ensure compliance and enforcement.

The team has also supported in the management of SGSSI's fisheries, which are globally recognised for their sustainability. In 2025, the Blue Belt Programme co-funded a scientific groundfish survey which sampled depths of over 700 metres, aiding estimates of future populations of toothfish.

Through the Programme, licensed fishing vessels have deployed longline cameras, generating thousands of hours of high-quality video footage, which has significantly improved understanding of SGSSI's deep-sea benthic habitats. The Programme also provided an assessment of how longline fishing gear interacts with the seabed ecosystem, analysing six years of video and stills camera footage. The data collected in this study allowed the team to model and map the distribution of vulnerable seabed ecosystems and assess the impact of fishing activity in these areas.

As well as informing future fisheries management and marine spatial planning, both of these projects have provided useful evidence for the MSC assessment of SGSSI's longline toothfish fishery, which has maintained consistently high scores.

13.2 CASE STUDY

St Helena

St Helena is an oceanic island located in the sub-tropical South Atlantic. Its waters support a rich and distinctive marine ecosystem including endemic and migratory species such as whale sharks, butterfly fish and turtles. St Helena's sustainable use MPA, established in 2016, covers its entire EEZ spanning more than 440,000 km^2.

The Blue Belt Programme has supported St Helena with the extensive work required to underpin the effective management of this MPA, including the production of a marine management plan, a monitoring and research plan, and the first annual MPA report in June 2025. In 2023, St Helena's MPA was designated as a global Hope Spot by Mission Blue in recognition of its efforts to monitor and manage its marine environment while developing a sustainable economy.

Fishing remains central to the island's economy and culture, with tuna species supplying both local and international markets. To strengthen sustainable fisheries management, the Blue Belt Programme assisted in the development of the 2021 Fisheries Ordinance, which provides a clear legal framework for effective regulation. The team also supported in establishing a fisheries science programme, delivering evidence-based assessments and management advice for key species.

The island's fisheries are continuously monitored to track changes in fish abundance and diversity. This includes local stock assessments, lobster and dive surveys, and, from 2025, a fish egg survey developed with support from the Blue Belt Programme team. In collaboration with St Helena's Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio, this data is systematically analysed and used to inform sustainable management decisions.

These recommendations have directly informed the implementation of fisheries control measures, including targeted fishing restrictions and other measures designed to maintain healthy fish stocks. Monitoring approaches are regularly reviewed and strengthened in line with best practice, ensuring that fisheries management remains adaptive and grounded in the latest scientific data.

Since 2016 and building on the Fisheries Ordinance, the Blue Belt Programme has supported St Helena to be fully compliant with the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), including a detailed review of tuna assessment methods in 2024–25 and the tagging of over 2,300 tunas to monitor local population levels.

> **"One of the most important improvements has been access to high-quality scientific expertise and advice, which has strengthened evidence-based decision making across fisheries management, marine tourism, and marine development planning."**
> *– Elizabeth Clingham, Head of Nature Conservation*

13.3 CASE STUDY

Pitcairn Islands

The Pitcairn Islands are a group of four islands in the South Pacific, which host the world's third-largest fully protected continuous MPA at 842,000 km^2. More than 1,250 marine species have been recorded in Pitcairn's waters, which contain some of the last remaining largely untouched marine habitats on Earth.

The Blue Belt Programme has supported the Pitcairn Government with the drafting of Marine Conservation Regulations needed to underpin the MPA, and the development and review of key MPA management and operational plans. Since 2021, the Programme has also funded an MPA Officer role on the island, who has received comprehensive training and ongoing support. In collaboration with the Royal Navy and Royal New Zealand Air Force, the Blue Belt Programme team undertakes surveillance of vessels within Pitcairn's MPA, using satellite imagery to detect evidence of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IUU).

In 2023, the Pitcairn Islands won a prestigious Platinum Blue Park Award for exceptional marine wildlife conservation, reflecting the outstanding ongoing efforts by the government of the Pitcairn Islands to protect and sustainably manage the marine environment.

As a highly protected MPA, where no extractive activities are permitted, Pitcairn's waters provide a valuable reference site for assessing the impacts of climate change and measuring the benefits of marine protection. This is particularly true of the islands' pristine coral habitats, which act as indicators of the effects of ocean warming and acidification. Pitcairn's corals grow in deeper, clearer, and cooler waters than many tropical reefs, making them especially important for long-term monitoring.

The Blue Belt team has carried out extensive research to support this work. In 2023, Operation Redfish, which was jointly funded by the Programme, assessed the health and resilience of coral reefs around Henderson and Oeno Islands. Surveys examined coral diversity, disease prevalence, and associated fish populations, strengthening understanding of these ecosystems and informing their long-term management. In 2025, this was followed by Operation Gannet, which focused on habitat mapping, seabird tagging, and mesophotic coral assessments to generate further insights into biodiversity and inform the MPA management plan.

> **"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 MCI Blue Parks Award - never mind at the highest level!"**
> *– The Pitcairn Islands Government*

MONTSERRAT

Welcome to the Blue Belt family

Montserrat is a small volcanic island in the eastern Caribbean Sea, known for its distinctive “Emerald Isle” landscapes and surrounding waters rich in coral reefs and marine biodiversity. Despite its size, its maritime zone encompasses ocean environments of significant conservation value.

In 2026, Montserrat became the fourth Caribbean Territory to join the Blue Belt Programme. Its commitment to protecting at least 20% of its maritime zone, developing a sustainable blue economy, and building robust marine management capacity represents a significant addition to the Blue Belt family.

As Montserrat embarks on this partnership, it joins a network of Territories committed to delivering tangible conservation results at the local level. The Blue Belt Programme looks forward to supporting Montserrat’s journey in the years ahead.

Committed to protecting at least **20%** of its maritime zone

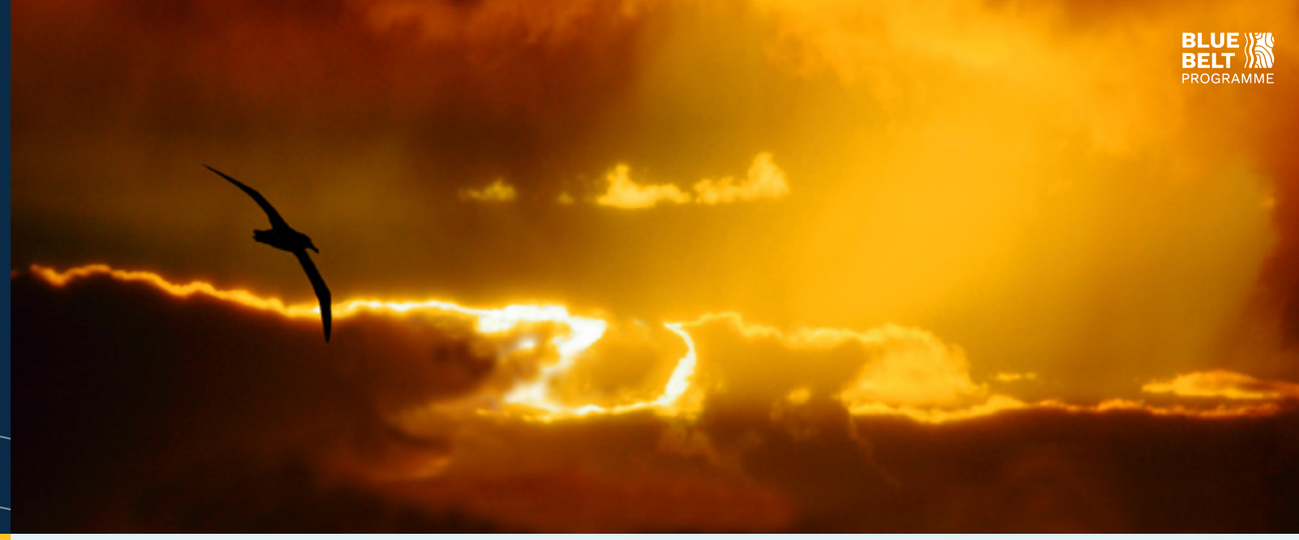
Photo credit: Torika Christian

14

THE BLUE BELT PROGRAMME: A LOOK AHEAD

Ten years after its launch, the Blue Belt Programme stands as one of the most successful marine conservation initiatives worldwide, working with the UKOTs to protect some of the most extraordinary marine environments on Earth. The results are a testament to what determined, locally led conservation can achieve. Standing alongside the UKOTs, the Programme has helped to safeguard millions of square kilometres of ocean, protect rare and remarkable wildlife, and build the scientific and institutional foundations for marine management in the years to come.

The UKOTs have been at the heart of this effort. From the remote South Atlantic to the Caribbean and the South Pacific, UKOT Governments, communities, scientists and marine managers have not only shaped the Programme but set the pace for international action. They have defined ambitious priorities, driven progressive legislation, pioneered innovative compliance and surveillance technologies, and led field operations in some of the most remote marine regions on the planet. Every milestone captured in this report is a testament to their leadership and their enduring contribution to global marine conservation.



A BOLD NEW CHAPTER

With global momentum building around protecting 30% of the ocean by 2030 – and as pressures on marine environments intensify – the next phase of the Programme will focus on delivering ambitious, future-proofed action.

From 2026 to 2029, the Programme will be anchored in a strengthened strategic framework built around three core pillars: Nature, Climate and People. This refreshed approach sharpens long-term ambitions, enhances governance and delivery, and ensures support to the UKOTs remains collaborative, adaptive and firmly grounded in scientific evidence. Building on a decade of experience, it will help Territories anticipate and respond to emerging risks and opportunities in rapidly changing seas.

The Nature pillar will focus on improving the health of UKOT waters, strengthening regional governance and supporting marine biodiversity. Complementing this, the Climate pillar will enhance resilience to climate change by restoring critical habitats, while advancing evidence-based approaches to adaptation and mitigation. The People pillar will ensure these efforts are rooted in the needs of communities, helping them to secure equitable access to local seafood, building support for marine conservation, and strengthening partnerships at regional and global levels.

A continued priority will be effective marine protection and management, underpinned by cutting-edge science, innovative technologies, and advanced surveillance systems. Collectively, these tools will help to build resilient coastal and marine ecosystems that can withstand the impacts of climate change and continue to support the biodiversity and communities that depend on them.

Local leadership will remain central to the Programme for building local capacity, deepening awareness, and empowering the next generation of marine stewards – ensuring that conservation achievements endure well beyond the coming decades.

We extend our sincere thanks to the international partners, scientific institutions, practitioners and environmental NGOs whose collaboration has amplified our impact. These partnerships position the Blue Belt Programme to continue as a global leader in marine conservation, driving meaningful change for nature, climate and people in the years ahead.

We are also excited to broaden the expertise provided to the UKOTs with the onboarding of the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) as Associate Partners within the Programme.

THE NATURE PILLAR

Improving the health of UKOT waters, strengthening regional governance and supporting marine biodiversity.

THE CLIMATE PILLAR

Enhance resilience to climate change by restoring critical habitats, while advancing evidence-based approaches to adaptation and mitigation.

THE PEOPLE PILLAR

Ensures efforts are rooted in the needs of communities, helping them to secure equitable access to local seafood, building support for marine conservation, and strengthening partnerships at regional and global levels.

15

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Baited Remote Underwater Video Systems (BRUVS)

Non-intrusive underwater camera rigs, typically equipped with bait, used to film and record marine life in order to collect data on species presence, abundance and biodiversity.

International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT)

An inter-governmental fishery organisation responsible for the conservation of tunas and tuna-like species in the Atlantic Ocean and its adjacent seas.

International Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR)

An international body established under the Antarctic Treaty System that manages and conserves marine life in the Southern Ocean.

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

A sea area extending up to 200 nautical miles from a country's coast where that country has special rights to use, manage, and protect natural resources.

Geographical Information System (GIS)

A computer-based system for capturing, storing, analysing and visualising spatial or geographic data to understand patterns, relationships and trends.

Global Ocean Wildlife Analysis Network (GOWAN)

A UK Government Blue Belt Programme initiative that uses a global network of baited remote underwater video systems (BRUVS) to collect data on marine biodiversity and ecosystems, in order to improve understanding and support conservation and management of ocean environments.

Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IUUF)

Fishing activities that violate laws or regulations, are not properly reported or are misreported, or occur outside established management and conservation measures.

International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

A global membership union of governments and civil society organisations that provides knowledge, tools, and expertise to conserve nature and ensure the sustainable use of natural resources.

Marine Protected Area (MPA)

Areas of the ocean established to protect and recover habitats, species and processes essential for healthy, functioning marine ecosystems from damage caused by human activities.

Marine Protected Zone (MPZ)

A defined area within the marine environment where specific rules are applied to protect particular habitats, species or features.

Marine Spatial Planning (MSP)

A public process of analysing and allocating where and when human activities occur in marine areas to achieve ecological, economic and social objectives through coordinated, policy-led decision-making.

UK Overseas Territory (UKOT)

The Overseas Territories are territories which are largely self-governing and together with UK and Crown Dependencies, form one undivided realm.

Photo credit: Paul Whomersley

BLUE BELT PROGRAMME

UK Government

OCEAN OF IMPACT

10 YEARS OF THE BLUE BELT PROGRAMME

IMPACT REPORT | 2026