

# **Fifth UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies Environment Ministers' Council Meeting**

**7 October 2022 (by Zoom)**

## **Statement**

### **Summary**

In this Statement, the Council recognises the context of its meeting, stressing the value of, and responsibilities to, the natural environment.

It expresses appreciation of the work of the UK Overseas Territories Association (UKOTA) and the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum (UKOTCF), and welcomes the response from UK Government on 13<sup>th</sup> August to our statement and the outputs of the technical conference organised by UKOTCF. In particular, we welcomed the facilitation of the Overseas Territories in Conferences of the Parties of Environmental Conventions, the restoration of biodiversity funding to all the UKOTs and restoring those with UKOT project experience to advisory panels.

We underlined the importance of:

- Maintaining, especially in times of economic stress, the conservation and environmental sustainability of our natural environments, vital to our quality of life and economies, and fundamental to nature-based solutions as cost-effective ways to address many current issues, and to invasive species and biosecurity
- Fighting Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease
- UK's continuing resourcing of the "Blue Belt" and extending to territories in other situations, and the need to restore and increase markedly resourcing for terrestrial conservation, on which depend most of the species for which UK and the territories are uniquely responsible
- Continuing positive engagement by HMG Ministers and Departments with UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies
- The work of the project "From Blue Iguanas to Blue Vervain" and its "Framework on Best Practice in environmental and other research in UK Overseas Territories", and the need for resourcing of further environmental research on needs identified by the territories
- The support services by territory NGOs and their umbrella body
- The work on championing our biodiversity, including in UK Parliament
- The work of the Protected Areas Working Group of IUCN
- Assessing progress in fulfilling international conservation commitments
- Territory involvement in the Conferences of the Parties of international conventions.

In respect of UK Government's funding of conservation in the Overseas Territories, the Council reiterates the need for this by territory conservation bodies and their umbrella NGO, and underlines some of its earlier calls and raises further ways in which addressing of priorities could make this more cost-effective, including in the context of the loss by the territories of significant EU funding.

## Main Text

1. We, the portfolio holders for the environment in our respective territories or dependencies, held our fifth Environment Ministers' Council meeting by Zoom on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> October 2022. We continue to fulfil the role recognised by the November 2017 Joint Ministerial Council, which emphasised the importance of meetings of environment ministers in work on environmental management and climate change issues. Since our first meeting, in Gibraltar in 2015, we have faced major challenges. Volcanic eruptions in the Caribbean, followed by the unprecedented hurricanes of 2017, seriously damaged infrastructure and local economies. COVID-19 has had a global impact, but has had a particular impact on those economies, including many represented here, with a high dependence on tourism. The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU has led to a reappraisal of future funding arrangements for environmental work. Since then, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is generating major challenges to economies, energy and food supplies. We welcomed the opportunity afforded by this Council to address our challenges through joint and collaborative working, and to develop common priorities and approaches.

2. We value the support of our UK Overseas Territories Association (UKOTA) in addressing many of our links with UK Government and of UKOTA and of the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum (UKOTCF) in pursuing and facilitating many environmental aspects important to our territories and their natural and human welfare.

3. The biodiversity of the territories and dependencies we represent is considerable. We have 3,300 endemic species, compared with around 90 in the UK. About 75% of these are globally threatened. Our ecosystems contain some of the rarest, and most threatened habitat types: we have, for example, nearly 5000 km<sup>2</sup> of coral reefs, which makes the UK the twelfth largest reef nation in the world. Our environmental capital has underpinned sustainable livelihoods in our populations for many generations, and can help continued growth in our economies and our living standards, as well as public health. But it is increasingly under threat, and needs both safeguarding and management. We recognise the hard spending choices facing UK and Territory politicians post-pandemic and during the current economic challenges, but note the conclusions of the HM Treasury-commissioned report by Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta and the increasing public awareness of the reality of the immediate major threats to human life and well-being caused by biodiversity loss and climate change.

4. We confirm our commitment to conserve our environmental capital, and, recognising its global importance, some territories have chosen to be included in UK's ratification of international environmental agreements. We share with the UK a partnership approach to integrating environmental considerations in government decision-making, marked in the case of most Overseas Territories by individual Environment Charters as envisaged in the 1999 White Paper *Partnership for Progress and Prosperity*, on which the 2012 White Paper *The Overseas Territories: Security, Success and Sustainability* is explicitly built. The approach is shared by other territories

and dependencies through their commitment to the international agreements in which they are included. The Territories are important to the delivery of UK's global environmental promises, for example in protecting the over 90% of species found only on UK sovereign territory and by the declaration of by far the largest area of UK protected ocean. The Territories are a positive asset to be celebrated, and not a cash drain.

**5.** We recognise that Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies have materially different relationships with the UK and we further recognise that there are differences between Overseas Territories. These differences are particularly reflected in approaches to funding, which we recognised in our consideration of future aspirations, expectations and obligations. But for all of us, particularly in the light of the major challenges noted above, funding remains the key issue. External funding for initiatives to tackle the priorities we identified in previous meetings, such as unsustainable development, invasive species and the impacts of climate change, remains a challenge. For some of us the EU was a source of considerable funds for project work, technical advice and infrastructure development. While we welcomed Lord Ahmad's statement, following our 2017 Alderney meeting, that there would be an increase in funding for terrestrial and marine projects in the territories through the Darwin Plus programme, and the later comments by Lord Goldsmith, as well increases in support through the Darwin Initiative and the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), terrestrial conservation, in particular, still lags behind in funding.

**6.** We showed our appreciation to the UK Government for HMG for eventually affording more places than ever to the Overseas Territories at the Climate Conference of the Parties 26 in Glasgow. The work of UKOTA in negotiating the additional places for OTs as part of the UK overflow delegation, the side event at COP "Our Vision for Healthy Oceans - Overseas Territories" and the video shown at COP which showcased the leadership of the OTs in dealing with Climate Change is acknowledged and appreciated. This gave the opportunity to highlight how precious and vulnerable our natural environments in the Overseas Territories are, and to generate high level engagement on environmental protection. Our differences are what makes us special; our commonalities are what bring us together to share knowledge and experiences. We tried to show UK Government that many seats at the table and many voices should not to be seen as a challenge, but a way to foster partnerships and collaboration, which can be a cost-effective way to do better for biodiversity and the planet. We welcomed this greater level of engagement and look forward to a further move to restore representatives of UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies to full membership of the core team of UK delegation as in earlier Conferences of the Parties to environmental conventions.

**7.** We appreciated the response of the Rt Hon Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park, Minister of State for the Pacific and the Environment at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs on 13<sup>th</sup> August 2021 to both our statement and

the outputs of the technical conference held earlier that year and organized by the UKOTCF. The reply from our joint Chair:

7a) thanked the Minister and HMG for facilitating participation of the Overseas Territories at the Climate Conference of the Parties.

7b) noted with pleasure our accord on the vital importance of nature-based solutions and working together by UK, UKOTs, officials and NGOs. This will be even greater as we ensure that environment and economic recovery are not pitted against each other as we build back after Covid, this possibility being a real threat.

7c) welcomed, within the Darwin Initiative, the restoration of the biodiversity fund to all the UKOTs by bringing the ODA-eligible UKOTs back into Darwin Plus alongside all the other UKOTs, as well as the commitment to restoring to the Advisory Group more from NGOs with experience of running UKOT projects. Welcome also were the comments on the introduction of a funding stream for large projects (giving potential scope for more innovation involving UKOTs, such as provision for sharing our knowledge and technical expertise), and another that will be limited to UKOT Governments and UKOT-based NGOs, in view of the recent tendency to use Darwin funds for UK Government and commercial bodies, at the loss to NGOs and territory bodies. He felt it important that "UKOT-based NGOs" be considered to include UKOT umbrella bodies which may be physically based in UK, but work largely in the UKOTs, especially where key UKOT bodies have limited capacity or where cross-territory co-ordination would be particularly helpful. Projects run in this way have a strong record of success.

7d) noted pleasure to hear of the additional funding in relation to Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease in the Caribbean, which is destroying the reef-building corals in the Caribbean at an alarming rate. Noted also was the great urgency for further treatment action in the sea to slow this disease down and for land-based coral nurseries, an important requirement for eventual coral-reef restoration. It is to be hoped that some of the financial support is reaching those local NGOs who have borne the brunt so far in some UKOTs. In line with the HMG comments, Defra agencies will need to benefit from the NGOs' local experience by planning and implementing action in full consultation with local NGOs already active, and share information about how the funds are being spent and allocated, in order to give confidence that the best action possible is being taken.

7e) expressed gratitude for comments on the other main matters, including the terrestrial environment, the Turing Scheme, and Tristan's and the Falklands' fisheries. The Minister's approach to the Culture Secretary regarding Lottery funds was most appreciated.

7f) looked forward to further continuing support from Her [now His] Majesty's Government to the Environment Ministers of the Overseas Territories and of the Crown Dependencies, and to continuing positive engagement with HMG Ministers and Departments.

**8.** We acknowledged the work led by the Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership (MCCIP) which worked with us to appoint regional co-ordinators to work with scientists and representatives across the UKOTs to bring together information on climate-change impacts on biodiversity and our communities. During this process these impacts were assessed and ranked, based on the proximity urgency and severity of each impact. Priority climate-change issues were identified and published in a peer-reviewed report (<https://www.mccip.org.uk/uk-overseas-territories>). We would welcome comments from HMG on how it will assist the UKOTs in identifying and addressing the impacts.

**9.** We welcomed the work of the project “From Blue Iguanas to Blue Vervain” as part of the “Hidden Histories” joint programme of the UK Arts & Humanities and Natural Environment Research Councils. This built strongly on the Statement of our 2021 meeting and the outputs of the technical conference organized by the UKOTCF earlier in 2021. We encourage all to adopt the resulting “Framework on Best Practice in environmental and other research in UK Overseas Territories” (<https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/framework-of-best-practice.pdf>).

**10.** We welcomed also the work of the project partners (UKOTCF and UKCEH) and the funding bodies (AHRC & NERC) for arranging for bodies in our territories to be funded from UK research funds and looked forward to this precedent to be expanded greatly in the future to an increasingly equitable situation. We welcomed also the commitment of various UK bodies who are supporting the UKOTs, including the John Ellerman Foundation (JEF), the Garfield Weston Foundation, the People's Postcode Lottery and the People's Trust for Endangered Animals, to fund environmental conservation in our territories. We encourage other foundations to join them in helping to conserve the unique and globally important part of the natural heritage for which the UK family is responsible. For over 10 years JEF has been supporting work in UKOTs. Since our last meeting, a dedicated fund has been established which is very welcome and should be supported. This resulted from efforts of the Environmental Funders Network, supported by a secondment from RSPB, and with input from several others.

**11.** We agreed at our 2021 meeting on the need for national champions to gain international understanding of our biodiversity and the threats to it, and welcome the initiative by UKOTCF, in association with our territory personnel, in seeking champions amongst UK Parliamentarians and others in the public eye. We heard and welcomed an update on progress and of the proposed All Party Parliamentary Group on environmental conservation in the UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies.

**12.** We heard of the work of the Protected Areas Working Group of the UK Committee of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and how this might relate to UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies. We welcomed the identified opportunity to make even more use of our protected area data already being collated by JNCC. Making this available

(under the same constraints) to the IUCN and UKOTCF for further analysis will greatly enhance the international standing of our protected areas and the information available to us to aid management.

**13.** We remain concerned about the environmental, social and economic damage caused by invasive species. We note that the costs of their removal greatly exceed the costs of prevention. Effective action requires wide consultation, stakeholder engagement, especially of active conservation NGOs, and public awareness campaigns. We recognise that long-term biosecurity, together with the development of early warning and rapidly adaptive response systems, needs to be resourced at the local and regional levels to prevent introduction and spread as new threats emerge.

**14.** At our 2018 meeting in the Isle of Man, we welcomed Blue Belt funding for extensive marine protection around oceanic territories, and recognised also the success of co-operative fishery management alongside marine protected areas. We joined the participants in the recent technical conference “Staying Connected for Conservation in a Changed World” in calling on the UK Government to commit funding to support the continuation and expansion of the Blue Belt programme for the remaining years of the current parliament, in order to (a) provide the necessary financial and technical support to bring about effective and locally-led protection and sustainable management of their large-scale MPAs; and (b) expand the Blue Belt Programme and assistance for UKOTs developing other types of protected areas to other territories, including those not in mid-ocean, as required. Safeguarding vital marine biodiversity and enabling ecosystem recovery will sustain the blue economies of tourism and fishing, enable sequestration of ‘blue carbon’, and improve territories’ climate resilience against increasingly frequent and stronger extreme weather events. Accordingly, we welcome the extension of the Blue Belt programme to develop a complementary “Blue Shield” initiative. Several territories have joined one or both schemes. We wish to see a comparable scheme for terrestrial conservation, on which most of the species found only in our territories depend. Some of our senior officers have expressed concern at the discomfort between their terrestrial and marine staff that this discrepancy in UK support that this has generated, and called for a “green dot” initiative.

**15.** We again recall our governments' commitments to biodiversity conservation and sustainable development by choosing to be included in various international environmental agreements. We note that, in 2021, the UK Government and UKOTs reached 20 years of the existence of the Environment Charters and their commitments, not created under the Charters but brought together from under other international measures. We again note the invaluable role played by the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum's (UKOTCF's) “Review of performance by 2016 of UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies in implementing the 2001 Environment Charters or their equivalents and moving towards the Aichi Targets and Sustainable Development Targets” (<https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/env-charter/progress/>) which we endorsed at our 2017 meeting. We

regret that the UK Government has not provided the modest financial support we sought to enable the updating of this. We are grateful that the UKOTCF is nevertheless trying to undertake an update using unpaid skilled volunteers, and call on all to assist with this.

**16.** We continue to recognise, as we have done at previous meetings, that conservation workers in our territories benefit from cooperation with NGO bodies experienced in project design and operation, and which can draw on a wide range of expertise. We urge the UK Government to consider supporting such bodies so that they can deploy their skilled volunteer and paid personnel in helping the territories and raising and empowering local capacity. We note that the UK Government has supported working conferences for conservation practitioners, organised by UKOTCF, as an opportunity to share experience and skills; this has led to maximising cost-effectiveness of project funds. We value these working conferences highly, and encourage the UK Government to contribute substantially to such future physical or online conferences for practical territory conservationists, in accordance with its commitment to 'promote better cooperation and the sharing of experience between and among the Overseas Territories and with other states and communities which face similar environmental problems.'

**17.** We agree to consult further after the meeting on our representation and presence at CoPs (UNFCCC CoP27 in Egypt 7-18 November – welcoming the inclusion of Ministers from Gibraltar, BVI, Falklands, Montserrat & Anguilla); CBD CoP15 (second part) in Montreal, Canada 7-19 December), noting the importance of inclusion of our representative in the UK delegation, and noting that 94% of the globally important biodiversity for which UK is responsible depends on the Territories, as well as the considerable in-territory knowledge and expertise which will add value to the UK delegation.

**18.** We stressed our welcome of the constructive approach by the technical conference organised by UK Overseas Conservation Forum in March 2021 to identify solutions to other aspects of the situation and highlight their following recommendations:

- support should be given to long-term projects involving knowledge transfer to local NGOs through cooperation with the wider scientific and environmental community. The UK Government and other potential funders should focus resources on provision by experienced NGOs and others of the technical guidance and project officers needed to capitalise on the considerable local enthusiasm for conservation and environmental initiatives. We welcome progress made in the recruitment and deployment of citizen-scientists and citizen-conservationists, organised largely by NGOs, to further public ownership of these initiatives while recognising that costs need to be invested to release this major workforce;

- long-term funding is needed also for projects, such as those involving environmental recovery, that cannot be completed within the usual short time-frame. Sustainability cannot be built in a three-year cycle for habitats that take 30 years or more to come to fruition;
- local knowledge is essential in project-development and grant decisions. UK Government agencies were not funded by earlier UK Government grant funds for Overseas Territory conservation, but they are now. The UK Government needs to reverse its recent tendency to divert the use of traditional sources of grant-funding from cost-effective and experienced local and supporting UK NGO bodies to support instead UK government agencies and institutions, some of which are not experienced with some territory situations, however experienced they may be generally, and pay more regard to experience and proven success in the Overseas Territories, especially NGOs. The UK Government should revert to the more cost-effective approach of concentrating grant-funding on conservation bodies in the Overseas Territories and their umbrella body, rather than on consultancies;
- UK government agencies working in the Overseas Territories should be more open to speaking with other stakeholders, especially NGOs, to avoid duplication of effort. They should recognise the capacity constraints on local NGOs, which in most cases depend on voluntary work, and ensure funding to enable their contributions are built into project budgets;
- UK Government funding applications need to be less bureaucratic and repetitive, and consideration of projects should not take many months more than the time for application preparation. The assessments should be by those with Overseas Territories project-running experience and not based on box-checking scores;
- linking organisations help our territories make the best use of science and other information for decision-making, where local government or NGO staff may lack the relevant technical expertise. Whilst the UK government has international responsibility for environmental issues in the Overseas Territories (House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee 2013), in practice that responsibility is devolved to the territories themselves. There is, therefore, little or no overall coordination, or mechanism for sharing expertise, which can lead to waste of resources in addressing problems to which solutions have been found elsewhere, and can fail to identify issues which others have seen as priorities. The further development of a loose, consultative structure of mutually reinforcing institutions, along the lines of the UKOTCF with its regional working groups, is a priority, which would be helped by support and recognition by UK government, as well as territory governments.

**19.** We recognise with thanks the key role that local conservation leaders play in maintaining community motivation throughout the planning and implementation of long-term conservation



projects. Their importance cannot be overstated if we are to ensure that community support for conservation projects does not fade over generations, and that future conservation projects will be embraced as readily as those currently being undertaken.

**20.** We continue to regret that, whilst there is no legal impediment to funding from the UK National Lottery being used in support of the environment in the territories, the policies and procedures of the Lottery funding bodies effectively prevent this. We ask, as we have done in previous meetings, the UK Government to undertake urgently a review of this situation, which would open up new horizons for cooperation.

**21.** We agree to meet again, probably in 2023 by remote communications, and ask UKOTCF to continue in the role of Secretariat.

### **Appendix: List of Ministers and other lead representatives participating**

Alderney: Mr Ian C. Carter, Chair of Policy and Finance Committee, States of Alderney

Anguilla: Ms Carencia Rouse, Director of Natural Resources (Environment) (representing Minister Hon. Quincia M. Gumbs-Marie)

Bermuda: Mr Andrew Pettit, Director of Environment (representing The Hon. Walter H Roban, JP, MP, Deputy Premier and Minister of Home Affairs)

(British) Virgin Islands: Mr Mervin Hastings (representing Hon. Melvin M. Turnbull, Minister for Natural Resources and Labour)

Cayman Islands: Ms Jennifer Ahearn, Permanent Secretary (representing Hon Wayne Panton, Premier and Minister for Sustainability and Climate Resiliency with responsibility for Environment)

Falkland Islands: Peter Biggs MLA, Portfolio Holder for the Environment

Gibraltar: Hon. Prof. John Cortés, Minister for Education, Heritage, Environment, Energy and Climate Change

Guernsey: Deputy Lindsay De Sausmarez, President of the Committee for the Environment & Infrastructure

Isle of Man: Clare Barber, MHK, Minister for Environment Food and Agriculture

Jersey: Deputy Jonathan Renouf, Minister for the Environment

St Helena: Minister Christine Scipio, Minister of Environment (via Mrs Kedell Worboys, St Helena UK Representative)

Sark: Ms Shakira Christodoulou (representing Conseiller Helen Plummer, Chairman, Agriculture and Environment Committee of the Chief Pleas of Sark)

Tristan da Cunha: Ms Stephanie Martin, Environment Policy Officer (representing Chief Islander James Glass)

Turks & Caicos Islands: Ms Lormeka Williams (representing Hon. Josephine Olivia Connolly, Minister of Tourism, Environment, Maritime, Heritage and Gaming)

Technical constraints prevented participation by:

Montserrat: Ms Ernestine Corbett, Director of Environment (representing Hon Crenston C. Buffonge, Minister of Agriculture, Lands, Housing & Environment); and

Pitcairn: Simon Young, Island Councillor leading on Environment;

however, both of these support this Statement.