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We welcomed the recent 3-day technical webinar of UKOTCF which picked up our concerns expressed last year about the environmental, social and economic damage caused by invasive species, and valued the chance to discuss some presentations from that. Adequately resourced long-term programmes are needed, especially in complex ecosystems; local communities are key to action needed to prevent introductions, and to control invasive species once they are established; UKOT- and CD-based researchers are leading the way in terms of our understanding of invasive non-native species and UK research institutes could benefit massively from partnerships with them; innovation can help us prepare for and monitor invasive species in efficient ways so that we can protect our native species.

We continue our recognition of the importance of 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, as well as supporting the infrastructure facilitating this such as conferences, workshops and reviews by experienced NGO bodies. Noting the benefits of Blue Belt and Blue Shield on marine conservation, we reiterated also the need for increased UK funding for terrestrial conservation – on which most species unique to UK territory depend. We noted also other funding aspects.

### **Main Text**

1. We, the portfolio holders for the environment in our respective territories or dependencies, held our sixth Environment Ministers' Council meeting by Zoom on Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2023. 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. 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 welcomed greatly the participation in part of the meeting of The Rt Hon Lord Benyon, UK DEFRA Minister of State (Minister for Biosecurity, Marine and Rural Affairs).
3. We value the support of our UK Overseas Territories Association (UKOTA) in addressing many of our links with UK Government, including supporting environmental initiatives.
4. We appreciate also the work of the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum (UKOTCF) and its associated organisations in pursuing and facilitating many environmental aspects important to our territories and their natural and human welfare, as well as the work of other supporting bodies, within our jurisdictions, the UK and beyond, with whom the UKOTs & CDs work.
5. 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 increasing public awareness of the reality of the immediate major threats to human life and well-being caused by biodiversity loss and climate change.
6. 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 invested in.
7. 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. We are pleased to see changes and resourcing so far through the Darwin Plus programme to start to address this, but note that some key aspects, particularly terrestrial conservation, still lag behind in funding.

**8.** We showed our appreciation to the UK Government for HMG for eventually affording more places than ever to the Overseas Territories at the 15<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity in Montreal in November 2022, as well as places at the 27<sup>th</sup> Climate Convention Conference of the Parties in Sharm El-Sheikh in December 2022. The work of UKOTA in negotiating the additional places for OTs as part of the UK overflow delegation 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. All UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies who wish to attend COPs should be able to do so. If only a few Ministers are able to attend there should be a clear process for getting the key points from the other territories and for providing feedback to all territories.

**9.** We appreciated the assurances from Lord Benyon that he and his fellow ministers recognise the huge proportion of the global biodiversity for which UK is responsible internationally that depends on the UK Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies, and that their waters provide the great proportion of UK's protected marine zones - and that consequently UK Government is committed to appropriate inclusion of territory representatives in UK delegations to COPs. We appreciated too his commitment to explore with colleagues and officials efficient use of marine resources in relation to Tristan da Cunha, including assistance for locally-controlled shipping capacity that would support IUU policing and ocean science. We appreciated his willingness and that of colleagues to explore wider funding opportunities including replacement for the EU funding potential lost with Brexit, and the inclusion of UK Overseas Territories representatives in any review of funding and its structures. We welcomed also the commitment of Lord Goldsmith at the Joint Ministerial Council to encourage Darwin Plus to resource more practical conservation, rather than research.

**10.** We confirmed our welcome of 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 noted in our fifth meeting our concern about the environmental, social and economic damage caused by invasive species. We noted 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 recognised 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. In this context, we greatly welcomed the organisation by UKOTCF in March 2023 of a 3-day technical conference on this topic, bringing together experience across our territories and others with relevant experience. This featured also the second Sir Richard and Lady Dace Ground Lecture, on Challenges and successes in restoring Caicos Pine forests after almost total destruction by introduced pest, by Bryan Naqqi Manco, Assistant Director responsible for Research & Development, Department of Environment and Coastal Resources, Turks & Caicos Islands Government. This was widely acclaimed and may be viewed on <https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/other-territory-support/seminars-training/webinar-invasive-species/>.

**12.** We were able to view in our meeting a few of the shorter presentations from that conference, and discuss with the presenters. Reinforced by these we note that:

Technicians highlighted that long-term programmes are fundamental to dealing with the threats (e.g. displacement, introduction of disease) posed by invasive non-native invasive species (INNS). Some ecosystems in the UKOTs, e.g. Turks and Caicos Pine Yards, are extremely complex and require management, resources and time to recover. We saw the green shoots of recovery only possible through decades of dedication from many collaborators.

Discoveries by UKOT home-grown researchers, for example on St Helena, provide the UK and the world with knowledge and understanding of unique and complex ecosystems. We recognize and applaud these achievements.

UKOTs and CDs (e.g. Gibraltar and Guernsey) can be centres of excellence. Their data collections and knowledge provide an understanding of movement of species, including invertebrates such as non-native ants, wasps and hornets and their interaction with native invertebrates. Collaboration between them in order to share knowledge is a way to address global issues starting at smaller scales.

Communities are fundamental to action needed to deal with INNS once they become established. They drive the action in collaboration with bodies (such as environment departments and NGOs) responsible for protecting fragile and rare habitats.

New innovation in the form of techniques such as horizon-scanning, monitoring tools such as those which allow us to analyse environmental DNA (eDNA) can be used in a variety of ways. By refining these techniques, we can work more smartly and quickly to monitor changes in composition of species and take action to protect our native wildlife where appropriate.

**13.** 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.'

**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. At our 2022 meeting, we welcomed UK Government, in response to calls from ourselves and UKOTCF's 2021 technical conference, to continue and expand the Blue Belt programme 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, complementary "Blue Shield" initiative. 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. We continue to call for 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 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 welcome the undertaking of HMG to consult widely on the drafting of a UK Government Biodiversity Strategy in support of the UK Overseas Territories, and note that, in the context of devolved environmental powers, the Strategy must embody the will of the Territories themselves.

**17.** We underlined our welcome, expressed in our previous statements, 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 joint 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.

**18.** We agree to consult further after the meeting on our representation and presence at CoPs (including UNFCCC CoP28 from 30 November to 12 December 2023 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates; and CBD CoP16 in Turkey in 2024), 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.

**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. We welcomed the commitment of Lord Goldsmith at the Joint Ministerial Council to pursue the availability to territories of National Lottery funding.

**21.** We agree to meet again, possibly in late 2023 and in 2024 by remote communications, and ask UKOTCF to continue in the role of Secretariat.

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

**Alderney:** Lin Maurice, Chair of the General Services Committee, States of, States of Alderney.

**Anguilla:** Hon. Quincia M. Gumbs-Marie, Minister of Sustainability, Innovation and the Environment

**Bermuda:** The Hon. Walter H Roban, JP, MP, Deputy Premier and Minister of Home Affairs

**Cayman Islands:** Troy Jacob (representing Hon Wayne Panton, Premier and Minister for Sustainability and Climate Resiliency, and Ms Jennifer Ahearn, Permanent Secretary)

**Falkland Islands:** Hon. Pete Biggs MLA, the portfolio holder for Environment and Public Infrastructure

**Gibraltar:** Hon. Prof. John Cortés, Minister for Education & Culture, the Environment, Sustainability, Climate Change, Heritage and Public Health

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

**Isle of Man:** Hon. Clare Barber MHK, Minister for the Department of Environment Food & Agriculture

**Jersey:** Mr Willie Peggie, Group Director - Natural Environment (representing Deputy Jonathan Renouf, Minister for the Environment)

**St Helena:** Hon. Christine Scipio, Minister of Environment, Natural Resources and Planning

**Sark:** Ms Shakira Christodoulou, Conservation Leader for La Société Sercquaise (representing Conseiller Helen Plummer, Chairman of Agriculture, Environment and Sea Fisheries Committee of the Chief Pleas of Sark)

**Tristan da Cunha:** Mr Chris Carnegie, UK Representative (representing Chief Islander Mr James Glass)

**Turks & Caicos Islands:** Hon. Josephine Connolly, Minister of Tourism, Environment, Maritime, Heritage & Gaming

#### ***Apologies for absence***

**Montserrat:** Hon Crenston C. Buffonge, Minister of Agriculture, Lands, Housing & Environment

**Pitcairn:** Simon Young, Mayor of Pitcairn