

Chagos: Background on a Disputed Archipelago and Efforts to Designate its Waters as a Reserve

When the UK government launched a public consultation in November 2009 on whether it should designate an MPA around the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean (also called the British Indian Ocean Territory), it reignited a decades-old controversy on the rights of islanders who used to live there. Expelled by the UK government in the 1960s to make room for a joint UK-US military base, Chagossian refugees have campaigned for the right to return. The resettlement issue has wended its way through the UK court system and Parliament, and might go next to the European Court of Human Rights.

The UK government consultation (www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/21153320/mpa-consultation-101109) closed on 5 March 2010. Reactions to it raised questions of whether the UK would be morally right to close off Chagos waters unilaterally. The refugees may return some day, for instance, and need to fish for food or income generation. Advocates for the refugees have pointed out that any no-take protections put in place now without Chagossian consultation could be overturned by refugees if, or when, they return to the archipelago.

In the field of MPA planning, Chagos is an unusual case. The archipelago has no current residents (save for roughly 4000 military personnel and contractors, mostly Americans) and yet the MPA-planning process has had as high an international profile as any in recent years, with advocates strongly for and against no-take status:

- An online petition distributed by an international group of conservation organizations - the Chagos Environment Network (<http://protectchagos.org>) - collected more than 275,000 names in favor of applying no-take status to the archipelago's entire 636,600-km² Exclusive Economic Zone and territorial waters.
- A competing online petition distributed by the Marine Education Trust, an NGO, proposed that any UK consideration of MPA status should allow for multiple use, and should also discuss resettlement of Chagossians and transfer of the archipelago's sovereignty to Mauritius. It collected more than 1500 signatures (www.marineeducationtrust.org/petition/protect-chagos).
- The government of Mauritius, where many of the expelled Chagossians settled in the 1960s, has called it "unacceptable that the British claim to protect marine fauna and flora when they insist on denying Chagos-born Mauritians the right to return to their islands all the while." (<http://bit.ly/9GFPO3>)
- IUCN submitted a letter to the UK government in support of full no-take status for Chagos waters, while "stressing the need for meaningful involvement of all relevant stakeholders in defining the outcome of the consultation." (<http://bit.ly/9AYwvQ>) The IUCN letter was criticized by the Mauritian government and by some members of IUCN's own Commission on Environmental Law, who called it "unethical" (<http://bit.ly/93L5Lk>).

Now that the public consultation period is over, the UK government must decide what to do. In its consultation, the three options it gave were: (a) designate the entire Chagos marine area as no-take; (b) designate it as no-take but allow exceptions for certain pelagic fisheries, such as tuna; or (c) declare no-take protections for the inshore reef systems only. Which one the government will ultimately choose - if any of them - remains to be seen.

BOX: The Chagos ecosystem

- The Chagos archipelago is a group of seven atolls comprising more than 60 tropical islands but covering just 63 km² of land. It is 500 km south of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean.
- Chagos coral reefs host 220 species of coral and 784 species of fish. IUCN says the islands' extremely low direct impacts of human activities have created "unrivaled ecosystem health" and that its reefs are "the healthiest, most resilient coral reefs in the world."
- The archipelago's waters also contain sandy lagoonal habitats, seagrass habitat, mangroves, seamounts, deep-sea

canyons, and hydrothermally active areas.

- Fisheries for skipjack and yellowfin tuna are active for two months of the year in Chagos waters.
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BOX: Chagos timeline

1700s: The uninhabited archipelago is claimed by France, which establishes coconut plantations there and sends workers from Mauritius to work on them.

1814: Chagos is ceded to Great Britain by treaty upon the defeat of Napoleon. Plantations failed by the mid-1900s but some of the workers remained.

1967-1971: UK expels remaining population of 2000 Chagossians to make way for a joint US-UK military base on the island of Diego Garcia. Chagossians resettle in Mauritius and UK.

2000s: UK courts rule the expulsion of residents was unlawful and that Chagossians have the right to return home.

2008: The UK House of Lords rules that the UK government does not have to allow Chagossians to return.

2009: UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office opens public consultation on whether Chagos waters should be designated an MPA. The consultation closed on 5 March 2010.

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