

The UK Overseas Territories and climate change

Capacity building, science diplomacy, and COP26, by Matt Frost and Paul Buckley.

On 6 November in the COP26 UK pavilion, Bermuda's Deputy Premier and Minister of Home Affairs Walter Roban hosted a panel on Nature Day entitled 'Our Vision for Healthy Oceans', focusing on how the UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs) are taking action against climate change. A key piece of work reported by this panel was that undertaken by the Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership (MCCIP), who worked closely with the UK Overseas Territories Association (UKOTA), the UK Department for the Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra), the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and Great British Oceans to publish the

The UK Overseas Territories are in the front line of climate change

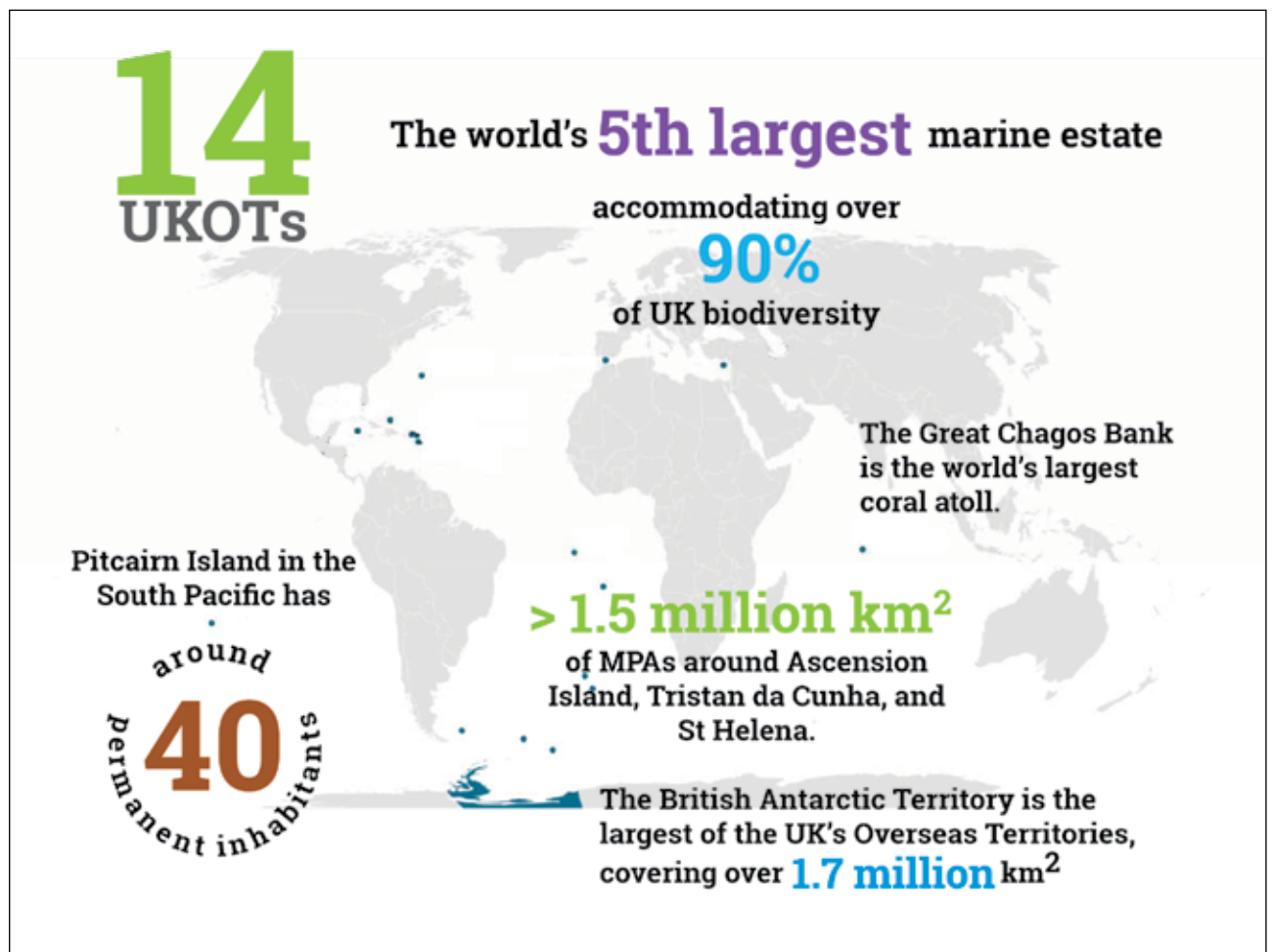
first ever comprehensive assessment of climate change impacts on coasts and seas across the UKOTs.

The work brought together more than 60 leading experts from all 14 UKOTs organized into six regional working groups, see Box 1. The model, by which the scientists and experts 'on the ground' work with MCCIP to produce 'policy relevant' and 'policy-ready' information to support policy (including that required to address the COP26 campaign themes) has been developed over many years. MCCIP brings a range of skills and experience to this, including science diplomacy, science and policy expertise, science to policy communication, and networks built up over years of collaboration. A key element of the work with the

Box 1. The six UKOT Regional working groups

- Pacific** Pitcairn Islands
- Caribbean and Mid Atlantic** Anguilla, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, Montserrat, and the Turks and Caicos
- South Atlantic** Ascension Island, Falkland Islands, St. Helena, and Tristan da Cunha
- Mediterranean** Gibraltar and Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) of Akrotiri and Dhekelia
- Indian Ocean** British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT)
- Polar** South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI) and the British Antarctic Territory (BAT)

UKOTs is not just reporting the initial findings, but putting in place capacity across the UKOTs in the form of networks and collaborations



An infographic showing some key facts and figures about the UK Overseas Territories. See also the map on page 12.

that can take the work forward.

The key findings from the MCCIP UKOT climate work were first reported last July, with the introductory keynote given by Lord Goldsmith, UK Minister for Pacific and the Environment at FCDO and Defra. Predictably, when looking at issues ranging from melting sea ice in polar regions through to import and supply issues for isolated islands in the mid-Pacific (Pitcairn), there were a number of climate issues that were unique to regions or territories. There were, however, a number of commonalities, including: impacts on transport of people and goods due to changes in extreme weather; impacts on fish populations (locally important for food and recreation); and, for many territories, the effects of increased sea temperature, ocean acidification, and extreme weather events on coral reefs. See the map of UKOT climate change issues on page 12.

Notably, the work also highlighted gaps in knowledge that could hinder not only understanding of climate impacts, but also efforts to develop solutions. There is already a lot of work being done, particularly around 'nature-based solutions', an approach being utilized widely across the different regions, but it is hoped that the UKOT network, established by MCCIP as part of this work, will provide significant extra capacity to address future challenges. As Mr Roban went on to emphasize at the COP26 event, the UK Overseas Territories are in the front line of climate change and were therefore 'saddled with great obligations and a considerable amount of work'. It has been a privilege for MCCIP to support the UKOTs in this work and we look forward to ongoing engagement.

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The reports for the UKOTS are readily accessible on the MCCIP website at <https://www.mccip.org.uk/> with an overview available at <https://www.mccip.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-08/mccip-a3-map-v6.pdf>

The Blue Belt

Our joint responsibility:
helping protect the biodiversity of
the UK Overseas Territories

By [Silvana Birchenough](#) and [Bryony Meakins](#).

The marine environment across the UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs) hosts some of the most spectacular marine life on the planet. Accounting for 90 per cent of the UK's biodiversity, the species and habitats encountered range from whale sharks and big-eye tuna, to pristine coral reefs and seamounts. Through initiatives like the Blue Belt Programme and UKOT Coral Reef Initiative, work is ongoing to help protect and enhance the biodiversity of the UKOTs.

The Blue Belt Programme is the UK Government's commitment to protect over 4 million square kilometres of ocean around seven UKOTs. The Territories within the Programme are St Helena, Ascension Island, Tristan da Cunha, British Antarctic Territory, British Indian Ocean Territory, Pitcairn Islands and South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands.

As these remote UKOTs face the impacts of global (climate change and plastic pollution) and localized pressures (including illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing), each UKOT has designated strict Marine Protected Areas to help preserve their biodiversity through closing off or restricting these areas for human activities. The Programme's support includes providing scientific expertise to help build understanding of this biodiversity and implementing monitoring

strategies to prevent unlawful activity.

Work to protect Caribbean coral reefs is also underway through the UKOT Coral Reef Initiative, an alliance of UKOT- and UK-based experts working together to restore and protect coral reef ecosystems for the communities that depend on them. Due to coral bleaching and the impacts of climate change, these corals are under unprecedented pressure; nearly two-thirds of Caribbean reefs are threatened by human activities and have seen unprecedented recent decline.

The UKOT Collaborative Coral Reef Working Group provides a forum to share expertise and knowledge across all stakeholders. This work—delivered in partnership with several Caribbean OT governments—has recently focussed on combatting the stony coral tissue loss disease, which is devastating Caribbean reefs (see article on p. 8). This dedicated programme continues to improve our understanding and valuing of biodiversity, support local communities with adaptation to climate change impacts, and build post-COVID resilience strategies.

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