

# Ascension Conservation Quarterly

Issue No: 10

Date: March 2005

Edited by: Tara Pelembe Ascension Conservation Officer

Website: [www.ascensionconservation.org.ac](http://www.ascensionconservation.org.ac)

Funded by: Ascension Island Government

Contact: Georgetown, Ascension Island ASCN 1ZZ

email: [conservation@atlantis.co.ac](mailto:conservation@atlantis.co.ac)

Tel: (247) 6359



## Tours and Tour guides:

Hi everyone,

These past three months we have been training volunteer tour guides for Green Mountain - we have also had the pleasure of hosting two Island Holidays tour groups and Dawn Osborne's photographic tour. These experiences have been great for all of us.

We are also very excited that Green Mountain has been designated a National Park - Ascension's first National Park designated under the Protected Areas ordinance.

Thanks to everyone for all your support.

Tara

## 2005

Mike Pienkowski (UKOTCF) visits on his way to St. Helena

ASC 001: Developing and initiating the implementation of Ascension's first National Park Management Plan - work continues on the Mountain.

National Park Logo Competition run and won!

Volunteer tour guide training commences

ASC 002 Securing local ownership for long term seabird restoration on Ascension - work continues

Green Turtle and Sooty terns breeding seasons in progress

Assistant Conservation Officer attends conference in Thailand

More information on Stedson's MBE

First Ascension only Tour.

Ascensions OTEP bid for 2005/2006 successful.

# Green Mountain National Park Update

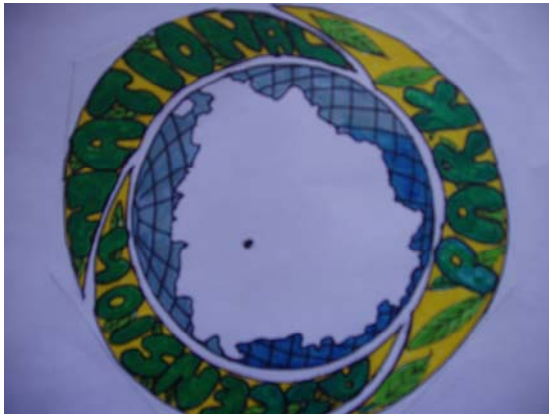
## Overseas Territories Environment Programme (OTEP) ASC 001

*Contributed by Tara Pelembe*

### National Park Logo Competition

*Contributed by Tara Pelembe*

A competition was held with the school children of Two Boats School to design a logo for the proposed Green Mountain National Park. There was a good response, and it was a difficult competition to judge. The Conservation Department volunteer tour guides judged the entries: Terri, Margaret, Ian and Raymond choose Shane Green's design as the winning one.



*Winning design by Shane Green*

Sharae Phillips was awarded a prize for junior entry.

On Friday 25<sup>th</sup> February Tara Pelembe, Conservation Officer presented the prizes and certificates to the prizewinners at Two Boats School Assembly, with all members of the Conservation Team present



*Shane Green receiving his prize in school assembly*



*Sharae Phillips receiving her prize in school*

#### **News Flash:**

#### **Ascension's first National Park**

On 10<sup>th</sup> March 2005, The Ascension Island Council agree that HE the Governor be asked to make and Order declaring Green Mountain to be a National Park.

The official opening is schedule for the weekend of 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> June 2005

## Volunteer Tour Guide Training:

*Contributed by Ian Close*



*Ian, Steve, Teri and Margaret – Volunteer Tour Guides*

With the soon to be opened Green Mountain National Park, the Conservation Office have undertaken to train tour guides for this project.

The purpose of the guides will be to take people up to the National Park and advise on the geology, flora, fauna, wildlife and its history and development. In addition to this the guides will also take interested parties on some of the many picturesque walks on Green Mountain.

The guides who are all volunteers have been trained on all aspects required for this project, which include:

A detailed understanding of the geology, flora, fauna, wildlife and history of Green Mountain, first aid training, 4x4 vehicle training, radio training.

All training will be completed for the end of April at which time the guides will be issued with uniforms for their role, which will feature the new national park logo.

It is envisaged that the guides will give visitors to Green Mountain an insight into its development and make for truly memorable visits to this unique National Park.

## Sea Bird Restoration Update

### Overseas Territories Environment Programme (OTEP) ASC 002

*Contributed by Tara Pelembe*

The Seabird Restoration Project continues to make steady progress. There have been challenges over the last months, which include the recent sign of a cat in the Wideawake Fairs. The team are working on solutions to the problems and we will keep you updated in the next newsletter on the results of the situation.

## **One-Stop Tour – The Island's First?**

February 2005

*Libby Weir-Breen*

*Island Holidays, Comrie, Perthshire, Scotland.*

[www.islandholidays.co.uk](http://www.islandholidays.co.uk)

It's not been long since visitors to Ascension Island en route for the Falklands had to sit in "the cage" up at the airhead, seeing only clinker and wondering what, if anything, lay beyond it.

Now – and we think for the first time – a UK holiday company has featured Ascension Island as a "stand alone" destination and their first group arrived from the British winter to the heat of an extremely warm Ascension February.

Working closely with Ascension Island Conservation, Island Holidays had put together a tour to allow the group to see as much as possible of the island, the emphasis being on its natural history although the human history was not ignored. With Tara as driver/guide we were in for a real treat.

In six short days we enjoyed two visits to the Wideawakes and various of the

clients who had previously seen this species on Bird Island in the Seychelles, where there are two million birds, were delighted by the lack of viewing restrictions which meant they could walk right up to the edge of the colony without causing disturbance. That's the difference between having a few visitors and tourism taking over! We watched engrossed as a huge Green Turtle laid her eggs under the cover of darkness and began the apparently exhausting process of covering them and disguising the nest. We enjoyed the glory of Green Mountain with not a cloud in sight and swam in the calmest waters imaginable in Comfortless Cove. We went off road and had a picnic amongst the out-of-season blooming lilies up in the Pines and enjoyed a spectacular boat trip to Boatswain Bird Island with turtles, dolphins and, of course seabirds in their thousands. In short, we had a wonderful week.



*The tour group and Libby at Mars Bay*

The clients have all been in touch since and every one of them has commented not only on how much they enjoyed the island but how welcoming and friendly all the people were. So our thanks to the folk of Ascension Island, and particularly to Tara and her team (and the fish fry was fantastic boys!) for making this a very special holiday.

## **An alternative view of Green Mountain.**

*By David M Wilkinson*

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 1836 Charles Darwin, homeward bound on HMS Beagle, arrived at Ascension Island. The vegetation he found on the island was very different from today: even on Green Mountain the plants were low growing, dominated by ferns and grasses with just one species of shrub which was so rare that he failed to notice it. He had just arrived from the more wooded island of St Helena and wrote of Ascension: 'The island is entirely destitute of trees, and in this and every other respect, it is very far inferior to St. Helena.' The vegetation

high on Green Mountain today is very different, being best described as cloud forest. The top of the mountain is dominated by tall bamboos, blocking out any summit view, and below this are woodlands composed of many tree species.

What happened between Darwin's visit and the present day? In 1843 the botanist Joseph Hooker visited Ascension. At the request of the British Admiralty he was asked to make recommendations to 'improve' Ascension's arid environment. His main idea was to plant more trees on the mountain, which he considered 'of the highest importance as thereby the fall of rain will be directly increased'. He also believed that increasing the tree cover would help create deeper, and more

useful, soils. For some years after Hooker's visit, consignments of plants were sent to Ascension, mainly from England and South Africa. The result has been to create a small tropical cloud forest, from scratch, in about 150 years.

The conventional way to view the current vegetation of Green Mountain would be to consider it a conservation disaster. Indeed, later in his life, Hooker wrote of his suggestions for Green Mountain: 'The consequences to the native vegetation of the peak will, I fear, be fatal, and especially to the rich carpet of ferns that clothed the mountain.' Certainly if the original vegetation survived on the mountain few ecologists would advocate anything other than preservation. However the current, largely introduced, vegetation is not without interest and many people like the opportunity of escaping from the more arid lowlands of the island to the cooler, greener woodlands on the mountain.

Scientifically the vegetation is interesting as it forms a useful experiment which could help us understand how ecosystems, like tropical forests, function. For example, some of the explanations which have been put forward to explain the functioning of these systems have assumed that the species involved have been living and evolving together for long periods of time. Clearly Green Mountain is an example where this is not the case and therefore provides an opportunity for scientists to study what happens when large numbers of species which do not normally live together are brought into contact with one another by human actions. Historically most ecological research on Ascension has focused on the native species and habitats, however Green Mountain has the potential to

contribute important information to improve our understanding of ecology. In addition the current Green Mountain ecosystem almost certainly stores more carbon, in its vegetation and 'improved' soils, than it did in its original state. In a world threatened by global warming this is of scientific and practical interest. While the increased storage of carbon (which would otherwise be in the atmosphere contributing to global warming) is too small to influence the global climate, it provides an example of how human actions can potentially increase carbon storage. The relatively small scale nature of Green Mountain makes it amenable to detailed scientific study which could quantify the amount of carbon stored on the mountain. Numbers from such a study would be useful in evaluating the potential role of large scale 'engineering' of vegetation as a partial response to global warming.

The Green Mountain system is scientifically interesting and has a beauty of its own. Although man-made it is deserving of protection alongside Ascension's turtles, sea birds and other wildlife.

Dave Wilkinson lectures in the School of Biological and Earth Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, UK.

A more detailed description of the Green Mountain system and its importance can be found in the following reference:

Wilkinson D.M. (2004) The parable of Green Mountain: Ascension Island, ecosystem construction and ecological fitting. *Journal of Biogeography* 31; 1-4.

## **Subsidiary Body On Scientific, Technical And Technological Advice – Tenth Meeting – Bangkok, 7- 11 February 2005. Attended By Stedson Stroud.**

Stedson has submitted the following report:

The convention covered international biodiversity strategies, discussions and workshops. My main focus was on Island biological diversity and the eradication and control of invasive alien species from islands.



*Stedson in Thailand*

The Earth is home to over 100,000 islands, which host more than 500 million inhabitants. Their combined land and exclusive economic zones cover more than one sixth of the Earth's total area. The isolation of island environments has resulted in the evolution of often endemic and characteristic flora and fauna. A total of 104 of the 218 endemic Bird areas are confined entirely to islands, while 36 of the 143 terrestrial Global, 200 Ecoregions are comprised of Islands.

Ten of the 34 biodiversity hotspots wholly comprise islands, and many of the rest also include islands. No less than 218 of the 595 individual sites holding the entire global population of one or more critically threatened species are found on islands. A recent global gap analysis of the coverage of terrestrial vertebrate species was in protected areas found that of the gaps, most "are montane or insular regions in the tropics." The significance of marine biodiversity within islands has been well recognized with over half of the tropical marine biodiversity found in islands and 12 of the 18 centers of endemism, and seven of the ten coral reef hotspots surround islands. In terms of cultural diversity a number of islands are also the home to unique cultures that have developed traditional resource management methods that have, in many cases, enabled people to develop and live in harmony with biodiversity. From small islands through to large, from countries that have islands through to countries that entirely comprise islands, and from large continental remnants through to remote atolls, there are opportunities and challenges for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Islands are self-contained ecosystems with well-defined geographical limits that encapsulate fundamental ecological processes and interactions. Islands incorporate all the existing thematic areas considered under the convention i.e. forests, inland waters, agricultural land, dry and sub-humid lands, marine and coastal eco systems, and mountain ecosystems. The connectivity of ecosystems and the interface between marine and terrestrial realms will create specific issues and opportunities for all islands including Ascension, on biological diversity.

## Observations of turtles offshore from Ascension

*Dr Graeme Hays  
School of Biological Sciences  
Institute of Environmental Sustainability  
University of Wales Swansea  
Singleton Park, Swansea SA2 8PP  
<http://www.swan.ac.uk/bs/staffprof/GCH.htm>*

As part of ongoing studies into the biology of green turtles at Ascension Island, in January 2004 we conducted boat surveys to determine the abundance of turtles far out at sea, over 10 miles offshore. This work is part of a long-standing collaborative research and conservation programme between the Universities of Swansea (Wales, UK) and Pisa (Italy). Teams from these universities first visited Ascension Island together in 1997 to begin satellite tracking turtles and since then we have returned almost every year to conduct research and conservation projects.

In 2004, myself and Dr Paolo Luschi chartered the big game fishing boat, the *Harmattan* to conduct surveys offshore to the west of Ascension. To our surprise we encountered large numbers of green turtles, presumably individuals completing their migration from Brazil. However, in addition to seeing turtles swimming towards Ascension, we also encountered several pairs of mating turtles (see photos). These observations were unexpected as we thought mating occurred exclusively close to the nesting beaches. We suspect that some males are actively searching for females prior to

their arrival at Ascension. In this way they can monopolise females before they reach the island, ensuring they father as many hatchlings as possible.

Thanks to Captain Matthias Henningsen for taking time out from marlin fishing to make the surveys so successful and to Tara for all help with logistics.



*Figure 1. (a) The survey vessel Harmattan, and (b) a mating turtle recorded in oceanic water offshore from Ascension Island. The female is beneath the male and lifted her head occasionally to breathe.*

# *Ascension Green Mountain National Park Photographic Competition 2005*



Another exciting opportunity to put all those pictures tucked away in dusty albums or hopefully non-dusty hard drives to good use.

After last years' success, this year the competition will be themed around Green Mountain National Park, open to your interpretation.

Pictures should depict Green Mountain either scenery, buildings or wildlife

Pictures may be submitted in electronic format (.jpeg), or prints. Pictures taken by those 16 years and under will be judged separately. Prizes will be given to the best 12 pictures.

The best 12 pictures will then be displayed in the Conservation Centre. With the agreement of the photographer, these pictures will also be used to make postcards and a 2006 calendar, to be sold to raise Conservation funds.

**SEND YOUR PHOTOS NOW -**

Please submit images to the Conservation Centre. Contact Tara or Ian for more information (Tel: 6359/6403) [conservation@atlantis.co.ac](mailto:conservation@atlantis.co.ac)