

Ascension Conservation Quarterly

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Edited by: Tara George Ascension Conservation Officer

Website: www.ascensionconservation.org.ac

Funded by: Ascension Island Government

Contact: Georgetown, Ascension Island ASCN 1ZZ

email: conservation@atlantis.co.ac

Tel: (247) 6359



People

It seems that we have focussed on people this time round. We have had so much input from various people from all walks of life that it is only timely that there is an edition of our newsletter that focuses on some of these people and the work that they have done.

Kevin O'neils article highlights the excellent contributions that the Military Dive Expedition teams are making to our knowledge of the marine environment. Steve Alton's article, is an excellent example of the valuable input of visitors; We then go on to thank BULRUSH for their kind donations, and end with an introduction to our new members of staff and to our first full-time volunteers.

Without all of these people, and others who are continuously working with us, we would never be able to accomplish many of the goals we set out to achieve.

Thanks to everyone for their support

Tara

The past 3 months....

Drs Brendan Godley and Annette Broderick visit Ascension.

Training workshops on turtles held

Masked Boobies return in larger numbers to the Letterbox area

OTEP funding secured for 2 projects on Ascension:

ASC 001: Developing and initiating the implementation of Ascension's first National Park Management Plan

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

Green Mountain Management Committee formed.

Conservation Department Annual report published.

National Protected Areas designations approved in Principle by Council with a series of public consultations being the next step in the formalisation of these designations.

Volunteers continue to make invaluable contributions to conservation initiatives on Ascension.

Royal Air Force Expedition 'Benthic Monitor' 2004

Contributed by Flight Lieutenant Kev O'Neill RAF
Expedition Leader - 'Benthic Monitor' 2004

As the RAF Expedition Leader for a planned trip to Ascension I was keen to identify a suitable project to give the participants a genuine task to complete while increasing their understanding of the marine world and giving something back to the Island community as a thank you for their support.

From early contact with Tara at the Conservation Office it became clear that there were a number of exciting initiatives ongoing that could benefit from our time and expertise and Exercise 'Benthic Monitor' was born.

Having arrived on Island on 27 Feb 04 we quickly established contact with Tara and, by happy coincidence, Emma Bennett the Marine Biologist from St Helena who had set up the Ascension fish monitoring programme a short time ago. It was clear that the success of the monitoring study rested on the timely gathering of accurate data in respect of the fish species of Ascension and their distribution. Knowing it has been difficult for the Island team to collect the data required, I committed our group to giving 100% effort to the task. We would visit each of the 14 research sites and carry out the data gathering exercises. This required us to amend our planned diving schedules to ensure that we were diving in the required positions and to plan our dive profiles to allow time for the surveys to be completed.

Having had the briefing from Tara and Emma we undertook the first dives to train the research team in the skills they would have to employ to gather the data successfully. As water magnifies images seen when diving, we needed to train our

divers to accurately gauge the size of fish underwater. Tara supplied some small pieces of wood, cut to known lengths, which we positioned on the sea bed and had divers swim along estimating the length of the pieces as they went. With practice, the divers soon became able to allow for the distorting effect of the water and could accurately estimate the correct lengths.

Then we got to grips with the survey equipment. The 50m blue nylon rope supplied by Tara (soon nicknamed 'the rope of death' by the Expedition members) to act as a datum line along which the data would be gathered was discarded after the first dive when its ability to float and wrap around the divers while working became apparent. Instead we used a diver's line reel which we marked off at 5m intervals and at the 50m point. This made the deployment and recovery of the datum line for the survey much safer, quicker and easier.

Then the team turned their attention to the data recording sheets which being A4 size were a little unwieldy underwater. The team transferred the data recording charts to small waterproof notebooks which could be safely stowed in jacket pockets when not in use.

I am glad to report that the team worked extremely hard to complete the surveys as Emma wanted and we asked her to join us as a guest diver to carry out a survey at Pyramid Point. It was clear that we were following her instructions properly and the team breathed a sigh of relief! (It felt like having teacher stood over your shoulder). Overall, the team managed to gather data

from 12 of the 14 required sites but missed out on the last 2 due to other commitments. That said, we did 2 additional surveys in the region of English Bay which we thought might be useful if and when the Marine Protection Area (MPA) is established.

As well as carrying out the data surveys, the team undertook to record sightings of whales and dolphins encountered when out diving and also sightings of Hawksbill Turtles. If we could humanely capture any Hawksbills while diving for tagging and micro-chipping we would do so but we knew this would be difficult as only 4 had been caught over the previous 2 years!

Suffice to say the luck of Neptune must have been with us because we saw and recorded lots of dolphins, both Bottlenose and Spinners, who seemed to take great interest in us and spent a long time with us over the days. We saw quite a few Hawksbills on our trips and having set the standard by catching the first one personally, the team rose to the challenge and we managed to bring a total of 4 to the Conservation Team for tagging by the end of the trip. In fact number 4 came from the last pair of divers, on the last dive of the trip, so it shows we never gave up to the very end! Each turtle was named by the team member who caught them so several expedition member's children or grandchildren now have little turtles sporting their names! Certainly my daughter Tegen now thinks I am the best dad in the whole world! Hoorah!



Hawksbill turtle in boat ready for tagging

It only remained for the team to try to meet the last of our aims, that of giving something back to the Island and we are most grateful to the Headmaster, staff and pupils of Two Boat School who gave us the opportunity to make a presentation to the children on our last afternoon. It went swimmingly (if you'll excuse the pun) and the team were very pleasantly surprised by both the very warm welcome shown to us and the level of knowledge of the marine world shown by the children. It was great fun although one or two of the team say they would rather swim with sharks than stand in front of such a knowledgeable class of children again!

Overall the Expedition team is very pleased to have been of some help to Tara and Stedson in supporting their excellent work on behalf of the Island wildlife. We support the establishment of the MPA at the earliest opportunity and wish well to everyone on your beautiful and unique Island. We will certainly be back to help again at the earliest opportunity.

National Protected Areas Update

The proposal for the designation of areas to be Protected was taken to the island Council on 13 May 2004. They had no objection in principle but requested that a public consultation exercise should be the next step in the process.

Millennium Seed Bank Project

Contributed by Steve Alton

The technical bit

The Millennium Seed Bank Project, an initiative of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, seeks to collect and conserve seeds of 10% of the world's plant species by the end of 2009. By drying the seeds and freezing them at -20C, they can be preserved for decades or even centuries, underpinning the conservation of plant species in the wild. The project commenced in 1997 with a programme to collect seeds of all the plant species native to the UK. This is now largely complete, with 95% of species conserved in the Seed Bank at Wakehurst Place, and the programme is now being extended to the UK's Overseas Territories. Funding was provided by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, and four Territories have been chosen for inclusion in the first round: Ascension, St. Helena, the Falklands and the British Virgin Islands.

The visit

The journey to the Falklands had been long and unpleasant; I had flown via France, Argentina and Chile, including a 19-hour stopover in Santiago Airport, so the trip northwards to Ascension seemed short by comparison. And I found myself in 'first class', which has never happened before and probably never will again. Even so, I was bleary-eyed by the time Tara and Stedson met me and bundled me into the minibus for the Obsidian Hotel. I unpacked a few essentials, hit the shower and then slept the sleep of the long-distance traveller.

The Falklands had been nothing like I expected – they were having a heatwave, for a start, with temperatures in the mid-twenties, and the whole place seemed less

bleak and more welcoming than I had imagined. But I had no clear idea what to expect of Ascension. I had seen pictures on the web, but nothing to prepare me for the reality of the place. The wind took me by surprise; everyone had told me it would be windy in the Falklands, but no one had mentioned that the wind also blows on Ascension. And the heat. How can somewhere be that windy and still be hot? The walls and doors of my hotel room rattled through the night and even with the fan on its highest setting I was still uncomfortable. I began to wonder what I had let myself in for.

But then I had my first experience of the island by daylight, courtesy of Tara, and was amazed. I was used to the landscape of England, where thousands of years of rain have knocked off the rough edges, smoothed things over, covered it all up in a blanket of vegetation. But here was geology in the raw. It was as if the last volcanic eruption had been last week – bare clinker, shattered rock, lava flows, only the spreading thorn trees to suggest that nature was reclaiming the place. And in contrast, the mysterious bulk of Green Mountain looming over everything, hidden in cloud. I decided I could like this place.

The main aims of my visit were to collect some seeds of the island's endemic plant species (and in doing so, to train Stedson and Tara) and to offer some advice on the establishment of a propagation nursery. We kicked off with an expedition to collect seeds of the Ascension Spurge.

It was an interesting introduction to the fine art of seed collecting – we were a little early, so only a few of the seeds were ripe.

This meant having to pick over each plant, searching for the ripest seeds.



Euphorbia origanoides – Ascension spurge

The sun was beating down on the slopes of South Gannet Hill, the clinker was dusty and unstable, given to shifting under your feet. Despite these hardships, the team did well on their first attempt, and we came away with a good collection of seeds, the first to be safely put away in long-term storage.



Our second target was an endemic grass species,

Sporobolus caespitosus,

which is to be found on the upper slopes of the mountain.

Stedson and I drove most of the

way up, and this lulled me into a false sense of security. Hey, we were nearly at the top – how much further could it be? We followed Elliot's Path, stopping off to visit some of the endemic fern species. Ferns produce spores rather than seeds and, as such, the seed bank can do little to conserve them. It was for this reason that we were discussing a propagation nursery, using the old greenhouses opposite the Red Lion.

Leaving the ferns, we scrambled on through the clouds and made our way round to the east side of the mountain. Here, Stedson casually disappeared over the edge of a cliff and, like a mountain goat, made his way along invisible ledges to the slopes where the *Sporobolus* grows. I tightened the straps of my rucksack and reluctantly followed. If the Spurge had been uncomfortable to collect, the *Sporobolus* was worse. The wind was whipping the cloud up the valley, the grass itself was barely an inch high and had only two or three seeds per clump. We inched our way along our separate ledges, searching for the scattered plants, plucking a few heads here and there and stuffing them into our collecting bags before the wind could whisk them away. It was with great relief that I struggled back up to Elliot's Path to wait for Stedson. We made our way further round, heading for a second population. This was to be found on Windy Corner, which lived up to its name. The wind here hit you like fist, taking your breath away.

We scrambled amongst the rocks and managed another small collection. Then Stedson suggested that, rather than retracing our steps, we could go over the top of the mountain. I agreed – I was quite keen to say that I had been to the summit and after all – how much further could it be? So Stedson set off vertically up the slope, following sheep tracks that seemed to have disappeared by the time I reached them. The cloud made everything wet and slippery, the wind was hitting my rucksack and knocking me off balance and my glasses had steamed up. I reflected that spending 11 months of the year sitting at a desk was not particularly good training for this sort of trip. Eventually, by grabbing handfuls of vegetation and hauling myself upwards, I struggled upwards and stumbled out into the clearing of the

Dewpond. As we made our way down through the bamboo, Stedson started to laugh.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked.

‘Not many people ever go that way,’ he confessed.

Thanks, Stedson.

Our final expedition was to Letterbox and South East Bay. I will not go into detail, other than to say this: it was hot. Stedson once more disappeared over a cliff. I refused to follow this time – nobody needs seeds that badly. My hiking boots, which I had owned for 18 years, disintegrated. I got burned, and as I write this, the skin is still peeling off my arms. But even so, I don’t regret a minute of it.

At the end of it all, two of Ascension’s endemic plant species are safely backed-up in the Millennium Seed Bank, we are hopefully a step closer to having a propagation nursery on the island, and I have 200 photos and a head full of memories. I can always buy a new pair of boots.

New full-time volunteers

Christina Laskaridis



Christina comes from Athens, Greece. After completing her high school, she spent some time in the Falkland Islands volunteering for Falklands Conservation. She arrived on Ascension in May 2004 to work as a full-time volunteer for 2 months before going to the UK to study politics and economics. Christina’s work also focuses mainly on data collection for the Seabird Restoration Project, and the cetacean monitoring project.

Caren George



Caren comes from Cape Town South Africa. She studied Environmental Sciences at the University of Cape Town and has a wide variety of interests. She arrived on Ascension in May 2004 to work as a full-time volunteer for 6 months. Her work focuses mainly on data collection for the Seabird Restoration Project, and the cetacean monitoring project

Bulrush donations

By Tara George AIG Conservation Officer 11th June 2004

Conservation Department receives donation

Two pallet loads of compost labelled Bulrush arrived on the ship a few weeks ago. This was a generous donation from Bulrush to the Ascension Island Government Conservation Department.



One of the pallets of compost

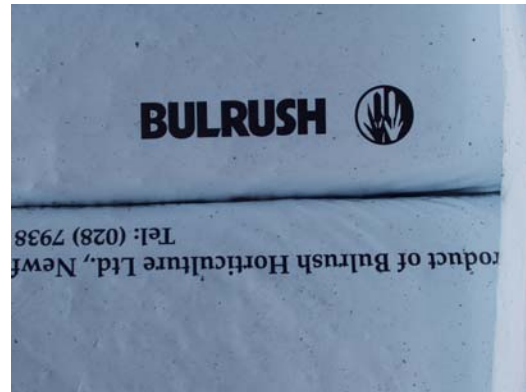
Why is the compost necessary?

This compost was prepared specially for the propagation of ferns. Ascension had 10 species of endemic plants, 4 of these are now extinct. Of the 6 remaining endemics, there are 4 species of fern. In a recent IUCN (World Conservation Union) classification, one of these ferns, *Pteris adscensionis*, was categorised as critically endangered: there are only 150 – 200 of them left in the world.

In a move to try to save these species from extinction, the Conservation Department is developing a nursery on Green Mountain to propagate endemics to try to increase the numbers of live plants and then attempt trial introductions into the wild to increase the wild populations.

Stedson Stroud, Assistant Ascension Conservation Officer is responsible for the fern propagation. An important part of the propagation process will obviously be the nature of the compost in which the ferns are grown.

Bulrush prepares compost that is species specific and they have kindly donated compost specially made for the propagation of ferns to the Conservation Department



Bulrush Horticulture Ltd.

Ascension Connection

The connection between Bulrush and Ascension came via Allan Wilson the Director of Financial Services, AIG, who had previously worked for the company.



*Allan Wilson helping Stedson prepare soil for propagating *Marrattia purpurascens**

Thanks

The Conservation Department would like to thank Bulrush Horticulture Ltd. for their generous donation and thank to Allan Wilson for his help.

New Staff

Raymond Benjamin

Raymond was born on St. Helena and has spent most of his working life as a fisherman on St. Helena, Falklands and South Georgia. He has also worked on St. Helena as a linesman, electrician and

mason. His first job on Ascension was for Pan Am in the 1960's in the commissary. He returned to Ascension in 2003 where he was initially employed by CSR on the American base as a general labourer. When the opportunity to work on the Seabird Restoration Project arose, with funding from RSPB, Raymond's interest in the environment made him apply for the job. He has been working as a field worker for the Project since March 2004.



Darren Roberts



Darren arrived at Ascension when he was 13 years old. After completing his schooling he worked as an apprentice on Green Mountain farm. His other jobs on Ascension have been: Pest and rodent

Control assistant and Painter. In September 2003 he was employed with funding from the RSPB and the Ascension Island Government to implement the new Rat Control Strategy that evolved as a result of the Seabird Restoration Project. He is now employed by the Ascension Island Government as part of an OTEP (Overseas Territories Environment Programme) funded project entitled: Securing local ownership for long term Seabird Restoration on Ascension. He began working as a full time field worker under this project, after an RSPB funded training period of a month, in May 2004.

ASCENSION ISLAND – SPECIAL STAMP ISSUE

BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL – PART II

MASKED BOOBY – SULA DACTYLATRA



Available now from the Ascension Post Office is a special issue of stamps depicting the Masked Booby. These stamps were released on 6 February 2004 and comprise five stamps, sold singularly as a mint set or in a picturesque souvenir sheet. Official first day covers are also available.

The stamps of Ascension Island are very attractive and highly collectible. To purchase these special birds stamps and many others please visit our website at www.postoffice.gov.ac/. Or you may contact us at The Philatelic Bureau, Post Office, Georgetown, Ascension Island, ASCN 1ZZ Telephone 00 247 6260 Fax 00 247 6583 or email us at PostOffice@atlantis.co.ac

