

Ascension Island National Protected Areas

**A proposal for areas to be designated as
Sanctuaries
Nature Reserves
National Parks**



Photo to show Boatswain bird Island – proposed sanctuary

1 Introduction.

A draft ordinance allowing for the creation of National Protected Areas is to be presented to Ascension Island Council. Following a briefing about the ordinance by the Conservation Office, the Council requested a more detailed justification for the designation of areas. The following document attempts to highlight the importance of each area, and subsequently explain why it is necessary to protect it under law.

There are three levels protection under the National Protected Areas Ordinance, and in this document they are presented in order from the strictest to the most lenient i.e.

Sanctuaries
Nature Reserves
National Parks.

It is not the aim of the document to explain these levels of protection as this is laid down in the Ordinance.

Hopefully the information given will suffice to convince those that all designated areas do need the level of protection proposed. Actual boundaries can only be outlined after formal surveys have been done, however Appendix 2 contains a written suggestion as to what these boundaries should be.

For any further information/queries/comments please contact

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2 Sanctuaries

The law states:

“The declaration of an area as a sanctuary shall be made primarily for the purpose of the protection of the natural ecology, or of any particular form of naturally occurring living organism (including any vegetable or marine life), in the area, and the avoidance of disturbance of the area by human activity, either at any time or at particular times according to the circumstances and the form of life which it is desired to protect. Entry into a sanctuary shall not be permitted except in accordance with any regulations made in respect of that sanctuary and no person shall carry out any development in a sanctuary”

2.1 Proposed designation:

**Boatswainbird Island
Seabird Stacks**

2.2 Background

The present sizes of the seabird colonies are thought to be only a fraction of those found before man’s colonisation in 1815, with colonies found in very different distributions over the island to those found today. Prior to human settlement they were found in many places on the lowland plains of mainland Ascension (Stonehouse 1960, Blair 1989). The introduction of humans and subsequent introduction of predators – primarily cats and rats saw a dramatic reduction in the mainland seabird populations, ultimately leading to their banishment to Boatswainbird island – the only safe, predator –free spot left.

In light of all this, Ascension is still one of the most important warm-water seabird stations in the world (Ashmole, Ashmole & Simmons 1994) and the most important seabird breeding site in the tropical Atlantic (Ratcliffe 1997). It supports over 400,000 seabirds of 11 species.

Boatswainbird island is home to all 11 species of seabird and is the primary breeding site for 10 of these species. It is vital that this last piece of nature be preserved from any further threats. It is recommended in the Ascension Island Management Plan that “Access to Boatswain bird Island should be prohibited except for work approved under the Management Plan” since it is vital that human disturbance is kept to an absolute minimum.

Therefore it is vital that Boatswainbird Island be designated a Sanctuary. The other, smaller offshore seabird stacks should also be given the status of sanctuary because of the reasons above.

3 Nature Reserves:

The law states:

“The declaration of an area as a nature reserve shall be made primarily for the purpose of maintaining a proper balance in the natural ecology of the area. An area which is designated as a nature reserve may be used for sporting and recreational purposes, subject to such restrictions as may be prescribed and which may be considered desirable to ensure a proper balance in the natural ecology of the area; but no building or other development shall be permitted except in accordance with the conditions of a grant of development permission made by the Governor and such grant shall only be made for a building or other development which is required for one of the aforesaid uses which are permissible in a nature reserve.”

3.1 Turtle Nesting Beaches

1. Long Beach
2. South West Bay
3. North East Bay

3.1.1 Background

Ascension Island supports one of the most important breeding populations of Green Turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) in the world. This populations many biological attributes include its large size, the fact that the island is the type locality for the species, and, perhaps more importantly, the fact that Ascension has been one of the best protected turtle colonies in the world (Mortimer 1980). The creation of National Protected areas is an attempt to formalize this recognised protection that Ascension offers to Green Turtles.

A 4-year long Darwin initiative project run by Swansea University resulted in the production of Management Plan for the Marine Turtles of Ascension Island. This plan recognises the three most important nesting grounds: Long Beach, South West Bay (Pan Am) and North East Bay. In an attempt to protect these nesting grounds – the three afore-named areas are being designated Nature Reserves i.e.

- Long Beach
- South West Bay
- North East Bay

Nb South West Bay falls under the land leased to the USAF and therefore regulations relating to the protection of the beach might not be able to be included in this designation?

3.2 Mainland seabird nesting grounds

4. Mars Bay through Shelley Beach to the Wideawake Fairs.

3.2.1 Background

The sooty terns which seasonally nest at Mars Bay and the Wideawake Fairs are the only seabird species which survived predation on the mainland. This is primarily attributed to their 2-3 month absence from the island during breeding seasons. The numbers of Sooty Terns nesting on Ascension is estimated at around 200,000 pairs, with numbers hopefully due to increase as a result of the feral cat eradication project.

It is important that their nesting ground is preserved and access controlled during nesting season so as disturbance is kept to a minimum and the sooty terns are able to increase in number. They provide magnificent viewing for tourists and the conservation centre weekly tours to the birdground during the nesting season proved very successful.

Also along the coastline at Shelley beach are a few rock pools a short distance inland from the shore. These contain 2 endemic crustaceans, the Caridean shrimps *Procaris ascensionis* and *Typhlatya rogersi* which also need legal protection.

It is therefore proposed that both sooty tern nesting grounds including the area between which contains Shelley Beach, be designated Nature Reserves

3.3 Sites of special geological importance

5. Sisters Peak.
6. Devils Riding School.

3.3.1 Background

Ascension Island is one of a number of volcanic, oceanic islands in the South Atlantic close to, but not part of, the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. It is the tip of a volcano about 60km in diameter which lies on the oceanic crust some 3,200 metres below the surface. The oldest rocks on the island have been dated at around 1.5 million years.

Sisters is the site of the youngest volcanic eruption estimated as being a mere 1000 – 700 years old. The youth of this peak necessitates protection to ensure that natural processes are allowed to take their course, providing a unique living example.

Devils Riding School lays claim to having been host to Ascension's largest freshwater lake. It subsequently contains unique sedimentary deposits that are found nowhere else on the island, and boasts the much sought after 'Devil's eyeballs'- sedimentary deposits that are round-shaped about the size of eyes.

3.4 Marine Nature Reserves

See detailed information under Rules of Marine National Protected Areas section 4.

4 National Parks:

The law states:

“..purpose of conserving features of natural and/or historical interest. An area which is designated as a national park shall be open to members of the public for agricultural, arboricultural, piscicultural or recreational use, including camping, fishing and sailing, and the Governor may make a grant of development permission for the erection in the area of buildings, the construction of roads and such other development as may be considered in keeping with the conservation of any features of natural and/or historical interest therein”

4.1 Green Mountain

There is an ordinance already existing which protects the flora and fauna of Green Mountain. This will be incorporated into this ordinance to systematize the method of designating areas. Green Mountain is home to 5 of the 6 species of endemic plants and therefore needs to receive a certain level of legal protection. It will however be open to members of the public to appreciate

the unique environment it has to offer. A proposal for the development of Green Mountain has already been submitted to Council.

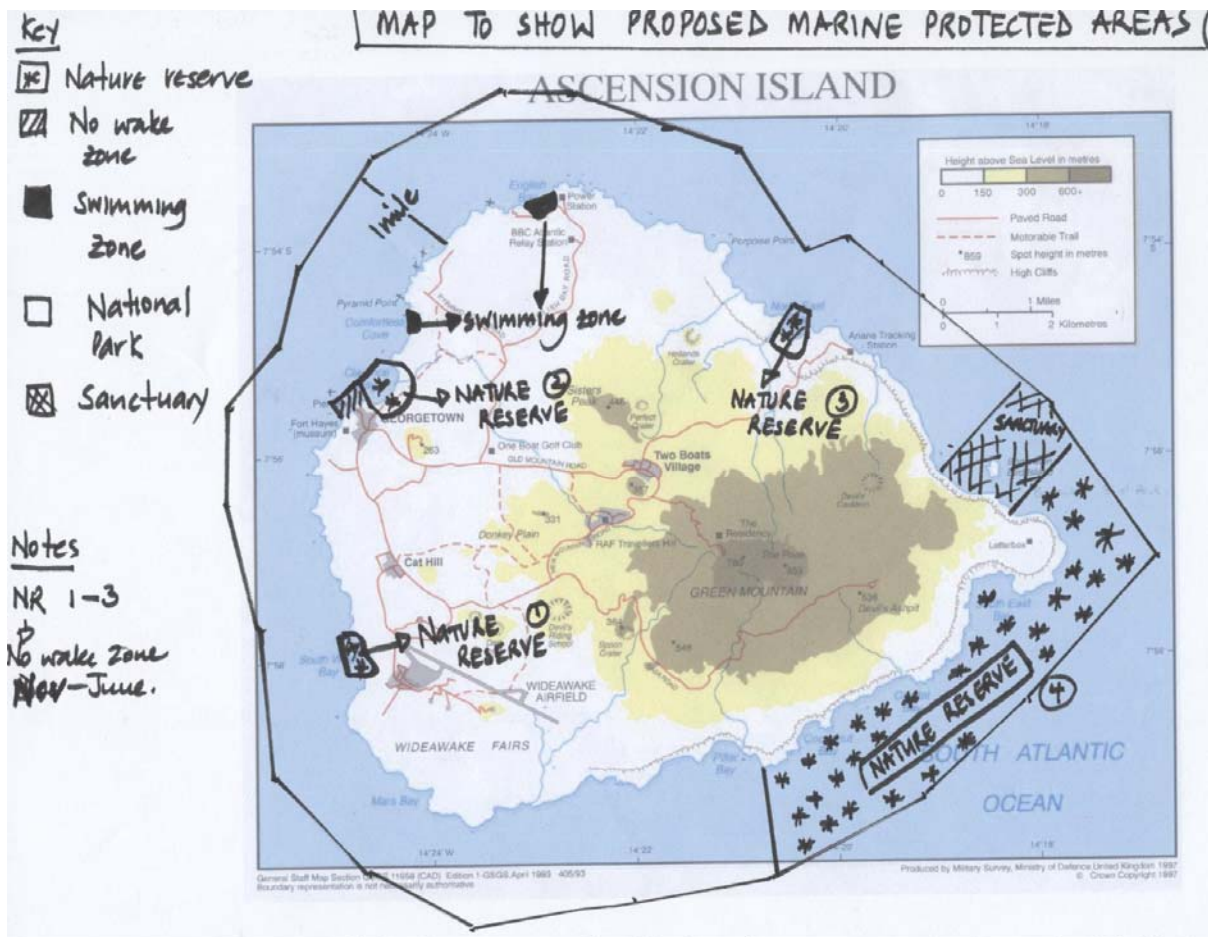
English Bay – to be removed in place of the Marine National Park

Of the 71 species of fish that exist in the inshore waters around Ascension, 8 are endemic. It is proposed that a Marine National Park be set up at English Bay where the unique marine environment can be protected, nurtured and interpreted for those interested in snorkelling and diving in the area.

4.2 Marine National Park

As a result of a series of public consultations held, the area to be included in a Marine National Park has been changed from English Bay (above) and the proposal, as a result of these consultations, designates a 1 mile zone around the whole of Ascension as a Marine National Park with various zones as shown in the following map. The list of rules explains what is permitted and what is prohibited done in each of these zones/protected areas

Rough Map to show Marine National Park with designated Zones.



4.2.1 Rules for Ascension Island Marine National Protected Areas:

Marine Park Zone:

No taking of any marine life alive or dead except:

- Line fishing from shore is permitted
- Line fishing from boats is permitted
- Taking fry and sprat with a fry or hand net is permitted
- Sand removal is prohibited (pending result of sand impact EIA)
- The dumping of non-biodegradable waste is prohibited
- The removal of any artefact (human made object of historical nature), without authorisation, is forbidden.

NOTE: spear guns and other nets are totally prohibited, Hawaiian sling/lance/pole spears are permitted

No Wake Zone:

- Speed of boats not to exceed 6 knots in this area

Swimming Zones

- Swimming is permitted
- SCUBA diving is permitted
- Spear fishing is prohibited.

Sanctuary

- SCUBA diving is permitted if led by a dive leader with a sanctuary license
- Spear fishing is prohibited
- Fishing is prohibited
- Landing on islands is prohibited unless issued with a license
- No taking of any marine life alive or dead.
- Removal of any artefact is prohibited

Nature reserve

- No taking of any marine life alive or dead, except:
- SCUBA is permitted
- Pole Spear fishing is prohibited
- Trolling for pelagic fish is permitted

Wrecks

- The removal of any object from a wreck is only possible with permission from Ascension Island Government

Anchoring zone

- Anchoring of vessels greater than 60ft is only permitted in this zone

Species Limits

NOTE this applies to both spear and boat fishermen

(also, studies on spawning seasons needed)

- Bullseye Bag limit of 20 per person per day
- Deepwater Bullseye Bag limit of 12 per person per day
- Grouper Bag limit of 30 per person per day
- Crayfish Bag limit of 4 per person per day

It is forbidden to catch the following marine species without exception

- Sharks
- Green turtles
- Hawksbill turtles
- Seabirds
- Dolphins
- Whales

Exporting fish

It is forbidden to export the following marine species without exception:

- Green turtles and turtle eggs
- Seabirds and seabird eggs
- Crayfish
- Any of the endemic fish species
- Sharks
- Hawksbill turtles and turtle eggs
- Seabirds
- Dolphins
- Whales
- Billfish

Other species of fish may be exported with a license

4.3 Letterbox National Park (addition)

A further addition to the original designation is being proposed – Letterbox National Park. The reasons for this addition are very important:

Endemic plants – various new sites of Ascension spurge have been discovered in this area – there is one particular area where the plants are obviously very old, and they appear not to have been visited by man before therefore they need to be preserved in this condition

Geology – a group of visiting American geologists recommended the Letterbox area as the site of greatest geological importance because of the diversity of features (some yet undescribed) represented in this area

Seabirds returning to the mainland – As a result of the cat eradication programme, seabirds are starting to return to the mainland. The table below outlines the progress of this over the past 3 months, and it can be seen that the letterbox area is proving to be a popular site for birds returning. We need to keep this protected so that over the years, as seabirds return in larger numbers, they have a protected habitat.

Table showing a summary of the data collected during the months of August – October 2003 (inclusive) focussing solely on the seabirds that successfully nested.

Species	Location	Total Number of nests throughout the 3 months	Success of nests to date
<i>Brown Booby</i>	<i>Comfortless Cove</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1 downy chick</i>
<i>Brown Booby</i>	<i>South East Bay Cliff top (Letterbox)</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>4 near fledged chicks</i>
<i>Brown Booby</i>	<i>Cocoanut Bay</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2 failed</i>
<i>Brown Booby</i>	<i>Wighill (Letterbox area)</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>2 near fledged chicks 1 failed</i>
<i>Brown Booby</i>	<i>North West Point</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>1 fledged chick 4 failed</i>
<i>Brown Noddy</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>0</i>	
<i>Masked Booby</i>	<i>Cocoanut bay</i>	<i>0</i>	
<i>Masked Booby</i>	<i>Letterbox</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1 large chick, 1 downy chick</i>
<i>Masked Booby</i>	<i>Powers Peak (Letterbox)</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1 fledged chick 1 failed</i>
<i>Masked Booby</i>	<i>Wig Hill (Letterbox)</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1 large chick, 1 failed</i>
<i>Yellow-billed Tropic bird</i>	<i>North West Point</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>3 chicks</i>
<i>Red-billed Tropic bird</i>	<i>Cocoanut Bay</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1 egg</i>

It can be seen from the table above that 4 species of seabird: Brown Booby, Masked Booby, Yellow-billed Tropicbird and Red-billed tropic bird have nested on the mainland between August 2003 and October 2003 inclusive. 8 Brown Booby chicks have been raised, one of which has fledged; 4 Masked Booby chicks have been raised, one of which has fledged; 3 Yellow-billed Tropic bird chicks are being raised, and there was the first ever Red-billed tropic bird nest recorded in Mid October.



Brown Booby and chick at Comfortless



Masked Booby and chick at letterbox.

The photograph of the Masked booby adult and chick at mainland letterbox illustrates just how far inland occasional seabirds are nesting.

5 Conclusions

Ascension has such a vast amount to offer the world in terms of its natural resources, it is important that we protect what is here now, so that there are no further devastations in the future. Protecting these areas, as well as fulfilling Ascension Island Government's commitments under the environment charter, will serve to ensure that we keep our island in pristine condition both for ourselves, and for the potential visitors that an island of this nature will attract.

Appendix 1 Summary Table

Proposed areas for protection under National Protected Areas (Ascension) Ordinance 2002

Area type	Name	Reason	Prohibitions	Notes
Sanctuary	Boatswainbird Island	Breeding seabirds, endemic invertebrates, marine life	a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j	
	Seabird stacks	Breeding seabirds	a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j	See REF for locations
Nature reserve	Wideawake Fairs	Breeding seabirds, endemic flora, endemic shrimp pools	a, b, c, d, f, g, h, i, j, k, l. Other:	
	Long Beach	Turtle nesting beach	a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m. Other:	To 100 m behind beach to 30 m isobath
	Pan Am Beach	Turtle nesting beach	a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m. Other:	To 100 m behind beach to 30 m isobath
	North-east Bay Beach	Turtle nesting beach	a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m. Other:	To 100 m behind beach to 30 m isobath
	Sisters Peak	Geological interest, endemic flora	a, b, c, d, f, g, h, i, j, k, l. Other:	
	Devil's Riding School	Geological interest	a, b, c, d, f, g, h, i, j, k, l. Other:	
National Park	Green Mountain	Historical interest, amenity value, endemic flora	a, b, c, d, f, g, h, i, j, k, l. Other:	
	English Bay (?)	Marine life, amenity value	?	Removed (October 2003)
	Marine National Park	Marine Biodiversity, Historical wrecks,	See detailed proposal	See detailed proposal
	Letterbox National Park	Geological Diversity Seabirds returning to the mainland Ascension spurge		

Appendix 2 National Protected Areas outlines

National Parks

Marine National Park (marine life)

1 mile from the coast of Ascension Island around the whole of the island with zones as drawn up on the map

Green Mountain National Park (endemic plants)

(As in the Green Mountain (Natural Resources) Protection ordinance)

The area bounded on the north by a straight line from Two Boats to the summit of Weather Post; on the east by a straight line from Weather Post to the summit of Castle Hill; on the south by a straight line from Castle Hill to South East Crater thence by a straight line to the summit of Mountain Red Hill; on the west by a straight line from Mountain Red Hill to Two Boats.

Letterbox National Park (geology, endemic plants, seabird nesting grounds)

Starting at the Ariane site, in a straight line to the Devil's Cauldron spot height; East in a straight line to the Weatherpost spot height; south along the green Mountain National Park boundary until South East Crater; in a straight line from SE Crater to Ragged Hill; directly South from Ragged Hill to the Coast at Pillar Bay.

Nature Reserves:

Sisters Nature Reserve (geology)

From the NE Bay road 702233 in a straight line until the summit of perfect crater, Northwest along the Broken tooth firing range boundary; in a straight line from the boundary west to the 503 spot height; South west to the corner of the US lease area boundary Grid Ref 680241 in a straight line South East 687232, directly East of this until the start.

Long Beach Nature Reserve (turtles)

From the Turtle ponds in a straight line South East to the first 100ft contour at the bottom of Cross Hill; follow the 100ft contour until it reaches Benin City. From Benin city in a straight line North West until it reaches the coast; 30m offshore from either end of the terrestrial section of the reserve.

Devil's Riding School Nature Reserve (geology)

From the main road at 677205; follow the main road to Devil's Ashpit until 690203; in a straight line directly south until it reaches the 500ft contour, follow the 500ft contour until 679200; in a straight line from 679200 to the start.

North East Bay Nature Reserve (Turtles)

From grid ref 722255 on the coast, in a straight South Westerly line to the 100ft contour; follow the 100ft contour until it reaches spot height 138ft; in a straight line North East from spot height 138ft to the coast; 30m offshore from either end of the terrestrial section of the reserve

Wideawake Fairs (birds)

Follows the boundary of the American leased land in the area named Wideawake Fairs on the map.

Sanctuaries**Boatswainbird Island Sanctuary**

The whole of Boatswain bird island; an area $\frac{1}{4}$ mile West and East of Boatswainbird extending to the shoreline and to the outer boundary of the Marine National Park.

Stacks 1-14

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