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# Science and policy in our Overseas Territories

Recommendations for the natural environment

# 94%

of unique British species are found in our Overseas Territories.



Trevor Glass

**Penguin nation. The UK has more penguins under its jurisdiction than any other country on earth.**

## The scientific need

The 14 UK Overseas Territories, scattered across the globe, hold some of the world's most iconic environments, from vast coral reefs to windswept albatross islands.

The UK Government has committed to “cherishing the environments” of the Overseas Territories (OTs). However, it has limited information on what species or habitats are present, what protections have been established, or which species may be at most imminent risk of extinction.

This has meant that British species may be on the cusp of disappearing forever, yet have no conservation work underway to save them. Indeed, the last known global extinction in the OTs occurred as recently as 2003, mostly due to a lack of conservation attention. To date, only 9% of the 1,500+ unique British species occurring in the OTs have ever had their conservation status assessed, and no assessment of habitats has ever been completed. Given limited resources, it is crucial that OT biodiversity knowledge is strengthened so that financial and

policy support can be targeted to where it is most urgently needed.

In January 2014, the UK Environmental Audit Committee urged “enhanced monitoring” and called for Defra to co-ordinate “a comprehensive research programme” with all stakeholders. With funding from the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, the RSPB has started this work by completing the first ever stock-take of species across our island OTs.

This brought together all known records from the last 300 years to finally reveal what species are known to be present. The results confirm that the OTs are the UK's natural crown jewels, yet much of their unique wildlife is little known and many species remain to be discovered.

The UK is privileged to have responsibility for tropical rainforests,

vast ice caps, and one of the largest maritime zones in the world. With improved knowledge and scientific focus, the conservation needs of these globally important environments can be identified and addressed for relatively little cost.



Ed Thorpe

**The unique spiky yellow woodlouse lives only in the cloud forests of St Helena. About 90 remain.**

# State of Territory wildlife

Overseas Territory	Number of known unique species	Unique species with Red List conservation status assessed	Unique species assessed as Globally Threatened
Anguilla	5	2	2
Ascension	48	10	8
Bermuda	321	32	30
British Indian Ocean Territory	9	1	1
British Virgin Islands	14	4	4
Cayman Islands	106	5	3
Falkland Islands	82	16	7
Montserrat	85	5	5
Pitcairn Islands	99	14	14
St Helena	502	26	21
South Georgia and the SSI	77	1	0
Tristan da Cunha	183	25	12
Turks and Caicos Islands	16	4	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,547</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>111</b>

## Most of the rarest known British species occur in our Overseas Territories

Group	Rarest species	Location	Number
Plant	Arlihau	Pitcairn	c. 6
Bird	Wilkins' bunting	Tristan da Cunha	c. 80 pairs
Reptile	Anegada rock iguana	British Virgin Islands	<200
Terrestrial invertebrate	Spiky yellow woodlouse	St Helena	c. 90
Marine invertebrate	Predatory shrimp	Ascension	Restricted to 2 rockpools

# 9%

of the 1,547 unique species in our Territories have had their conservation status assessed.

# 85%

of the Critically Endangered species for which the UK is responsible are found in the Territories.

# 2,100

unique British species are thought to still await discovery in our Territories.



**Gone forever. Lost in 2003, the St Helena olive tree is the most recent documented British species to have gone globally extinct.**

## Conservation priorities

### 1. Two UK World Heritage Sites in danger

The World Heritage Sites of Gough Island in the South Atlantic, and Henderson Island in the South Pacific, are internationally celebrated for their near-pristine ecosystems and eight unique bird species. Both are, however, being ravaged by introduced rodents, with more than 500,000 chicks being killed every year. Several bird species will be lost forever unless the rodents can be removed.

### 2. Unprotected Caribbean habitats

The Caribbean Territories hold the region's largest mangrove forests, swathes of rainforest, seagrass meadows and wetlands of international importance. Home to a wealth of species, including 39 unique and highly threatened reptiles, many of these rich habitats remain almost entirely unprotected and vulnerable to destruction.

### 3. St Helena invertebrates on the brink

The small island of St Helena holds over 400 unique invertebrate species. Whilst iconic species, such as the giant earwig, are

already feared to be extinct, others are on the brink, in some cases clinging to survival on just a couple of old trees.

### 4. Disappearing plants

The beautiful St Helena olive tree was lost forever in November 2003. More unique plant species face global extinction: only a handful of red berry trees and "arlihau" (a yellow-flowering woody shrub) remain on Pitcairn. Neither of these species has yet been secured in the Millennium Seed Bank.

### 5. Protecting the world's oceans

Ascension Island holds the second-largest breeding site for endangered green turtles in the Atlantic. It also has unique fish and seabird species, migrating West African tuna stocks and record-breaking marlins. Without a permanent human population, or commercial fishery, Ascension offers one of the only opportunities to create a large, highly-protected marine reserve in the tropical Atlantic.



**Success. Targeted conservation has increased the population of the unique Cayman blue iguana from just 12 in 2002 to over 750 today.**

# Science and policy recommendations

91% of unique OT species have never had their conservation status assessed under the IUCN Red List (the global benchmark for identifying conservation priorities).

Whole groups of species remain almost entirely undiscovered. Whilst some excellent conservation work is underway on the ground, often supported by the UK Government's Darwin Plus fund, the UK Government still has no strategic overview of where the most urgent priorities lie, or even a simple understanding of actions undertaken, such as the number of nature reserves established across

Defra must assess whether the most internationally important **OT habitats are safeguarded** in nature reserves.

our Overseas Territories. Defra has no dedicated evidence plan for the OTs, whilst the UK Government's scientific advisory body on nature conservation, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), does not yet have a strategy in place to methodically address OT biodiversity knowledge gaps. The following actions would help us secure and treasure the OT's remarkable wildlife:

## Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs:

- OT biodiversity knowledge gaps need to be addressed via the creation of a dedicated Defra scientific evidence plan and co-ordination of scientific stakeholders by winter 2014.
- IUCN Red List conservation status assessments should be

initiated for every unique OT species by spring 2015.

- The extent to which the most internationally significant OT wildlife habitats are safeguarded as protected areas should be evaluated by spring 2015.
- Funding should be made available to the JNCC to update the OTs nature stocktake every five years and present the results to the UK Parliament and OT Governments.

## Overseas Territories Governments:

- Those OTs with incomplete protections for their internationally important wildlife habitats should urgently progress work to safeguard these most precious sites.



Paul Tyler and Alison Rothwell

Over one-third of the world's albatrosses breed in the Overseas Territories, including Endangered Atlantic yellow-nosed albatrosses (pictured).

A courting pair of adult king penguins displaying in the Falkland Islands.



David Osborn (rspb-images.com)

The UK has more penguins under its jurisdiction than any other nation in the world.

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Front cover: Endangered green turtle. Ascension Island holds the second largest green turtle nesting site in the Atlantic (FLPA-images.co.uk)

The RSPB is a member of BirdLife International, a partnership of nature conservation organisations working to give nature a home around the world.

[rspb.org.uk/OTwildlife](http://rspb.org.uk/OTwildlife)

