

Blue Belt extends to the Caribbean, as Turks and Caicos Islands join flagship marine conservation programme

Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI) have become the latest Overseas Territory to join the UK Government's flagship marine conservation programme, Blue Belt, and the first located in the Caribbean.

The announcement was made today by Lord Goldsmith, Minister for Pacific and the Environment at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) in an address at a UN World Ocean Day event celebrating the work of the UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs) within the Blue Belt Programme.

Lord Goldsmith commented:

The commitment shown by the Overseas Territories to marine conservation makes a crucial contribution to our target to protect 30% of the world's oceans by 2030. Well over 4 million square kilometres of ocean are now covered by the Blue Belt – a remarkable achievement. It is wonderful to meet with the Territories on World Ocean Day, as we celebrate our successes of the Blue Belt Programme and look ahead to the next three years.

The Blue Belt Programme is open to all Territories seeking to enhance marine protection. I congratulate the Turks and Caicos Islands, as they join the Blue Belt as our first Caribbean territory. Over the next three years, the Turks and Caicos Islands and the Blue Belt Programme will enhance protection for the incredible biodiversity found in the Islands. We will combat Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing, and seek to mitigate the effects of marine pollution and climate change. We will also support sustainable livelihoods for the islanders.

In addition, I am delighted that Bermuda has become the first Territory to join the Blue Shield Programme and look forward to working together to enhance marine protection for their marine environment.

TCI is known for its incredible biodiversity. It is home to the third largest barrier reef on earth, and one of the finest in the Caribbean, hosting a plethora of soft and hard corals, and a wide range of marine species – from reef sharks to parrot fish. These reefs are of huge importance both ecologically and economically for TCI.

Blue Belt Programme support will include work to protect these reefs, as well as the wider marine environment of TCI, which faces the impacts of both global and local threats – from climate change to illegal fishing. Support

from Blue Belt includes:

- Work to monitor and conduct research into tackling coral diseases, such as Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease, that is impacting reefs across the Caribbean.
- The creation of a new Marine Protected Area (MPA) covering over half of TCIs Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This new MPA will act as a sanctuary for key species such as sharks and rays, protecting them from human activities.
- Work to prevent illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing. IUU fishing has been a challenge for the TCI Government over recent years, and Blue Belt will work to strengthen enforcement regimes through enhanced data analysis, informing more strategic patrols, and funding more capacity on-island.
- Monitor, manage and minimise the impact of human activities such as tourism and marine pollution (e.g. plastics) across TCI.

The Hon. Josephine Conolly, Minister for the Environment, Turks & Caicos Islands Government commented:

I look forward to the great benefits and successes that we will achieve through the initiatives being implemented in collaboration with the UK Government Blue Belt Programme.

The programme will directly benefit the TCI; ensuring that marine protection brings lasting benefits to the marine environment and local communities for future generations. From this partnership, we will be purchasing a brand-new catamaran vessel that will be used in demarcating park boundaries and swim zones. The vessel will also be used for conducting industry-leading research in our waters, to help improve our knowledge and management of this precious resource.

TCI joins Ascension Island, the British Antarctic Territory, British Indian Ocean Territory, South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands, the Pitcairn Islands, St Helena and Tristan da Cunha – within the Blue Belt Programme. These UKOTs are home to around 90% of the UK's biodiversity, hosting a huge range of unique and endangered species. Combined, their MPAs span over 1% of the global ocean, making a major impact in safeguarding precious marine environments and resources, as well as helping to combat global ocean threats.

Today's Small Island – Big Impact World Ocean Day event, provided a fantastic

opportunity for UKOT representatives to discuss their achievements and future ambitions in managing and protecting such environmentally diverse marine environments and habitats – as well the importance of inspiring their islands younger generations in the protection of their precious biodiversity.

The event also coincides with the publication of the Blue Belt Programme Annual Update 2021/22, which details the incredible commitment and work delivered by the UKOTs over the last 12 months.

Stephanie Martin, Blue Belt Programme UK Overseas Territory Representative said:

From the Tropics to the Atlantic and down to the Southern Ocean, UK Overseas Territories' marine areas feature incredible biodiversity. As part of the UK Blue Belt Programme, the local communities and other stakeholders are working to help understand and manage these special habitats for long-term conservation. Taking care of these marine ecosystems is vital for future generations.

UKOT representatives at the event were joined by a range of policy makers, Non-Governmental Organisations and Not-for-profits. These included OceanMind and Blue Abacus, who partner the Blue Belt Programme in the delivery of its two sub-programmes, [Blue Shield](#), and the [Global Ocean Wildlife Analysis Network](#).

Presentations will be given by a range of Ministers and UKOT representatives. During the intervals, guests had the opportunity to see some of the unique shelf water specimens collected off Tristan da Cunha, St. Helena and SGSSI, during the RRS Discovery 99 and 100 expedition.