

UK's most exotic natural treasures under threat from 'legal neglect'

Title

A first-ever analysis of the environmental laws across all 14 of the UK's Overseas Territories has been published and presented to the British Government. The report, commissioned by the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK), reveals serious flaws in the legislation that should protect some of the most important places for UK wildlife.

The assessment comes just nine months after the UK Government published its Overseas Territories White Paper last June. In it, the Prime Minister pledged to 'cherish the environments' and 'help ensure their good government'.

The UK's Overseas Territories hold some of the world's most remarkable environments, from pristine tropical forests like on Grand Cayman, to windswept South Atlantic islands, home to penguins and elephant seals, as well as over 90% of the threatened wildlife for which the UK is responsible.

In the new assessment, entitled 'Environmental Governance in the UK's Overseas Territories, a number of major gaps in environmental protection are exposed:

- Five of the Territories have no Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) requirements for major developments e.g. Cayman Islands, where a major highway is proposed to cut through key old-growth forests home to the endangered blue iguana; and on Scrub Island in Anguilla a \$1 billion development proposal has been given the go ahead which will involve cutting this important wildlife island in half and creating an inland marina;
- Nine Territories lack strong networks of protected areas or completed implementing legislation, meaning sites such as the Centre Hills forest in Montserrat, home to the critically endangered Mountain Chicken (a giant frog) remain unprotected;
- Four Territories have no marine protected areas e.g. Falkland Islands (Las Malvinas), where the development of the offshore oil industry risks pre-empting the establishment of a coherent network of marine protected areas;
- In the three uninhabited Territories, where the UK Government has made a commitment to 'exemplary environmental management', there is a significant lack of transparency and accountability.

Image not found

Montserrat Oriole is found only on the UK Overseas Territory of Montserrat (Chris Bowden; rspb-images)

However, there are at least five draft bills (e.g. the Cayman National Conservation Bill 2007, the Anguilla Physical Planning Bill 2001) currently in Overseas Territories' legislatures that would fill many of the gaps in their environmental legislation, but all have been stalled due to a lack of political will.

Tim Stowe, the RSPB's Director of International Operations said, "Whilst some of the UK's Overseas Territories such as Gibraltar have excellent environmental legislation, the gaps uncovered in this analysis are worrying and have the potential to allow damage to the environments and wildlife we are responsible for protecting.

"We hope this review will encourage the UK Government to fulfil its ambitions "to set world standards" in the Overseas Territories and begin a programme of work to strengthen the most pressing gaps in their environmental laws. Major improvements are within reach and much can be achieved without significant additional resources."

The report offers seven recommendations to help the Prime Minister realise his ambitions on Overseas Territories. Although the report has found a number of gaps in environmental governance, it has also discovered that some of the UK's Territories are beacons of best practice in terms of environmental legislation. Gibraltar's environmental legislation was rated as "strong" across the board, whilst the site protection mechanisms of the British Virgin Islands, and development control procedures in St Helena, were also very good.

Tackling the interlinked the interlinked threats of habitat degradation, invasive species and climate change on Europe's Overseas Territories has been identified as one of the key actions need to prevent future bird extinctions. [Find out more about the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme.](#)
