



# Protections for Ascension Island, the Crossroads of the Atlantic

Safeguards needed for critical nesting ground of green sea turtles and seabirds

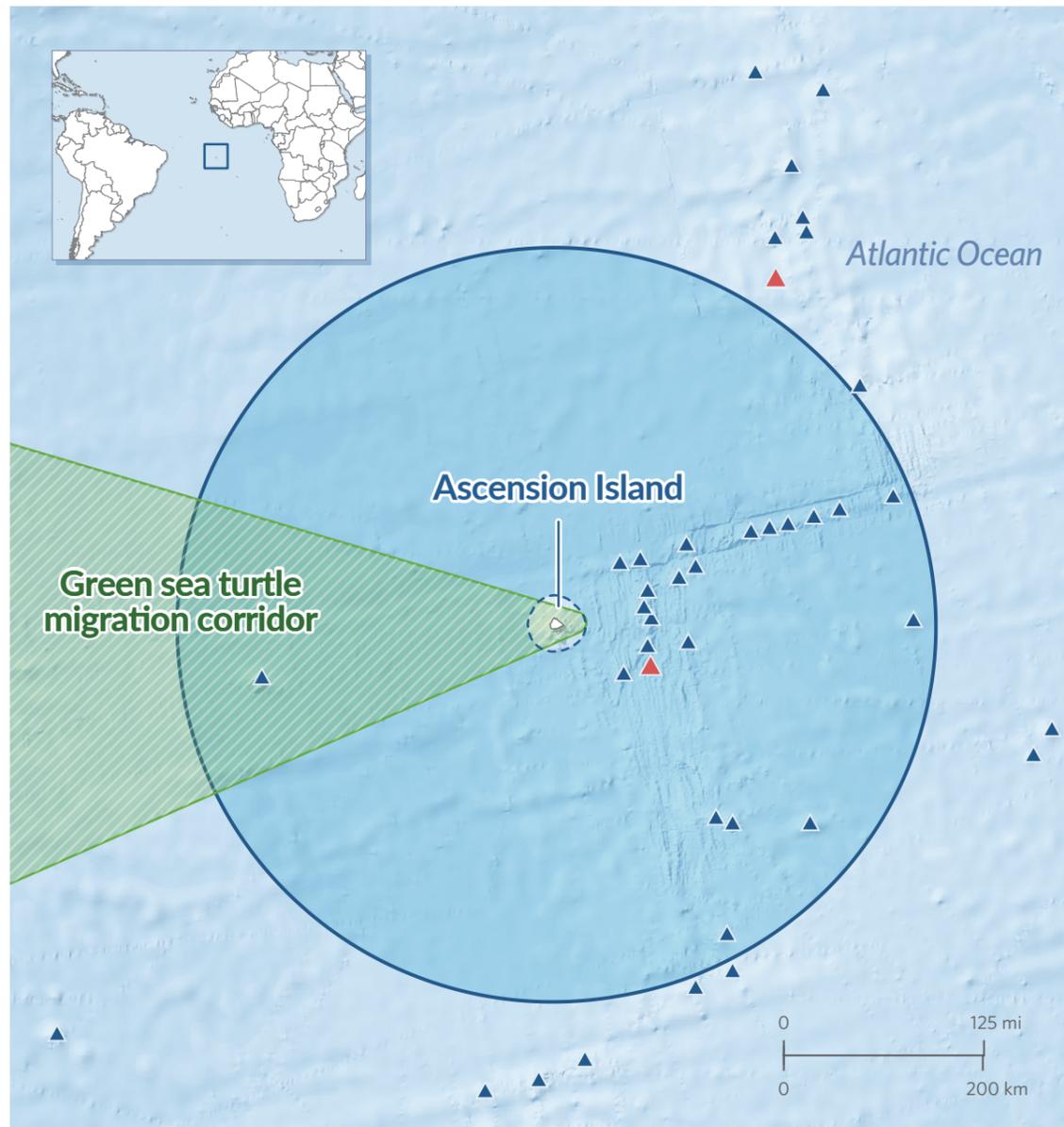
## Overview

Ascension Island lies in an isolated expanse of the South Atlantic Ocean midway between Angola and Brazil. Part of the United Kingdom Overseas Territory of St. Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha, the volcanic island measures just 88 square kilometres (34 square miles). The surrounding waters are rich with biodiversity and serve as a critical stopping place for migratory species, such as green sea turtles.

This critically important ecosystem warrants protection. Highly mobile species stop in these waters seeking food and shelter from the open seas as they travel across the ocean. The area supports healthy populations of marine mammals and fish, including 11 fish species found nowhere else. The island is home to the second-largest nesting population of green sea turtles in the Atlantic, along with 11 types of seabirds that nest on the island and feed in its rich waters.

The Ascension Island Council (AIC) and the U.K. Government both support steps to safeguard biodiversity in these waters through establishment of a large marine protected area (MPA). Encompassing the island's entire exclusive economic zone (EEZ), the MPA would be twice the size of the United Kingdom's land mass. Industrial fishing and mineral extraction would be prohibited within its boundaries.

## Ascension Island Marine Protected Area



- Proposed MPA boundary (447,887 square kilometres)
- ▲ Seamount
- ⊞ 12-nautical-mile buffer
- ▲ Thermal vent

Commercial fishing banned throughout the marine protected area. Sports and recreational fishing permitted near Ascension Island.

Sources: G.C. Hays et al., "Biphasal Long-Distance Migration in Green Turtles," *Animal Behaviour* 64, no. 6 (2002): 895-898, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0003347202919755>; TopoBathy Hillshade base layer by Esri; bathymetry from Natural Earth

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## U.K. leadership

Recognising the declining health of the world's ocean ecosystems, the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 2016 recommended that 30 percent of all marine habitats be protected in order to sustain and continue the growth of marine biodiversity. Later that year, the U.K. Government publicly committed to protect 4 million square kilometres (1.5 million square miles) of its waters through what is known as its Blue Belt policy. This ambitious framework included a goal of protecting at least 50 percent of the area around Ascension Island.

In March 2019, the U.K. Government agreed to support the Ascension Island Council's proposal to designate a 443,000-square-kilometre (171,000-square-mile) MPA that would cover the island's entire EEZ.

Commercial fishing and mineral extraction would be banned throughout the MPA, but recreational and sport fishing still would be allowed up to 12 nautical miles (22 kilometres) from shore. If designated, the Ascension Island MPA would cover more than twice the area that the U.K. Government committed to protect in 2016. Such an action would represent significant progress in the national Government's effort to implement comprehensive protections for the marine environment of its Overseas Territories.

## The case for protecting Ascension Island

### Internationally significant wildlife

Because of its isolation, Ascension has largely avoided intensive commercial fishing. As a result, these waters are among the most intact in the Atlantic, providing a home to some of the world's largest tuna, marlin, and sailfish.

Green sea turtles return from their feeding grounds in Brazil and the Caribbean once they reach maturity—which can take decades—to nest on the beaches of their birth. The turtles were regularly harvested on Ascension until the practice was banned in the 1930s. Their numbers began to recover in the 1970s, and—although still listed as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List—the species is rebounding. Critically endangered hawksbill turtles also have been observed in local waters, although they aren't known to nest on the island.<sup>1</sup>

A variety of marine mammals frequent Ascension's waters, including bottlenose dolphins, humpback whales, sperm whales, and Gervais' beaked whales. Humpbacks return to these seas from the Southern Ocean during the late winter and early spring to mate and give birth.<sup>2</sup>



Sperm whales and other migratory species can be found in the waters surrounding Ascension Island.

The fish that live in these waters include larger migratory species, such as various sharks, and smaller reef-dwelling species, such as the Ascension goby. There are 11 endemic species of fish, including the resplendent angelfish. Other common species include the rock hind grouper, yellowfin tuna, spotted moray eel, and Atlantic blue marlin.<sup>3</sup> In addition, shoreline shark sightings have increased in recent years.

Experts believe Ascension provided a home for millions of seabirds before humans arrived in 1815. In the following years, those populations were almost entirely wiped out by predators introduced by early settlers. After feral cats were eradicated in 2009, bird populations began to rise. The island is now home to more than 500,000 seabirds of 11 species and is considered a haven for the brown noddy, sooty tern, and the endemic Ascension Island frigate bird.<sup>4</sup> Boatswain Bird Island, a few hundred metres from Ascension's northeast coast, is an important nesting site and home to 10 percent of the Atlantic population of masked booby and 17 percent of the Atlantic's red-billed tropic birds. Other species that dwell on Ascension's cliffs include the black noddy, white tern, yellow-billed tropic bird, brown booby, red-footed booby, and the Madeiran storm petrel.<sup>5</sup> Fishing pressure remains limited in the region around Ascension, but the island's rich biodiversity remains at risk without protections in place.



Ten percent of the masked booby population lives on Ascension Island.

## Climate change resilience

Highly protected MPAs mitigate the effects of climate change by building resilience into the ecosystem, helping to buffer against future uncertainty in management and environmental fluctuations.<sup>6</sup> Over time, the ability of Ascension's marine environment to cope with the impact of climate change could increase under strong protection, helping to safeguard the species that live there, area biodiversity, and the people who depend on a healthy marine environment.

## Great British Oceans

Since 2015, Great British Oceans (GBO), a coalition of environmental non-governmental organisations that includes the Blue Marine Foundation, Greenpeace-U.K., Marine Conservation Society, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Zoological Society of London, and The Pew Trusts, has advocated for an ambitious implementation of the U.K. Government's Blue Belt policy. With support from the Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy Project, GBO has called for the protection of Ascension's waters and has partnered with the Ascension Island Council over several years to study the best path forward.

### The Evolution of the Ascension Island MPA

- **March 2015: The Blue Belt commitment**

The Conservative Party published a manifesto that included a pledge to create "a Blue Belt around the U.K.'s 14 Overseas Territories, subject to local support and environmental need. We will designate a further protected area at Ascension Island, subject to the views of the local community."

- **January 2016: Commitment to protect at least 50 percent of EEZ**

The U.K. Blue Belt Programme committed to establish an MPA by 2019 that would prohibit commercial fishing in at least 50 percent of Ascension's EEZ.

- **September 2016: Commitment to protect 4 million square kilometres**

The U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) announced plans to protect 4 million square kilometres (1.5 million square miles) of ocean around the Overseas Territories. The Government pledged to allocate £20 million between 2016 and 2020 to support implementation, management, surveillance, and enforcement of these MPAs.

- **November 2017: Blue Belt Charter launched**

Great British Oceans launched the **Blue Belt Charter**, calling on the U.K. Government to deliver on its commitment to establish a fully protected MPA in at least 50 percent of Ascension's waters by 2019. Some 285 Members of Parliament from eight political parties announced their support.

- **November 2018: Evidence and options document published**

The Ascension Island Government published an MPA evidence and options document that highlighted the importance of the local marine ecosystem and laid out three options. The Pew Trusts and other GBO members advocated for designation of the most ambitious option.

- **December 2018: Blue Belt Charter 2.0**

Following the success of the charter, GBO launched the Blue Belt Charter 2.0. More than 50 prominent international and domestic marine and environmental non-governmental organisations, world-leading universities and eminent scientists agreed to a statement of support.

- **August 2019: Designation of the Ascension Island MPA**

The AIC voted in favour of designating an MPA surrounding Ascension.



A school of horse-eye jacks in the waters around Ascension Island. A wide range of fish, including larger species such as sharks, live in these waters.

## Ocean monitoring for a designated MPA

Effective monitoring and enforcement is critical to an MPA's success. Remote monitoring can help solve the challenges posed by large-scale MPAs or those established in distant and isolated waters. That task can be handled in large part by capabilities such as Oversea Ocean Monitor, which was developed by Pew and Satellite Applications Catapult. Initially called "Project Eyes on the Seas," the technology combines satellite data, fishing authorizations, and artificial intelligence to detect illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing for further assessment and investigation.

This platform has already been used extensively to monitor vessel activity in Ascension's waters and has helped enforce the Blue Belt policy. The analyses by Oversea Ocean Monitor have assisted in setting baselines to inform future management decisions. The technology helps ensure IUU fishing does not undermine marine conservation measures that ban commercial fishing.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

The Ascension Island MPA would help safeguard a critical and irreplaceable ocean ecosystem, and strengthen the U.K. and its Overseas Territories' position as global leaders in marine conservation. Establishment of this protected area would also mean that the U.K. has protected over 30 percent of its waters with fully protected MPAs.

## Endnotes

- 1 Ascension Island Government, "Marine Turtles," accessed March 2019, <https://www.ascension-island.gov.ac/government/conservation/our-species/marine-turtles/>.
- 2 C. MacLeod and T. George, "Whales & Dolphins of Ascension Island," Ascension Island Government, <http://www.ascension-island.gov.ac/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/whales-and-dolphins-leaflet.pdf>.
- 3 Ascension Island Conservation Department/Tourist Office, "Marine Life of Ascension Island," <http://www.ascension-island.gov.ac/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/AI-Marinelife-DL-proof.pdf>.
- 4 Overseas Territories Conservation UK, "Key Species," accessed April 2019, <https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/ascension#AscensionIslandKeySpecies>.
- 5 Ascension Island Government, "Seabirds of Ascension Island," <http://www.ascension-island.gov.ac/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/29-O-Ascension-seabird-leaflet.pdf>.
- 6 C.M. Roberts et al., "Marine Reserves Can Mitigate and Promote Adaptation to Climate Change," *PNAS*, (2017): 1-9, <https://www.pnas.org/content/early/2017/05/31/1701262114>.
- 7 G. Rowlands et al., "Satellite Surveillance of Fishing Vessel Activity in the Ascension Island Exclusive Economic Zone and Marine Protected Area," *Marine Policy* 101 (2019): 39-50, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308597X18303002>.

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**For further information, please visit:**  
[pewtrusts.org/ocean-legacy](https://pewtrusts.org/ocean-legacy)

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**The Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy Project** | The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Bertarelli Foundation joined forces in 2017 to create the Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy Project, with the shared goal of establishing the first generation of ecologically significant and effective marine protected areas around the world. This effort builds on a decade of work by both organizations to protect the ocean. Between them, they have helped to obtain designations to safeguard over 8 million square kilometers (3 million square miles) of ocean by working with philanthropic partners, indigenous groups, community leaders, government officials, and scientists. Since 2010, the Bertarelli Foundation has sought to protect the ocean for future generations through marine conservation and collaborative marine science research.