

FOR DAVID



Smithsonian
National Zoological Park

Letter from the Desk of David Challinor
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The rocky shore of Connecticut, where I grew up, is studded with hundreds of small islands. Many are just clumps of rocks with little or no terrestrial vegetation; others are up to a dozen acres, with thick hardwood stands entangled in poison ivy and thorny smilax vines. Several small unoccupied islands are only a one-minute row from the family's pier, and as a boy I regularly rowed out to "explore" them. They seemed much larger to me then than they do today as I look at them with adult eyes.* Their proximity, combined with a fertile imagination, has nourished a life-long fascination with islands, large and small, occupied or devoid of humans. This month's letter is about my Smithsonian involvement with some of the remote, exotic islands of our globe.

In the late 1960's, I was director of the Institution's Office of International Activities. An inspired creation of Secretary Ripley, this small office of six or seven was responsible for maintaining our relations with all the countries where Smithsonian scientists either did research or aspired to do so. We had other duties, such as securing visas for our people as well as for foreign scientists who wanted to work with us in the U.S., but much of our energy was devoted to being the Smithsonian's mini "State Department." One of our initial tasks was to help thwart the plans of the British Ministry of Defence (MOD) to build a large airstrip on Aldabra, a remote island in the Indian Ocean. Construction was to be funded by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD). The incentive for this proposal was the unpredictable policies of some newly independent former African colonies allowing foreign military aircraft to fly in their airspace. The U.S. and U.K. military were, therefore, looking for a remote island (in their terms—an "unsinkable aircraft carrier") where their planes could refuel on the way to the Far East. At this time, the Seychelles—a group of islands that stretches from just northeast of Madagascar for 2500 miles eastward (equivalent of New York City to San Francisco)—were preparing for independence. The British government detached four of these islands that would normally have been included in the new republic (the British Foreign Office evidently assumed that all were virtually uninhabited) and these islands: Aldabra, Farquhar, Desroches and the Chagos Archipelago, remained colonies with a new name—British Indian Ocean Territories (BIOT).

Aldabra is the largest elevated coral atoll in the world—about the size of Manhattan—but with a big central lagoon occupying three-quarters of the atoll. At the time, the only inhabitants were about two score contract laborers and their families who processed copra from the coconut palms on the atoll's westernmost island. Although legend has it that the famous WW I German commerce raider—the cruiser Königsberg—had successfully hidden from the British Navy in Aldabra's lagoon, the story is unlikely because when Jacques Cousteau tried to anchor *Calypso* in the lagoon's entrance channel,

* Several of these very islands are in seascapes painted by well-known luminist John F. Kensett (1816-72).

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the anchors would not hold against the strong tides that had scoured the bottom to smooth hard coral. The lagoon itself is too shallow at low tide for a cruiser to anchor. I have watched the tide come surging through the channel and even a cruiser would need almost full steam to withstand it.

Professor David Stoddard, then with Cambridge's Department of Geography, learned of the military's plans and arranged through the British Royal Society to visit Aldabra in August 1966 with a colleague, Dr. C.A. Wright from the British Museum of Natural History. It was his report pleading "for preserving Aldabra from any development whatsoever..." that triggered a joint effort by the Royal Society, the (U.S.) National Academy of Sciences and the Smithsonian to fulfill this recommendation.

This was my introduction to Aldabra, and as the Smithsonian's representative on the international effort to thwart the military development, I participated in publicizing this heretofore secret plan and explaining to the MOD and DOD that 1) it would take a decade at least to eradicate the nesting colonies of sea birds (which are lethal to jet planes when ingested by an engine), and 2) the site for the proposed airstrip was honeycombed with large voids just below the limestone surface—all would have to be filled with concrete to support a large jet plane.

The island was not developed. In all honesty, this was primarily because a rapid devaluation of the pound (even though the DOD was to pay two-thirds of the development cost) made the project economically prohibitive. I visited Aldabra in December 1990 as the Smithsonian's representative on the Board of the Seychelles Islands Foundations (SIF), which held its annual meeting there that year. The Foundation is now the primary vehicle for Seychelles conservation; our office at the Institution helped the local government establish the requisite charter, by-laws and other legal documents, based on our experience in helping initiate similar organizations such as the Charles Darwin Foundation (Galapagos) and the King Mehendra Trust (Nepal).

Before leaving the Indian Ocean, I should report that the one survivor of the BIOT (Aldabra, Farquhar and Desroches were returned to the Seychelles Republic) is the Chagos Archipelago, lying 1800 km (1100 mi) south of India and equidistant east of Mahe, Seychelles's principal island. In the early 1970's, about 1,000 people were summarily (some would say brutally) evicted from Diego Garcia, the Chagos's principal island, and deported to Mauritius so that the (U.S.) DOD could build a large airstrip for B-52 bombers and dredge the lagoon as an anchorage. The development was done in great secrecy and the unfortunate Chagosians are still appealing to the British government to return to their homeland. This appalling story recently came to light in England, although few officials give the islanders much chance to return because the giant base there is now a major support element in the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

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On the opposite side of the world lie the remote Pitcairn group of islands: Pitcairn, Oeno, Ducie and Henderson. Only Pitcairn is regularly occupied, although its population is down to 47. The island is only about two-and-a-half square miles and until recently was known principally as the refuge of the mutinous sailors on HMS Bounty. Today, however, its reputation is tarnished as a result of a trial of seven men, all of whom have been found guilty of rape and assault on the dozen or so girls and women still living there.

Smithsonian scientists have visited Pitcairn, but only on the way to the three relatively nearby islands of Oeno, Ducie and Henderson. Oeno and Ducie, along with Rose atoll in American Samoa, had all been proposed in the late 1960's as "Islands for Science." The idea was to have the British and American governments relinquish sovereignty to these islands and transfer them to an international scientific organization to be used in perpetuity for research. Since none were inhabited, the proposing scientists could see no strategic importance for them and we all felt it was a great idea. How naïve we were!

The military establishments in both countries smugly pointed out that it was essential for their respective governments to retain title because they might be needed at some future time as an acoustical base for tracking Soviet submarines. It was never clearly explained why the Soviets would want to send their submarines anywhere near these exceedingly remote islands, but the military considered them important.

Despite this disappointment, I succeeded in getting a group of Smithsonian scientists to Henderson Island (about 100 mi N.E. of Pitcairn). In 1987 a college classmate, George Nichols, had given up his position as a research oncologist at Massachusetts General Hospital and bought a large ketch to circumnavigate the globe. When he told me of his plan, I persuaded him to stop at Henderson and take three or four Smithsonian scientists with him. This he did and the group spent about a week ashore while the boat had to heave to for most of the time in whatever lee the skipper could find, as the island lacked any kind of safe anchorage.

It was a fruitful expedition because a young avian paleontologist, David Steadman, discovered the bones of a series of sea birds that had nested on this island, but had since become extinct. Further research showed that centuries ago Polynesians had actually settled on Henderson, but after a few generations had wiped out all the sea bird nesting colonies for food; they finally had to abandon the island. Fresh water is also hard to find and the scientists could only fill their canteens with water dripping from the ceiling of a limestone cave in which, incidentally, many avian fossils were found. Among the few subsequent visitors to Henderson after the Polynesians abandoned it were the men of Pitcairn who sailed their small boats there to collect wood from which they carved figurines and other objects to sell to the occasional tourist ship or yacht calling at Pitcairn. With the adult male population of Pitcairn down to about 14—half of whom

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have been sentenced to jail—it is unlikely that there will be any more trips to Henderson for wood. In fact, I would be surprised if Pitcairn is still occupied twenty years hence. Teenagers now can go to school in New Zealand and, as you can imagine, few return.

Other remote islands, such as Tristan da Cunha in the south Atlantic, still have a few hundred people living on it. There exists a thriving spiny lobster fishery not only in local waters but in the waters of the adjacent islands: Nightingale, Gough and aptly named Inaccessible. Gough used to have a South African manned weather station and may still have one. The other two islands are not inhabited. Gough is also home to an endemic flightless rail, a related species of which also lives on Aldabra.

Sitting in my office writing about these fascinating dots on the global oceans is one thing, but actually living for long periods on these isolated islands is quite another. The glamour and novelty soon vanish and those who successfully remain voluntarily for long periods usually have rewarding projects to keep them busy. Scientifically, islands will always be attractive sites for work on species colonization, evolution, competition and many other topics. We will never run out of subjects to study and the remote islands of the world will doubtless keep luring future generations to visit and explore them.

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