Written evidence submitted by the National Trust for the Cayman Islands

Introduction

The National Trust for the Cayman Islands is a not-for-profit NGO created by statute in 1987 to preserve the history and biodiversity of the Cayman Islands. Through education and conservation we work to protect environmentally sensitive and historically significant sites across all three Cayman Islands. Until recently the NTCI was the only significant holder of land for conservation in the Islands. We have protected over 5% of Cayman’s land area, comprising critically important habitat, including Important Bird Areas and the Cayman Islands’ only Ramsar site, the Little Cayman Booby Pond. The Trust’s Blue Iguana Recovery Programme is a flagship model for saving island endemic species from extinction.

The United Kingdom’s Overseas Territories in the Caribbean biodiversity hotspot contribute enormously to the UK’s overall biodiversity. We are glad that the OTs have been included in the current inquiry. We propose to focus on aspects of the terms of reference that are relevant to the NTCI’s purposes, particularly as the manager of over 3,500 acres of environmentally important reserves, and as a leader in encouraging and shaping public opinion towards the integration of environmental sustainability in all aspects of Caymanian life.

Among the NTCI’s most important reserves in danger from invasive species, are:

- The Mastic Reserve, Grand Cayman – a Key Biodiversity Area containing the highest number of native plant species and a stronghold of endemic birds, including, Vitelline Warbler, Cayman Bullfinch and Grand Cayman subspecies of Cuban Parrot;
- Colliers Wilderness Reserve and Salina Reserve (both in Grand Cayman) – provide the undisturbed habitat into which over 1,000 captive bred Blue Iguanas have been released;
- Cayman Brac Parrot Reserve – home to the most endangered of the four subspecies of the Cuban Parrot;
- Little Cayman Booby Pond – Important Bird Area and Ramsar recognised site, protects the most significant populations of breeding Red-footed Boobies in the Western Caribbean;
- Little Cayman Preston Bay Beach – extremely important nesting site for endemic Sister Islands Rock Iguana.

Existing non-native species posing threats

These diverse reserves all face the common threat of invasive species. Whilst non-native plants and invertebrates do pose some important threats, by far the most urgent and intractable issue is the threat from feral animals resulting from accidental and deliberate release of domestic animals and pets in addition to the ubiquitous rats and pest species which accompanied the arrival of humans in the Islands 500 years ago. Thus feral cats, green iguanas, feral chickens and (more recently) unsupervised goats are all important actual or potential threats to biodiversity through a range of pathways: cats – direct predation on birds, juvenile iguanas, endemic anoles and other lizards; green iguanas – competition for habitat,
plant consumption, disruption of nesting birds and potentially implicated in transmission of helicobacter disease to native iguanas; chickens – digging up of native plant seedlings, potential for transmission of avian diseases; goats – habitat destruction. Improperly contained or supervised dogs have caused deaths at the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme facility at the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park. Combatting the cats, dogs and now, Green Iguanas, has required installation of extensive biosecurity fencing that is still incomplete and in need of urgent financing.

As in many jurisdictions conservation bodies in Cayman are faced with public indifference or even outright refusal to recognize the threats posed by feral pets and livestock. Despite the sincere, ethical efforts of a governmental programme to address feral cats in Little Cayman where they threaten both the Red-footed Booby colony and also the endemic Sister Islands Rock Iguana, opposition, led in part by external organisations, has paralysed the project. [https://www.caymancompass.com/2019/04/09/mctaggart-euthanise-sister-islands-feral-cats/](https://www.caymancompass.com/2019/04/09/mctaggart-euthanise-sister-islands-feral-cats/)

The Little Cayman feral cat project had been selected by the Department of Environment as a trial model given that the cost of control in our smallest and least populous island is relatively low and prospects of success high. A concerted, sensitive, programme for all UKOTs suffering from this problem using UK support and expertise could stem the increasing threat from feral animals, a problem exacerbated by animal welfare groups operating Trap, Neuter, Vaccinate, Release policies which deliberately place vulnerable and unwanted animals into the wild.

NTCI recently participated in an EU-BEST funded IAS control project of the RSPB - (Securing Pockets of Paradise in the Caribbean: embedding capacity for alien species management in UKOT based organisations. EU BEST 2.0 Project 1059, ended April 2019) in which Cayman’s component was directed exclusively at invasive plants, whilst Montserrat, BVI and Turks and Caicos focused on invasive animals. We look forward to the results and experience gained from our fellow Caribbean territories being reported and distributed among all OTs, particularly the advice for national IAS policy and management planning.

**Actions in the event of EU exit**

We note the production of the IUCN Invasive Species Guidelines - Preparation and testing of a comprehensive model for preventing and managing the spread of invasive species on Island Ecosystems, issued in 2018 by the IUCN, was funded by the European Union, project DCI-ENV/2011/221-0660.

It is evident that the replacement of EU funding for Overseas Territories at the forefront of efforts to stem UK biodiversity losses from the impacts of invasive species will have to be found.

**How should the UK work with [the European Commission and] others internationally to reduce the risk of invasive species?**

In addition to participation in the EU-BEST project noted above, NTCI contributed our expertise and experience to the Assessment of current and future Invasive Alien Species in
Caribbean Overseas Territories (May 2018) as part of the OT Biosecurity Project. This multi-partner project of the GB Non-native Species Secretariat (NNSS) secured funding (£2.75m) over four years (2016-2020) under the FCO’s Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF). A Biosecurity for the Overseas Territories eLearning module was launched in March 2019. We understand that NNSS will be providing evidence on this project. We look forward to further cooperation to implement a robust biosecurity policy in the Cayman Islands.

NTCI appreciates that the UK Government’s interventions in Cayman Islands governmental policy is limited by the nature of the powers delegated for self-government. However, there are important roles to be played in (a) assisting/cooperating with the Cayman Islands for adherence to International Conventions and targets, (b) provision of technical and legal assistance in developing legislation and regulations. Relevant Cayman Islands legislation is limited to the National Conservation Law, the Animals Law and the Endangered Species Trade and Transport Law, where, though primary statements of control are enacted, the absence or extremely slow development of secondary regulations hamper effective implementation.

**How well is the UK and its overseas territories managing the impact of invasive species and controlling the risks of further invasion?**

This may be viewed in terms of progress towards achieving Aichi Target 9 by the UK and its OTs to which the convention has been extended.

“By 2020, invasive alien species and pathways are identified and prioritized, priority species are controlled or eradicated, and measures are in place to manage pathways to prevent their introduction and establishment.”

We believe that while species and pathways in the Cayman Islands are well on the way to identification and prioritisation, control and eradication is in its infancy, notwithstanding several million dollars having been spent in Grand Cayman alone to combat the invasive Green Iguana. It is well-established that island endemic species are less able to adapt to IAS, the need for biosecurity is well recognised, but little will be achieved until the government is willing to attend to the warnings and appropriately fund effective measures.

HRH Prince of Wales experiences the joy of a close encounter with Peter, Ambassador for the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme on his recent visit to the Cayman Islands.