Written evidence – RSPB (OST0005)

Environmental concern for Overseas Territories as a result of Brexit

Summary
British Overseas Territories are likely to lose up to one-third of their annual environmental project funding with the loss of the EU’s ‘BEST programme’. No replacement has been announced by the UK Government. This is causing significant concern in both UK and Territory organisations.

The importance of the environment in the Overseas Territories
The fourteen Overseas Territories hold some of the world’s most remarkable environments, from vast coral reefs to windswept albatross islands. They hold more than 90 per cent of the threatened wildlife for which the UK, in conjunction with Territory governments, has responsibility. Disproportionately large parts of the economies of the Territories depend on their environmental assets. Industries such as tourism, agriculture and fisheries commonly play major roles in domestic finances, whilst often relying heavily on limited freshwater supplies and healthy oceanic ecosystems. Yet paradoxically environmental management and restoration does not receive the project finance needed to achieve environmental goals.

Forgotten because of their Constitutions
The constitutional situation of the Overseas Territories means that they have very limited access to environmental project finance. On the one hand they are not eligible for domestic UK funds such as agri-environment, Heritage Lottery, or the Landfill Communities Fund. Yet on the other hand, due to their constitutional link to the UK, neither are they eligible for global priority funds such as the Global Environment Facility.

Darwin Plus and BEST
The fourteen Territories have only regularly received funding from two significant ongoing environment programmes: the UK’s Darwin Plus fund and the EU’s Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in Territories of Europe overseas –‘BEST’– fund. The BEST programme provides approximately one third of annual project financing for the Territories e.g. in its second funding round, started in 2013, more than £680,000 was awarded to British Territories.

No plan to replace BEST programme funding
It is of great concern that the UK Government has, to-date, not made any comment on whether the BEST funding will be replaced when the UK leaves the EU. It would be regrettable if Brexit were to damage the prospects of the environment in the Territories.

Solution
The vital Darwin Plus programme should be increased to address this shortfall and ensure that these unique British islands can protect their natural heritage.

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