



The sea cucumber *Thelenota ananas*, the largest of the Chagos sea cucumbers.

Where have all the sea cucumbers gone?

Holothurians, or sea cucumbers, are the least attractive relatives of starfishes (sea urchins, brittlestars, feather stars etc). This belies their ecological importance, for they help keep coral reefs healthy, by processing detritus. Unfortunately, throughout much of Chagos and the wider Indian Ocean, populations have suffered heavy exploitation. In some places, this has taken less than a decade, and the main reason is their high international market value, especially in China and South East Asia, combined with the fact that they are an easy target for poachers.

During the 2006 expedition, ecologists surveyed sea cucumbers in Chagos. It is clear that they are being heavily exploited, principally by Sri Lankan fishers. This confirms earlier observation^{1,2}. Counts were made along approximately 80 transects, each 100m x 2m, and with one 11 nautical miles long x 4m wide around the entire inside of Salomon. As shown in the inset graph, the cucumber abundance (numbers per 200m² transect) from these surveys show that in Diego Garcia, where there is no poaching, abundance is ten times greater than in Salomon and Peros Banhos waters. In these atolls, poaching by Sri Lankan fishers has increased markedly over the past decade. Differences in ecology may be partly responsible, but the main factor is almost certainly sea cucumber poaching. The presence of yachts appears to discourage such theft from parts of Salomon Atoll. Work is continuing on estimating the quantity of illegal catch.

¹ Spalding, M. 2005. WEXAS Trip to the Chagos Archipelago. August 2005.

² Spalding, M.D. 2006. Illegal sea cucumber fisheries in the Chagos Archipelago. SPC Beche-de-mer Information Bulletin #23 – February 2006, pp. 32-34.

Any observant sailor is encouraged to report suspicious vessels to the *Pacific Marlin* using email address BIOTadmin@fco.gov.uk.

The **Chagos Conservation Trust** is a charity (Registered in the UK No. 1031561), whose aims are to promote conservation, scientific and historical research, and to advance education concerning the archipelago. The Trust is a non political association.

If you would like more information, please visit www.chagos-trust.org or contact the Secretary (simonhughes@hughes-mccormack.co.uk).