



The Settlement at East Point, 1819; Dutch print by Lieutenant Verhuel.

### **History of the Chagos Archipelago**

The history of the Chagos Archipelago has been short and chequered. The islands have been settled for less than 250 years and human activities have been conditioned, both commercially and militarily, from outside.

Although they were discovered by the Portuguese in the 1500s, the French, operating from Mauritius, were the first to establish sovereignty in the 1770s, and to exploit the islands’ modest potential to supply fish and coconut products. Plantations were established in each of the main island groups under indefinite leases granted to a small number of individuals and groups of proprietors resident in Mauritius. The initial work force was provided by slaves imported from Mauritius or directly from Madagascar and southern Africa. Their descendants, enjoying steadily improved employment terms, came to form, with those in other minor dependencies of Mauritius, a community of islanders—the Ilois—distinct from the increasingly Indianised population of Mauritius. By the mid twentieth century the long term decline in the plantations’ viability was reflected in their consolidation into a single company under Seychellois ownership—Chagos Agalega. The population of the Chagos rose gradually to a peak of 1,158 in 1952, declining to around 900 in the 1960s.

British sovereignty came in 1814 with the end of the Napoleonic Wars, but its impact on the distant Archipelago was only gradual—the consequence mainly of the abolition of slavery in 1835 and a slow increase in administrative supervision from Port Louis. From a military point of view, both Britain and France had been concerned to deny the other use of Diego Garcia’s excellent (but vulnerable) harbour, which eventually proved an asset in World War II. This island’s strategic importance, deriving from its mid-oceanic location, was however transformed by the changes in global power politics of the second half of the twentieth century.

As Britain yielded strategic influence to the USA, both countries took the view that their common military interests required the exclusion of the established population of the archipelago and closure of the plantations—measures undertaken with little consideration for the inhabitants themselves and leading to continuing distress, legal claims and political controversy. In terms of the Archipelago’s history however, the effect has been to increase the transient population of service and support personnel in Diego Garcia to its highest number ever (some 2,400 with peaks of 6,000 at times of crisis), with one half of the island transformed into a major air and naval logistic base. The rest of the archipelago has reverted to a state of natural wilderness. Outside influence remains overwhelming.

For more history read **Peak of Limuria**. This revised and updated edition of Richard Edis’ book gives a lively account of the nature, discovery and development of the Chagos Archipelago initially for coconut plantations, focussing particularly on Diego Garcia and its military role, which from the beginning also attracted the attention of naval powers active in the region. It concludes by describing the gradual recognition of the ecological importance of the Chagos and the growing impact of climatic changes, which threaten the Archipelago’s long-term habitability.

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 on the publications (especially **Peak of Limuria**) or membership, please contact the Secretary ([simonhughes@hughes-mccormack.co.uk](mailto:simonhughes@hughes-mccormack.co.uk)) or.

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