South Coast Nature Reserve Management Plan 2025-2030

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Introduction

Introduction

Ascension Island

Ascension Island is a remote overseas territory of the United Kingdom (UKOT) located at the centre of the Atlantic Ocean. Ascension is a young volcanic island 97km² in size, lying 1504km from the coast of Africa and 2232km from Brazil.



Though small, Ascension supports globally-important biodiversity including 67 endemic species found nowhere else in the world. It is a nesting site for over half a million seabirds and the second largest turtle rookery in the Atlantic.

Protecting biodiversity is one of the Ascension Island Government (AIG)'s strategic objectives and a commitment under the Convention on Biological Diversity. The island's Protected Areas are central to meeting this commitment and achieving Target 3 of the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. All of the Protected Areas have legal status and are underpinned by management plans. This plan covers the newly designated South Coast Nature Reserve. The South Coast Nature Reserve (NR) was designated in Feb 2025 under the National Protected Areas (Amendment) Order, 2025. It was created to protect endemic invertebrates and nesting seabirds. The reserve marries the Waterside Fairs Nature Reserve on the western edge to the Letterbox Nature Reserve on the eastern edge. All wildlife protected areas on Ascension Island are managed by the Ascension Island Government Conservation and Fisheries Directorate (AIGCFD).



The reserve is made up of a number of basalt lava flows which extend along the southern coast of the island. A number of effusive and passive eruptions from nearby scoria cones have created a range of lava types such as a'ā lava which is difficult to maneuver through to some smooth, ropey pāhoehoe lava found on the western edge of the South Coast NR.

The South Coast NR hugs the coastline and extends 500m inland, protecting a niche habitat which is important to the endemic scaly cricket– *Discophallus ascension*. These crickets are largely confined to Ascension's barren coastline as they are outcompeted further inland by non-native species. This stretch of coastline is particularly important to this species as invasive non-native vegetation has not yet reached this area.

The South Coast NR also protects nesting seabirds. The masked booby (*Sula dactylatra*) is expanding it's nesting range and now nest circles can be found scattered along this coastline. Cliff edges and offshore stacks are home to brown boobies (*Sula leucogaster*), noddies (*Anous spp.*) and tropicbirds (*Phaethon spp.*) that favour ledges and stacks which are inaccessible to rodents. The Ascension frigatebird (*Fregata aquila*) roosts on the coastal peaks on the eastern edge of the NR at Crater Cliff.

South Coast NR

The South Coast Nature Reserve covers a number of unique habitats described below that support a range of important biodiversity.

Lava flows: These are home to the endemic *Discophallus* scaly crickets which are relatively abundant under small rocks and boulders. The lava flows are also populated with masked booby nests as this species extends its nesting range.

Coastline: Some of the NR coastline is at sea-level around Crystal Bay. This environment is favourable habitat for moray eels (*Muraenidae*), octopus (*Octopus vulgaris*), rock oysters (*Saccostrea cucullate*) and other inshore marine life.

Offshore stacks: The South Coast NR has a number of offshore rocks that are home to thousands of nesting seabirds. These offshore stacks were identified as Important Bird Areas (IBA) by the Royal Society of the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in 2006 by Rowlands *et al.* highlighting their importance to local and global biodiversity.

The South Coast NR is only accessible on foot. An old service road leads from the NASA road towards Crystal Bay. This has not been maintained for a number of years and has regularly washed out since so is no longer accessible by vehicle. Additional walking routes on the western edge of the NR are accessed by foot from a designated car park along the NASA road.





Strategic and Operational Objectives



Conserve Ascension's endemic invertebrates including *Discophallus* scaly crickets and pseudoscorpions.

Scaly cricket population remains stable and where possible they extend their range into suitable surrounding habitat.

Conserve the seabirds nesting on the South Coast Nature Reserve. This includes the seabirds nesting on surrounding offshore stacks and rocks.

• The size of the seabird populations in the South Coast NR are maintained or increased.

Facilitate natural ecosystem functions and processes within the reserve.

- No non-native shrubs present within the NRs.
- Non-native predators are controlled to a level in which they have no significant impact on the seabird or scaly cricket populations.

Encourage recreational use of the Nature Reserves- compatible with conservation objectives- to promote the health and wellbeing of people of Ascension.

- There is a high level of awareness about the importance of the South Coast NR for scaly crickets.
- The South Coast NR is a source of pride for Ascension islanders.



Natural features of the Nature Reserve

Species of South Coast Nature Reserve

Ascension scaly crickets (Discophallus spp.)

The *Discophallus* genus of scaly crickets (family: *Mogoplistidae*) are endemic to Ascension Island and likely arrived via rafting (Ashmole & Ashmole 2000; Gorochov 2009). The Ascension scaly cricket is nocturnal, growing to around 12-15mm in body length and are covered in minute translucent scales (below right).

Originally believed to consist of five sister species (*D. ascension, D. amplus, D. myrtleae, D. pallidus and D. .phillipi*), the taxonomy of this genus has been called into question. An ongoing genomic analysis may determine that all other species in the genus are in fact a single species of *D. ascension*. This species and it's synonyms, following the outcome of the taxonomic assessment, have been assessed as Critically Endangered under category B1ab(iii) by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) given their limited distributions and that much of their suitable habitat has been degraded by non-native plants and invertebrates.

The Ascension scaly crickets are generalist scavengers and it is thought that the decomposing fish and crab carcasses on the NR coastline form an important food sources for this species. The Ascension scaly cricket lays eggs in fine substrate, including sand found in the South Coast NR. Interestingly, this species produces a call which crosses between high-pitch audible frequency to ultrasonic.

A study by Chin *et al.* 2024 found that the distribution of Ascension scaly crickets is limited due to competition with introduced tropical house crickets (*Gryllodes sigillatus*). The study found a higher concentration of scaly crickets in native habitat compared to degraded habitat where invasive vegetation was altering the microclimate temperature to above the preferred temperature of the cricket. Encroaching non-native vegetation also supports a local rat population which were recorded to predate the Ascension scaly cricket. This highlights the importance of the South Coast NR as a remaining pristine habitat for the species however invasive vegetation is encroaching onto the NR from several sides.





Endemic Ascension scaly cricket (Discophallus spp.)

Ascension-endemic pseudoscorpions (Order: Pseudoscorpiones)

The South Coast NR is home to some of Ascension's renowned pseudoscorpions, which are notably large in comparison to pseudoscorpions worldwide. Ascension's pseudoscorpion species are thought to have reached the island via phoresy, that is the process of "hitchhiking" on larger organisms (likely seabirds). Pseudoscorpion species would naturally occupy large areas of the Ascension mainland but introduced species have greatly reduced their populations through competition.

Ellick's pseudoscorpion (*Garypus ellickae*) was discovered in 2023 during the Darwin funded project 'From pseudoscorpions to crickets: securing Ascension Island's unique invertebrates' (DPLUS135). The project aimed to collect baseline surveys of Ascension's understudied invertebrate species. In 2024, Sherwood *et al.* performed a taxonomic assessment of the pseudoscorpions of Ascension, revealing six endemic species. They named this species photographed right after islander Jacqui Ellick who greatly contributed to early conservation efforts on Ascension. This species was also assessed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List.

Ellick's pseudoscorpion is closely related to the giant pseudoscorpion (*Garypus titanius*) which is only found on Boatswain Bird Island Sanctuary though it is smaller in size. Little is known about the ecology of Ellick's pseudoscorpion however it has only been detected along Ascension's volcanic coastline and several times in intertidal substrate. This species however can be reliably found underneath pebbles in the small rocky bays of the South Coast NR.

Ascension's pseudoscorpions are active nocturnal predators of invertebrates found on bird guano. Ellick's pseudoscorpion was also observed predating tiny native woodlice on the South Coast NR.





Ellick's pseudoscorpion

Masked booby (Sula dactylatra)

Length: 81-92cm, Wingspan: 152cm. Least concern.

Masked boobies have a pan-tropical distribution. They nest across Boatswain Bird Island Sanctuary, Letterbox NR and their nesting range in recent years has spread to the South Coast NR. Masked boobies lay 1-2 eggs in a shallow depression on the ground. The eggs are incubated by both parents for 39-48 days. The second chick typically does not survive and is killed by the stronger sibling, fledging after 120 days. Masked boobies feed by plunging head first into the water, sometimes diving from as high as 30m. They feed primarily on fish and squid, usually during daylight hours.



Masked booby

Brown booby (Sula leucogaster)

Length: 64-74cm, Wingspan: 132-150cm. Least concern.

Brown boobies are found worldwide across tropical regions. They nest on Boatswain Bird Island Sanctuary, Letterbox NR and on offshore stacks such as Pillar Pay and White Rocks. Brown boobies lay 1-2 blue chalky eggs in a mound created with shells, stones, twigs and feathers. Both sexes share incubation duties for 43 days until the egg hatches. Usually only one chick is raised with the second chick unable to compete for food. The chick fledges after 96-120 days. Brown boobies forage at a low height over inshore waters for small fish driven to the surface by marine predators, primarily feeding on flying fish and squid during daylight hours.

Black noddy (Anous minutus)

Length: 35-39cm, Wingspan: 66-72cm. Least concern

The Black noddy breeds across tropical and sub-tropical seas. It is a colonial nester, nesting around the cliffs of the South Coast NR and on offshore stacks. Black noddies lay a single egg in a nest built on a cliff ledge. Both parents incubate for 30-37 days. The parental birds leave the chick unattended after just a few weeks, feeding frequently until the chick is ready to fledge after only 6 weeks. The fledgling is further supported for several more weeks. Black noddies feed on small fish and squid caught on the sea surface. They have also been known to kleptoparasitise food from other seabirds. Black noddies are usually found within 80km of nesting sites, coming ashore daily to roost in sites around the South Coast NR.



Brown booby



Black noddy

Brown noddy (Anous stolidus)

Length: 40-45, Wingspan: 79-86cm. Least concern.

Brown noddies can be found across the tropics worldwide. They nest in small loose colonies across the South Coast NR and on offshore stacks. This species potentially navigates long distances but its precise dispersal throughout its world range is poorly known. The brown noddy creates a platform nest of shingle and lays a single egg. Incubation is performed by both parents for 35-38 days. Adult noddies often forage close to the colony, feeding the young frequently. Brown noddy chicks grow quickly, reaching the weight of the adult bird after only three weeks. The chick fledges at six weeks, however is supported by the adults for several more weeks.



Brown noddy

Red-billed tropicbird (Phaethon aethereus)

Length: 46-50cm, Wingspan: 99-106cm. Least concern (global population declining).

Widespread throughout tropical oceans, the red-billed tropicbird can be found nesting on offshore stacks and in suitable ledges around the South Coast NR. Also known as the "boatswain bird" due to the similarity of its shrill call to a boatswain's whistle. Aggressive at the nesting site, this species may oust other seabirds for nesting habitat. The red-billed tropicbird is a monogamous species, and faithful to it's nest site. They lay a single egg on inaccessible ledges or in crevices. The chick fledges after 80 days and receives no additional parental care once leaving the nest.



Length: 38-40cm, Wingspan: 89-96cm. Least concern.

This species can be found across the tropical oceans. It is the smallest, most common and most widely distributed of the three *Phaethon* species. This species is approximately twice as abundant as its larger relative on Ascension Island where it nests on offshore stacks and inaccessible cliffs around the coastline. The yellow-billed tropicbird lays a single egg in a scrape on the ground, incubating for 42-44 days. The chick fledges after 70-85 days. This species can breed several times per year if nesting attempts are unsuccessful, depending on weather and availability of nesting habitat. The yellow-billed tropicbird disperses widely across the ocean outside of the breeding season. They feed primarily on fish and squid, which they catch by surface plunging; this species is a poor swimmer.



Red-billed tropicbird



Yellow-billed tropicbird

Fairy tern (Gygis alba)

Length: 28-33cm, Wingspan: 70-87cm. Least concern

Also known as the white tern, this distinctive species nests across the tropical oceans of the world. The fairy tern nests on available shelves and offshore stacks of the South Coast NR. The fairy tern lays a single egg on a level ledge in inaccessible locations. Both adults share the incubation of the egg for 28-36 days. Newly hatched chicks have well-developed feet for grip on precarious nesting sites. The chick fledges at 48-60 days. This species hovers above the water and dives into the sea surface to feed upon small fish, squid and crustaceans. They have an undulating flight pattern with deep, slow wingbeats and a strong flight that enables sustained periods of hovering. An inquisitive species, fairy terns are often seen on their own or in small groups around the island year round.



Length: 89-96cm, Wingspan: 196-201cm. Vulnerable.

Endemic to Ascension Island, this species nests on nearby Letterbox NR and Boatswain Bird Island Sanctuary. Although not nesting on the South Coast NR, this species uses high rocks on this coastline as an important site to roost.

Female Ascension frigatebirds have a blue eye ring while males can be identified by their red gular pouch, which they inflate as part of their breeding display. Males also perform a mating ritual of wing flapping and rapid bill snapping to attract a mate. Juvenile Ascension frigatebirds may be identified by their white head and stomach (left below). Colonial nesters, the Ascension frigatebird lays a single white egg on bare ground, which is incubated for 43-50 days. The chick fledges at 6-7 months but remains dependent on the parents for several months post-fledging.

The Ascension frigatebird has a varied diet. They feed mainly on flying fish and other surface fish. They also predate turtle hatchlings, sooty tern hatchlings and will harass other birds to steal their food (kleptoparasitism).



Fairy tern



Ascension frigatebird adults



Rocky shoreline/rock pools of the South Coast NR

The coastline around Crystal Bay is home to a number of rock pools. The pools range in size and provide a safe haven for inshore marine species. The common octopus (*Octopus vulgaris*) can be seen weaving through the shallows where it feeds on small fish such as sergeant majors (*Abudefduf saxatilis*) or black triggerfish (*Melichthys niger*). Juvenile eels can also be found hiding between the rocks, waiting for the opportune moment to feed on unsuspecting fish and crabs.

Sally lightfoot crabs (*Grapsus grapsus*) are numerous around the coastlines of the South Coast NR, scavenging on dead marine life or grazing on algae. These rook pools provide a fantastic habitat for these brightly coloured crustaceans where they can be seen zigzagging across rock oysters (*Saccostrea cucullate*) clinging to shoreline boulders.

Land crabs

The Ascension land crab (*Johngarthia lagostoma*) is regularly observed on the NR. This species is only found on Ascension and three small Brazilian islands in the western Atlantic (Trindade, Fernando de Noronha and Atol das Rocas) though the Ascension population is genetically distinct from the other islands. A range of colour morphs from yellow to dark purple can be found on Ascension.

Land crabs are found at their highest densities on the mid and upper slopes of Green Mountain for most of the year but are present throughout the island (Hartnoll *et al.* 2016). Land crabs spawn in several locations found within the South Coast NR

(bottom right). Spawning occurs around ten days after the full moon between January and May with females producing 72,000 eggs. Eggs are released into the water, developing through a number of planktonic larval phases over the course of three weeks. The final megalops larval stage emerges onto land and moults into small crabs to make their way higher in the island. Land crabs can live for between 40 and 50 years, making multiple spawning migrations in that time.





Common octopus IUCN conservation status: Least concern



Sally Lightfoot crab IUCN conservation status: Not evaluated





Historical and recreational use of reserve

Historical use of the South Coast NR

There is limited literature available on Ascension with most focusing on the human use of the island through it's military interest. Despite extensive research, only Packer makes any reference to the South Coast (right, below).

A service road leads towards Crystal Bay however there is no record of when this was installed, by who or what it was servicing. It is likely the road was related to the NASA site at Devils Ashpit to the North with old cables visible in sites.

As part of the Seabird Restoration Project by the Royal Society of the Protection of Birds (RSPB), plastic decoys of frigatebirds were deployed on the South Coast to lure breeding frigatebirds following the feral cat eradication programme. These were unsuccessful and several decoys still remain in-situ.

Packer 1968

Packer described Ascension Island in detail, producing geological drawings (below) and incorporating historical records to create a concise guide of the island. Packer wrote about a number of Ascension features found on the South Coast NR including:

PILLAR BAY: has two tall off-shore stacks rising to over a hundred feet, whitened by guano from roosting Boatswarin Birds and Noddies. (See Potted History, 1879).

(YSTAL BAY: an isolated beach with curious olive green send of tiny crystals of the genistone periodite. Magnetic send also occurs there. (See also Part 4: Geology.)

XCONUT BAY: named when a small plantation of occonuts was established there in the 1850's of which only one stunted specimen and the dead trunk of a second remain. The psims grew out of a sandy 'bench' actually a hundred feet of more above sea level and composed of felspar crystals weathered out of surrounding trachyte lavas. White Rock nearby supports breeding Boobies and Noddies, and old Noddy bracket nests occur on the mainland cliffs in a site probably abandoned when ferel outs reached the area.

CRATER CLIFF: a curious half-crater near Crystal Bay, the ash cone has been neatly sectioned by the sea washing half of the original structure away.



Recreational use of the reserve

Hiking

Ascension Island has 42 designated walks spread across the island with hikers seeking a stamp found in a letterbox at the end of each walk as a reward. Hikers follow guidance provided through the Letterbox Walks book, last updated in 2020, with the four most extreme hikes found on the South Coast NR.

Pillar Bay

A parking site on the NASA Road is clearly signposted. Hikers should travel South and at around 500ft Pillar Rock becomes obvious jutting through the coastline. This guano-covered stack



is home to many nesting seabirds and provides a fantastic foreground to the surrounding Atlantic Ocean. Strong oceanic currents here creates a wild coastline with dramatic waves.

Cocoanut Bay

Following the same route for Pillar Bay, once hikers reach the lower 500ft, there is a line of cairns which mark out the route to Cocoanut Bay. The name has been misspelt for many years and derives from a coconut plantation established here during the 1850s. The trees did not thrive here however and only one remains with the dead stump of a second tree evident. The sand found here is not formed by the sea, the bay itself sits well above sea level, but consists of feldspar crystals weathered out of local rocks. Offshore is

White Rock, another breeding site for Ascension seabirds– mainly tropicbirds, boobies and noddies.





Recreational use of the reserve

Crystal Bay

This remote bay is like no other on Ascension. It consists of a fascinating assemblage of fine minerals such as peridot (olive green) and magnetite (black), though they are much too small to be of interest to gem-hunters.



Access to this site begins on Castle Hill on the NASA road, before Devil's Ashpit. Often hikers will utilize an old service road starting at 1500ft. This leads to the coastal plain near Round Hill and Unicorn Point. Crystal Bay is on the western edge of these landmarks with a number of rockpools and strong currents crashing into surrounding rocks.

Crater Cliff

This site can be accessed via the same route as Crystal Bay using the old service road and then following the coastline towards the South East Bay. The site may also be accessed by hiking down the gullies from the NASA site however there are no exact pathways. The crater is a relatively recent volcanic cone of red ash set amongst older, darker rocks. Half of the crater has washed into the sea of the South East Bay leaving steep cliffs that dip straight down into the water. These are a popular roost site for the Ascension frigatebird.

The remaining crater excellently frames views of the Letterbox peninsula, Little White Hill and Wig Hill (right).





Threats to the Nature Reserve

Invasive flora

A number of Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) can be found encroaching onto the South Coast NR. INNS out-compete native wildlife for resources such as water, nutrients and available habitat and can also introduce diseases and support other INNS, further exacerbating the threat to native flora and fauna.

Mexican thorn (*Neltuma juliflora*) and tree tobacco (*Nicotiana glauca*) are the main species of concern as they encroach onto the reserve from a number of angles. A study by Chin *et al.* 2024 found that invasive vegetation facilitates the increased competitive pressure from non-native species such as rats and introduced insects.

Mexican Thorn

Mexican thorn is identified as a major threat in Ascension's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. The pressing need to control thorn is highlighted in a specific Species Action Plan for Mexican thorn, reflecting its widespread impacts on species, habitats and landscapes.

Mexican thorn is a dryland specialist, growing in arid low-lying lava and ash plains across the island. They have extensive lateral root systems (up to 30m) allowing them to survive prolonged drought by accessing the water table.

Tree tobacco

Hundreds of tree tobacco plants can be found growing in the Waterside Fairs NR which joins the South Coast NR on the western edge. Tree tobacco thrives on this coastline as it prefers well drained soil in full sun. It can grow up to 6m in height. First introduced as an ornamental, the seeds are carried long distances by moving waterflows. Tree tobacco follows the valleys towards the South Coast NR where water flows during heavy rain allowing this species to spread quickly across the reserve.



Introduced Fauna

A number of non-native animal species have been introduced to Ascension that are detrimental to the wildlife found on the South Coast NR.

Rodents:

Rodents were introduced via passing ships, sometime before 1701. Black rats (*Rattus rattus*) and house mice (*Mus musculus*) can be found throughout the island. These highly adaptable species forage on fruit, seeds, plants and will predate small animals and eggs. Rodents have a high fecundity and short generation times allowing populations to grow rapidly in favourable conditions.

Research by Chin*et al.* 2024 noted a high predation risk by rats on endemic scaly crickets in areas such as the South Coast NR with a barren habitat and lower food availability for rats. Rodents may also impact native invertebrate populations through reducing food availability.

The seabirds on Ascension have not evolved alongside rodents. Consequently the birds do not react to the presence of rodents with an anti-predatory response. Small chicks which are unable to fly are particularly vulnerable to rodent predation.

Domestic cat (Felis catus)

Cats were introduced to Ascension in 1815 to control the rodent population. Feral cats predated the nesting seabirds too, decimating some populations and greatly reducing the sooty tern population on the Wideawake Fairs.

A successful feral cat eradication was undertaken in 2002-2004 by the RSPB. This removed a significant source of predation for Ascension's seabirds. Several pet cats remain on island, however, all have to be registered through AIG. Each cat is desexed and monitored regularly to ensure it remains with the owner. Advice is given to prevent the cat turning feral. If a cat goes missing, AIGCFD may assist to recapture the animal and return it to the owner.

Non-native invertebrates

A number of non-native invertebrate species can be found across the island which are detrimental to scaly crickets and other endemic insects found on the South Coast NR. The tropical house cricket (*Gryllodes sigillatus*) and American cockroach (*Periplaneta americana*) outcompetes scaly crickets and psuedoscorpions, further fragmenting their populations in marginal native habitat.

Introduced ants were reported by Chin *et al.* 2024 to be the main cause of predation on Ascension scaly crickets in habitat degraded by invasive Mexican thorn. Non-native ants will also compete with native and endemic invertebrates for resources.

Non-native marine species

Little is known about the introduced marine non-native species on Ascension. However, recent eDNA research has shown the presence of introduced barnacles, mussels and other crustaceans. Horizon scanning performed in 2019 highlighted an array of high-risk invasive species with potential to arrive within the next 5-10 years. Among the non-native marine species of highest concern are the lionfish (*Pteriois miles*), three mussel species (*Mytilus galloprovincialis, Mytilus edulis* and *Perna viridis*), the Pacific oyster (*Magallana gigas*), a bivalve (*Semimytilus algosus*), an two ascidians (*Ciona* robusta and *Didemnum perlucidum*). Strong currents feed onto the South Coast NR and the reserve is therefore likely to showcase the first introductions.



Climate Change

The global climate is changing at an unprecedented rate due to the increased levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere produced by the burning of fossil fuels. The following changes are predicted for Ascension by the end of the 21st century:

- Air temperatures will rise by between 0.7 And 2.4°C depending on global CO₂ emission reductions (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change)
- The ocean will become warmer and more acidic with temperatures increasing by between 0.6 And 1.4 $^{\circ}$ C and pH decreasing by between 0.006 and 0.11 depending on global CO₂ emission reductions.
- Sea levels will rise by between 0.3 and 0.6m (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change).
- Storm events and high swells will become more frequent and more severe This will have a profound effect on Ascension's biodiversity if species are unable to evolve quickly enough to cope with the changing conditions.

Impacts of climate change on Ascension endemic invertebrates:

The preferred habitat of the Ascension scaly cricket is a marginal strip along the South Coast where they have access to their preferred diet of fish and crabs. Increases in storms may affected the food availability for this species and may inundated this fragile habitat.



Impacts of climate change on seabirds:

Rising sea levels, rising sea temperatures and shifts in oceanic currents will greatly disrupt marine ecosystem and make prey items increasingly difficult for seabirds to find. During the nesting period when seabirds are tied to the island, travelling increased distances for food will not be energy efficient, resulting in population decline as adults fail to nest successfully.

Increased offshore storms makes feeding more difficult for seabirds that surface feed because the increased turbidity makes viewing prey more difficult. If storms and swells increase, cliffs are likely to be damaged, potentially reducing or increasing the availability of habitat for cliff nesting species such as tropicbirds.

Periods of heavy rainfall will result in temporary water-flows through the reserve, washing out seabird nests. Chicks are particularly vulnerable to heavy rains with downy feathers becoming waterlogged, causing hypothermia and eventually death. Heavy rains cause a boom in raingrass (*Enneapogon cenchroides*) and other introduced vegetation which supports rodents, increasing the predation pressures on seabird eggs and chicks.



Litter

Oceanic currents wash driftwood, plastic and other waste onto the shores of the South Coast NR where it accumulates on the lower shores of the eastern coastline around Crystal Bay (pictured).

An analysis of the litter showed that most items originated from afar. Fishing equipment and fresh plastic bottles which are not used locally suggests the litter originates from large-scale fishing vessels which are not permitted within 200NM of the island.

It is well documented that seabirds are vulnerable to ingesting plastic found within the marine environment, mistaking plastic for food items, which can be fatal. Even small plastic fragments can have long-term impacts, scarring the digestive tract, which leaves the bird more vulnerable to illness. Litter also provides habitat and refuge for invasive rats and reduces the aesthetic value of this coastline.



Legislation

Legislation and Policy

The designation and management of Nature Reserves is an important part of Ascension's approach to protecting its biodiversity and meeting its commitments under international agreements and strategies.

International agreements and strategies

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has been extended to Ascension and provides the overarching context for biodiversity protection on the island. Target 3 of the CBD Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework reads:

Ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, recognizing indigenous and traditional territories, where applicable, and integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and the ocean, while ensuring that any sustainable use, where appropriate in such areas, is fully consistent with conservation outcomes, recognizing and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, including over their traditional territories.

The need for well-managed area-based protection is also a foundation of the UK **Overseas Territories Biodiversity Strategy** and fulfills Ascension's obligations to protect habitats and species under the **Ascension Environmental Charter** signed in 2001. The South Coast Nature Reserve forms part of a network of protected areas on Ascension. Local legislation provides the legal basis for the establishment and management of the Nature Reserves.

Ascension protected areas legislation

The National Protected Areas (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025 provides the Governor with powers to designate Nature Reserves 'protecting native biodiversity and the habitats, ecosystems and natural processes that support it'. It also limits the type of development that can be permitted within a Nature Reserve and allows the restriction of activities that could be harmful to a Nature Reserve. The Ordinance also provides powers to introduce regulations to protect Nature Reserves and to appoint Reserve Wardens to enforce these regulations.

The South Coast NR was designated in Feb 2025 under the Natural Protected Areas (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025. The boundary is shown on page 5 of this management plan.

The National Protected Areas (Amendment) Regulations, 2025, prohibits a list of potentially harmful activities on the Nature Reserve without prior permission from the Administrator or Reserve Warden (see overleaf). They also provide powers for the Administrator to close all or part of a nature reserve for the purposes of management, wildlife protection or public safety.

Other relevant Ascension legislation

Under the Wildlife Protection Ordinance, 2013, it is an offence to willfully take, kill, trade or molest any of 40 species listed in the ordinance. All nesting seabirds are listed in the ordinance alongside several invertebrates which are found on the South Coast NR.

The Biosecurity Ordinance, 2020 introduced import control measures and powers to inspect and treat cargo, vessels and aircraft arriving on Ascension with the aim of reducing the likelihood of introducing new non-native species to the island. This is particularly important with respect to invasive invertebrates.

The Ascension Island Marine Protected Area was designated in 2019 under the National Protected Areas Ordinance. The MPA covers 100% of Ascension's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), an area of over 445,000km². Within the MPA, large-scale commercial fishing and mineral extraction is prohibited. The MPA protects the food source for the seabirds nesting on the South Coast Nature Reserve. It also protects the inshore marine environment along the coastal edges of the reserve to the high tide mark.

The National Protected Areas Regulations

All or any of the following are prohibited within South Coast Nature Reserve if done without the prior permission of the Administrator or Reserve Warden:

- any development;
- the improving or altering of any existing structure;
- the removal of sand, soil or rock;
- the intentional or reckless disturbance to, or damage or injury to, any protected species;
- the dumping of refuse, chemicals, abandoned vehicles, scrap metal, mining spoils, toxic or other wastes, bilges, oil and other petroleum products, pesticides and other items harmful to animals or plants, or unsightly items;
- the driving or riding of motor vehicles other than on a designated road or track;
- parking a vehicle, except in a signed parking zone;
- the making of fires without a permit other than in a portable stove or grill, or in designated fire pits;
- playing any musical instrument, radio, sound system, television or other item which produces or reproduces music, to the annoyance of other persons;
- the use or possession by any person, other than a Warden acting in the course of his or her duties, of any type of firearm, air gun, cross bow, bow and arrow or slingshot;
- Allowing any dogs or cats within the reserve;
- Camping, except in a designated campsite;

Implementation policy

The restrictions are designed to prevent activities that might harm the natural features of the Nature Reserve or reduce people's enjoyment of the areas. There is a presumption against these activities taking place in the Nature Reserve, but the Administrator and Reserve Warden have discretion to permit them on a case by case basis. When deciding whether to permit an activity, the Administrator or Reserve Warden must consult the Director of Conservation and will consider the following:

- Whether an activity is consistent with the objectives of this management plan. The onus will be on the person proposing the activity to demonstrate that it will not conflict with the objectives. Activities that would have a significant negative impact on the Nature Reserve objectives will not be permitted.
- Whether the activity will have a significant and/or long-term impact on the natural features of the Nature Reserve. Activities that would have a significant or long-term impact on the natural features of the Nature Reserve will not be permitted. Decisions of this nature must be referred to the Administrator and cannot be made by a Reserve Warden.
- Whether the activity is necessary for the island's military mission or critical functions. Such activities can be permitted if all other alternatives have been exhausted and all available mitigations have been put in place. Decisions of this nature must be referred to the Administrator and cannot be made by a Reserve Warden.
- Where there is doubt or lack of evidence about an activity's impact, the precautionary principle will be applied and the activity will not be permitted.
- Restrictions on public access to the Nature Reserve will only be authorised by the Administrator where it is necessary to prevent the risk of significant disturbance or trampling of the natural features or where there is a risk to public safety. Restrictions will be in place for the shortest time period and over

Enforcement

Education and awareness raising are the preferred methods to ensure compliance, and proportionate enforcement action will only be taken when this approach has been exhausted. The maximum penalty for an offence under the National Protected Areas Ordinance or Regulations is a fine of £20,000 or imprisonment for 12 months. All warranted Reserve Wardens, Fishery Protection Officers and Police Officers are able to take enforcement action.



Action Plan

Action plan

The South Coast NR is the most remote part of Ascension Island so reserve maintenance is not extensive due to access constraints. The following section describes a number of ambitious actions which may be feasible for the five year period of this Management Plan.



	Description	Targets	Outcome	Objective addressed
1	Annual site visits to the South Coast NR to monitor the spread of invasive vegetation reaching reserve boundary.	Where possible, remove invasive vegetation encroaching onto reserve.	 Preservation of barren habitat preferred by reserve species. Prevention of further spread of non-native invasive species and their impact on the habitat and reserve species. Hiking trails remain accessible for reserve visitors. 	× + *
2	Reduce litter on South Coast NR	Organise beach clean at Crystal Bay where litter accumulates from strong onshore currents.	 Reduced artificial accommodation of rats along the coast and reduced abundance. Reduced likelihood of pollution of the Ascension MPA. Increased enjoyment of the reserve from hikers. 	+
3	Increase public awareness of the NR and the species found here.	Increase public understanding and NR support through social media and island awareness campaigns.	 Increased support for conservation measures. Increased enjoyment of the NR through appreciation of unique wildlife . Potential increased funding for management/research on the NR. 	*



Monitoring and research

Monitoring and research

To assess the success of the Nature Reserve and the species found there are being protected, species monitoring will take place. This monitoring will ensure that management actions set in this document are accomplished and that they make a positive contribution towards environmental protection through achieving the Management Plan objectives (page 6). The remote nature of the reserve means monitoring work will not be as regular as would be liked.

Monitoring will be assessed in two approaches:

- 1. Monitoring Management Plan actions Have management actions been completed and outputs achieved?
- 2. Performance Monitoring are the Management Plan objectives being achieved?

Separating these types of monitoring will allow a distinction to be drawn between a) missing objectives because actions were not carried out properly or b) actions were completed, but were insufficient to achieve the objectives. This will guide future management responses, determining if more effort is required to deliver planned actions or if new actions need to be established. These will be reviewed annually by AIGCFD.

	Monitoring	Details	Objective	
A	Monitor the distribution and population of nesting seabirds.	Use an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle to collect high resolution images for population counts and monitoring every 5 years.	Ŧ	 Uncover trends in the use of the NR by seabirds spatially and temporarily. Understand the health of Ascension's nesting seabird population.
В	Monitor the population of Ascensions invertebrates on the South Coast NR.	Population assessment of Ascension scaly crickets and pseudoscorpions every 5 years to understand the invertebrate population health.	- Ke	• Determine if addition conservation methods are required to protect native and endemic invertebrate populations.
С	Monitor the impacts of climate change on the NR	Analyse if intertidal habitats are moving inland. Calculate the number of pools and area covered– does this change over time?	*	 Understand natural processes to allow mitigation measures to be implemented if required.

	Research	Details	Objective	
A	Determine the impacts of pollution on the seabirds of the NRs	Dissection of freshly dead seabirds to collect stomachs for plastic analysis.	 Determine the main items of pollution which seabirds ingest. Reduce litter found in reserves and in surrounding MPA by identifying items and reducing them at the source. 	
В	Understand the ecology of Ascension endemic invertebrates	Experimental studies of Ascension pseudoscorpions, springtails and scaly crickets. Phylogenetic analysis of <i>Garypus ellickae</i> and <i>Garypus titanius</i> specimens.	• Understanding of endemic invertebrate ecology may assist with the conservation of these species.	
с	Biodiversity monitoring of intertidal pools at Unicorn Point	DNA sequencing and identification of unknown species. Establishment of long-term monitoring to obtain baseline biodiversity data.	 Establish baseline biodiversity data for intertidal habitats. Detect threats to biodiversity such as invasive marine species, 	
D	Understand the impacts of climate change on the South Coast NR species.	Predict shifts in sea level and storm waves through quantitative modelling.	Potential to mitigate against potential environmental change along the South Coast Nature Reserve.	



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