



Eagle Island with its old coconut plantation
The settlement was abandoned in the 1930s

Coconuts and the Oil Islands

Almost all of the Chagos islands are covered with the coconut, *Cocos nucifera*. This characteristic tree is likely to be a native of southeast Asia, though this is not certain. It was clearly transported both by ocean currents and by migrations of ocean-going people.

Coconut oil became the primary produce of Chagos, whose islands then gained their characteristic skyline of palms. Throughout the archipelago, plantations caused the native vegetation to be cleared and the product became so successful that the archipelago became known as the Oil Islands.

But global economic trends were to count against the value of the Chagos coconut industry. Some plantations closed during the early 20th Century, partly because of the high cost of transport. Then, the oil palm in southeast Asia began to be cultivated on a massive scale, and this palm oil was considerably cheaper. The graph traces global production of both coconut oil and palm oil, and it shows that by the mid 1970s, coconut oil was eclipsed. Its level of production has remained almost unchanged, while that of palm oil has soared.

A few islands, notably on the Great Chagos Bank, remained too inaccessible for regular use, and these escaped the coconut planting. As a result they now support many original native hardwood trees and other plants, together with high densities of native bird species which were lost on the heavily planted islands.

The Chagos Conservation Trust is a charity (Registered in the UK No. 1031561) established in 1992 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 or membership, please contact the Secretary simonhughes@hughes-mccormack.co.uk.

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