



The Eagle Island bulrush swamp of 1973 had been totally replaced by palm swamp in 2007



Some very large-canopied trees have developed and hold their own within the coconuts (Indian Almond tree *Terminalia catappa*, on Eagle Island.)

Post settlement vegetation changes

Little information exists on the original vegetation of the Chagos Archipelago before establishment of the coconut plantations (approx 1780). It is likely that small and isolated islands such as Nelson and the Three Brothers received little attention and better represent the earlier “natural” and diverse habitat of open, lightly vegetated spaces overlying shallow coralline rock, fringed with denser *Scaevola* (see *CCT Factsheet 097*) and *Argusia* scrub, and tall clusters of forest comprised of very large tree species, such as *Pisonia* (see *CCT Factsheet 020*), *Calopyllum* and *Morinda*. Larger islands may have formed from coalescing neighbouring islands and sand banks, and are characterised by internal “barachois” (swamp areas with some surface water) which initially and at periodic very high tides were connected with the sea, and which eventually progressed through swamp vegetation to become *terra firma*. Open areas on undisturbed islands have become dense ground-nesting bird breeding areas—terns, noddies and gulls, while large trees (excluding coconut palms) and shrubs are favoured for nesting by boobies, frigates, and other tern and noddy species.

Human settlement and coconut plantations after 1800 changed this. In order to maximise profits from coconuts, indigenous vegetation was largely cleared on many islands. Other tree and plant species were introduced for the benefit of the settlers—for food, to provide shade, to brighten up their lives and for timber. Many of these plants have naturally reproduced and spread, further displacing any remaining indigenous species. Many weeds were accidentally introduced.

Since settlement came to an end in the 1970s, nature in the form of the existing vegetation has been left to its own devices in most places. The coconut palm dominates most islands but the few ancient large trees that were left in the plantations are now senescent and not reproducing themselves.

On the main island of Diego Garcia management is very different, housing as it does a modern US naval and air base with its human population and all “mod cons”. There, lawns, gardens, shade trees and a host of exotic species have displaced most indigenous vegetation to the periphery and the uninhabited eastern arm—resulting in a highly managed urban environment.

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.

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