



The Chagos brain coral *Ctenella chagius*  
fending off the fast growing branching coral *Acropora*

### ***The Chagos brain coral***

The Chagos Brain coral is one of very few species of corals in the Indian and Pacific Oceans with a range which is restricted to just one archipelago. Its proper name is *Ctenella chagius*, and it is distinguished by the very long, smooth and meandering valleys on its surface. Sightings have been claimed of it off Mauritius, but photographs show them to be a different species, and nobody has yet reported any from even the nearest parts of the Maldives.

Despite its restricted range, it is common on Chagos reefs, being found from calm parts of lagoons to seaward reefs exposed to moderate swell. It does not like extremely turbulent shallow water, nor water that is too deep and dark, but can grow into perfectly smooth brain shapes up to 50cm in diameter wherever there is good light. Such a coral could well be 50 years old.

It is aggressive when it comes to other corals, and defends its space by using 'sweeper tentacles' or long digestive filaments to kill many other species that might encroach into its patch of reef. Fast growing branching corals, such as the *Acropora* in the photograph, which can grow up to 8cm in a year, is one kind which could overtop and shade it. The photograph shows the result of the *Ctenella* aggressively preventing the *Acropora* from expanding and robbing it of the light it needs.

Such interactions generally happen at night. In the coral world, a lightning strike may take two weeks or more, but there is a continuous, dynamic interplay between the different species for space in which to live.

Sheppard, C.R.C., Drew, E.A. and Dinesen, Z. 1984. Ecology and physiology of the scleractinian coral *Ctenella chagius* (Matthai). *Bulletin of Marine Science* 3:905-918.

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.

For more on information, please contact the Secretary ([simonhughes@hughes-mccormack.co.uk](mailto:simonhughes@hughes-mccormack.co.uk)) or visit [www.chagos-trust.org](http://www.chagos-trust.org).