

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HON. PRAVIND KUMAR JUGNAUTH, PRIME MINISTER
OF THE REPUBLIC OF MAURITIUS, AT THE OPENING OF THE CHAGOS
ARCHIPELAGO MARINE PROTECTED AREA WORKSHOP**

**27 FEBRUARY 2024 AT 9.30 A.M.
INTERCONTINENTAL MAURITIUS RESORT, BALACLAVA**

**Deputy Prime Minister,
Colleague Ministers,
Your Excellency, Ambassador Matthew Gould, CEO of the Zoological Society of
London,
Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Distinguished representatives of governments,
Esteemed experts and scientists,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good morning.

It is truly a pleasure to welcome each and every one of you to Mauritius for this important workshop on the establishment of a Marine Protected Area (MPA) in the Chagos Archipelago region. Your presence here reflects your commitment to the preservation of our oceans and the invaluable biodiversity that they harbour.

Many of you are already aware that the Chagos Archipelago harbours an unparalleled richness of marine life. Pristine coral reefs teeming with vibrantly coloured fish, majestic sea turtles gliding through the azure waters, and diverse ecosystems woven into the fabric of the islands of the Chagos Archipelago paint a picture of natural splendour. Yet, this paradise faces significant threats, prompting a crucial call for action: the establishment of a comprehensive and effective Marine Protected Area (MPA) around the Chagos Archipelago which will protect and conserve this unique and fragile environment for the benefit of current and future generations.

Mauritius is proud to host this workshop, and we are committed to playing a leading role in these conservation efforts. Our island nation understands the significance of preserving our marine ecosystems.

As we embark on this journey together, let us keep in mind the global implications of our actions. The Chagos Archipelago is not an isolated entity; its health and vitality contribute to the overall resilience of our planet's oceans.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before going further, let me provide a brief historical and legal background regarding the status of the Chagos Archipelago under international law.

Historically, the Chagos Archipelago has a complex narrative deeply intertwined with colonial legacies. The Archipelago which has always been part of the territory of Mauritius was detached from Mauritius and incorporated in the so-called “British Indian Ocean Territory” (“BIOT”), in the late 1960s during the period of decolonization. The excision was carried out amid contested circumstances, and the inhabitants of the Chagos Archipelago, about 3000, who had been living on those islands for generations were forcibly displaced from their birthplace to make way for the establishment of a significant military base on Diego Garcia. More than half of them were brought to Mauritius.

The legal status of the Chagos Archipelago has been a subject of international debate and legal proceedings. In 2019, the International Court of Justice issued an Advisory Opinion, declaring that the process of decolonization of Mauritius was not lawfully completed as a result of the unlawful excision of the Chagos Archipelago. The International Court of Justice stressed that the detachment of the Archipelago from Mauritius was contrary to the right to self-determination, a fundamental principle of international law.

In the same year the United Nations General Assembly passed resolution 73/295 calling for the United Kingdom to withdraw its colonial administration from the Chagos Archipelago and to facilitate the return of the former inhabitants of the Chagos Archipelago to their birthplace.

Against this backdrop, our discussions on the establishment of a Marine Protected Area in the Chagos Archipelago hold profound significance. It is an opportunity not only to contribute to global marine conservation efforts but also to address the historical injustices associated with the Chagos Archipelago’s colonial past.

The Chagossian community, whose connection to the Chagos Archipelago spans generations, holds unique insights into the ecological and cultural dimensions of these islands. Their traditional knowledge and lived experiences provide a valuable perspective that is crucial for the successful implementation and sustainability of any conservation effort.

While the historical displacement of the Chagossians remains a poignant chapter in the Archipelago’s history, we recognize the importance of acknowledging and involving them in the decision-making processes moving forward. In line with the principle of justice, their inclusion is not only a matter of ethical consideration but also a strategic imperative for the success of our conservation endeavours.

The Chagossians can contribute significantly to the scientific and conservation aspects of this workshop. Their understanding of local ecosystems, traditional fishing practices, and cultural significance of certain areas can enhance our collective knowledge base. The collaboration of the Chagossian community will ensure that our efforts are not only environmentally sound but also culturally sensitive, fostering a sense of shared stewardship.

Furthermore, their active involvement in the management and monitoring of the proposed MPA can lead to more effective enforcement and sustainable practices. By engaging the Chagossians as partners in this initiative, we strengthen the bonds between conservation, cultural preservation, and community well-being.

It is our responsibility, as participants in this workshop, to consider the Chagossians as key stakeholders in the decision-making processes regarding the Chagos Archipelago. Their perspectives, aspirations, and expertise should guide our collaborative efforts towards a comprehensive and inclusive strategy for the establishment and management of the MPA.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The vast and ecologically rich expanse of the Chagos Archipelago demands a sophisticated approach to management, one that is grounded in cutting-edge technologies and innovative surveillance methods. As we strive to strike a balance between conservation goals and sustainable use, leveraging advanced monitoring tools becomes indispensable.

State-of-the-art satellite imaging, remote sensing, and Geographic Information System (or GIS) technologies can provide us with real-time data on the health of coral reefs, marine biodiversity and changes in the physical environment. These tools can serve as our eyes in the sky, enabling us to detect and respond to environmental changes promptly.

Underwater sensor networks, autonomous underwater vehicles (AUVs), and remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) equipped with high-resolution cameras and sensors can delve into the depths of the ocean, offering insights into the underwater ecosystems. This advanced technology is instrumental for conducting comprehensive assessments of marine life, tracking migratory patterns, and identifying potential threats.

Furthermore, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning algorithms can enhance our capacity to analyze vast datasets, predict ecological trends, and automate the processing of information gathered from monitoring efforts. This not only improves the efficiency of conservation initiatives but also allows for more informed decision-making.

However, the successful implementation of these advanced technologies necessitates a collaborative effort involving both the scientific community and the Chagossians. Training programs, workshops, and knowledge-sharing initiatives will empower Mauritian enforcement officers and the future custodians to actively engage with and utilize these technologies, ensuring the sustainable management of the Chagos Archipelago MPA.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Chagos Archipelago, with its unparalleled ecological significance and historical complexities, demands a holistic approach that encompasses environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and community empowerment. It is incumbent upon us to synergize our diverse expertise and perspectives, transcending disciplinary boundaries, to formulate a proposal that stands as a beacon of global environmental stewardship.

In our discussions, let us remain mindful of the intricate interplay between ecological sustainability and the rights and aspirations of the Chagossians. As we incorporate state-of-the-art management techniques and leverage cutting-edge technologies, let us also integrate traditional wisdom and local knowledge into our proposal. By doing so, we can create a blueprint that not only conserves the unique biodiversity of the Chagos Archipelago but also fosters a harmonious coexistence between nature and communities.

Let me therefore highlight the guiding principles which Mauritius considers crucial for the vision we have.

1. **Ecological Sustainability:** The MPA will prioritize the long-term health and resilience of the marine ecosystem, safeguarding biodiversity, critical habitats, and ecosystem services. Sustainable fishing practices, effective pollution control, and restoration efforts will be central to achieving this goal. The Chagos Archipelago MPA should set the global standard for the protection of the environment and should be seen as a model of practice.
2. **Cultural Preservation:** The unique cultural heritage of the Chagossians, deeply intertwined with the Chagos Archipelago's history and traditions, will be acknowledged and respected. Collaborative management involving the Chagossian community will ensure that their voices are heard and their cultural identity is safeguarded.
3. **Scientific Research:** The MPA will serve as a platform for cutting-edge marine research, fostering knowledge discovery, conservation efforts, and sustainable resource management. Collaboration with research institutions and international partners will be crucial for advancing scientific understanding and informing effective management strategies.
4. **Economic Opportunity:** The MPA will be established in a way that recognizes the economic significance of the Chagos Archipelago ecosystem for local communities and our economy. Sustainable fishing practices, ecotourism, and research opportunities will be explored to create new economic avenues while ensuring environmental sustainability.

5. **Transparency and Accountability:** Open communication, inclusive decision-making, and transparent governance will be cornerstones of the MPA's management. Regular monitoring, reporting, and stakeholder engagement will ensure accountability and build trust among all stakeholders.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Looking ahead, we see a number of benefits not only to Mauritius but also to our global heritage. These include:

1. **A Thriving Marine Ecosystem:** The MPA will contribute to the recovery and long-term health of coral reefs, fish populations, and other marine life, boosting biodiversity and ecosystem resilience. This will safeguard vital ecosystem services essential for food security, coastal protection, and carbon sequestration.
2. **Cultural Restoration:** By actively involving the Chagossian community in management and research, the MPA can support the preservation of their cultural heritage and traditions, fostering a sense of connection to their ancestral homelands.
3. **Scientific Advancement:** The MPA will provide a unique platform for scientific research, contributing to a deeper understanding of the Indian Ocean ecosystem, climate change impacts, and effective conservation strategies. This knowledge will benefit not only the Chagos Archipelago but also broader marine conservation efforts globally.
4. **Sustainable Economic Development:** The MPA can create new economic opportunities through responsible ecotourism ventures, and research partnerships. This will contribute to economic diversification and improved livelihoods for local communities and Mauritius in general.
5. **Global Collaboration:** The establishment of the Chagos Archipelago MPA can serve as a beacon of international cooperation in marine conservation, inspiring similar initiatives and fostering knowledge sharing for the benefit of oceans worldwide.

And finally, in order for us to ensure a successful MPA, we will need to bear in mind these key considerations:

1. **Delimitation and Zoning:** The MPA's boundaries and internal zoning will have to be carefully designed to balance ecological protection, sustainable use, and the needs of stakeholders. Scientific data, community input, and international best practices will have to inform this process.

2. **Management Structure:** An effective and inclusive management structure will be established, ensuring the participation of relevant authorities, research institutions, local communities, and civil society organizations. Collaborative decision-making and transparent governance will be essential.
3. **Enforcement and Compliance:** Robust enforcement mechanisms will be crucial to ensure compliance with regulations and prevent illegal activities within the MPA. Cooperation with regional partners and international organizations will be vital for effective enforcement.
4. **Funding and Sustainability:** Sustainable financing mechanisms will be needed to support the long-term management and operation of the MPA. Public-private partnerships, innovative financing solutions from biodiversity credits to conservation trust funds as well as international support will need to be explored.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Establishing a Marine Protected Area around the Chagos Archipelago is not just an environmental imperative; it is an opportunity to secure a brighter future for the region's ecology, culture, and economy. By embracing the guiding principles, harnessing the potential benefits, and carefully addressing key considerations, we can transform this vision into reality. Let the vibrant tapestry of the Chagos Archipelago continue to inspire awe and wonder, not just for today, but for generations to come.

I recognize the high calibre of expertise in this room. I appreciate the effort and time you have put in to be present here personally or on line. More importantly I thank you for the shared commitment to the preservation of the marine environment of the Chagos Archipelago.

I encourage each of you to actively participate in the discussions, share your expertise, and contribute to the development of a robust framework for the establishment of the Marine Protected Area. Your dedication to scientific excellence and environmental stewardship is instrumental in shaping a sustainable future for the Chagos Archipelago and beyond.

I wish you all very successful deliberations and a very happy and enjoyable stay in Mauritius.

I am now pleased to declare this workshop open.

Thank you.