



NATURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION STRATEGY

2021 – 2030

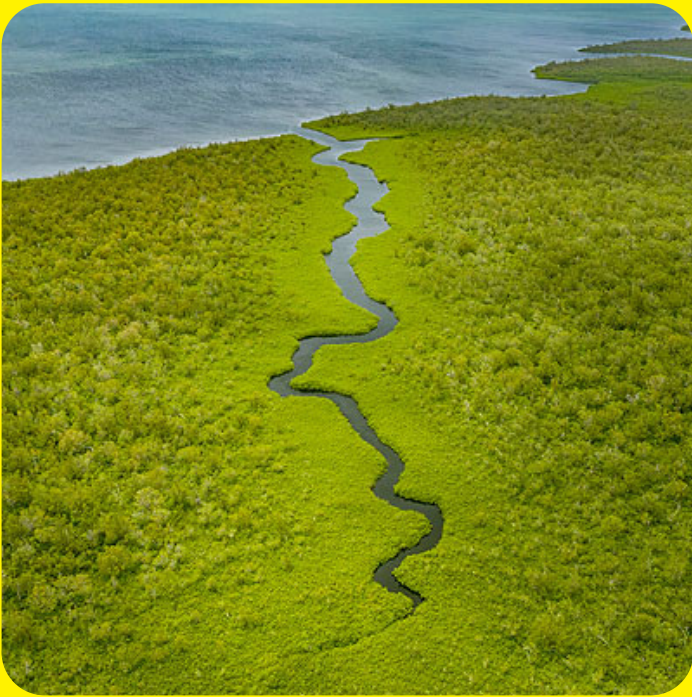
Introduction

Small islands generally have a high level of endemism compared to mainland areas and are home to a disproportionately large number of the world’s threatened biodiversity. In fact, UK Overseas Territories have 94% of the known endemic species found in the UK. About 75% of those formally reviewed are globally threatened, and there are likely to be many more that have not been studied that are similarly under threat (Churchyard et al, 2016).

The Cayman Islands contains approximately 3192 native species, biodiversity that is critical for supporting sustainable livelihoods and a part of Cayman culture and heritage for many generations. These natural assets need both safeguarding and management if they are to support sustainable tourism, quality of life, and the culture of local communities (UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum, 2021).

It is the NTCI’s goal to continue to build a series of protected natural areas representing key habitats to preserve Cayman’s unique biodiversity and to provide the public with the opportunity to experience wilderness areas.

Within that goal, the NTCI’s strategic focus is on completing the current and expanding its protected reserves.



The organisation’s Strategic Plan for 2018–2023 contains a key Environment Goal calling for the achievement of an internal target of 11% of terrestrial habitat of the total area of the Cayman Islands.

It is important for this strategy to align with the global movement towards the “30 x 30” Biodiversity Framework in which nations around the world are committing to protect 30% of the world’s land and ocean by 2030 thereby addressing biodiversity loss and the extinction crisis. Nationally, combined NTCI and Government (National Conservation Council) protected areas is at approximately 12% of total land area.

As such, this document outlines goals and strategy for prioritizing the areas which should be targeted and continued land acquisition and stewardship; taking into consideration the areas Government has prioritized for Crown acquisition in expanding the national system of protected areas.

Main Goals

1. Priority will be given to expanding existing reserves by protecting land of environmental importance adjacent to current protected areas as larger sites generally afford greater ecological impact for more species than smaller protected areas.
2. Protect ecosystems that are considered underrepresented within the NTCI protected area framework.
3. Protect adequate land for the needs of endemic species.
4. Create new protected areas that safeguard land of high ecological value.
5. Create wildlife corridors between protected areas to remedy fragmentation of habitat.
6. Fund the efforts outlined above.





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Targets

- Protect 11% of the Cayman Islands' terrestrial environment as the NTCI's contribution towards meeting international targets by 2030.

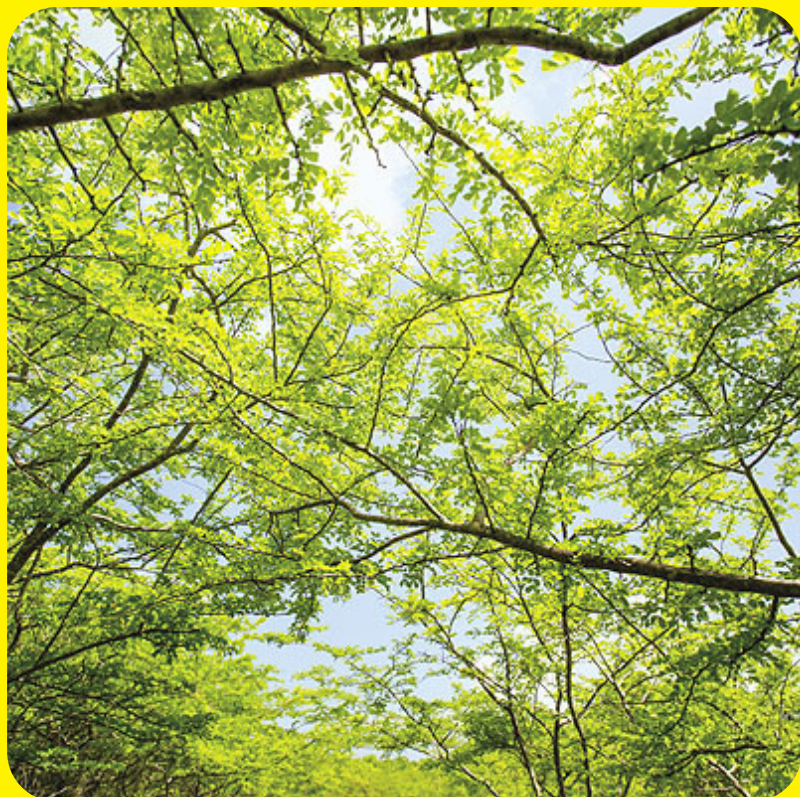
- Complete NTCI protected area ecosystem footprints.

Constraints

There are a variety of challenges to be addressed.

The increasing price of land, and the fact that natural areas tend to be composed of large properties, can make purchase a challenging proposition, especially in light of falling donations and rising prices over recent years.

Preservation of natural areas is also difficult in the face of an active real estate market and the increasing rate of unplanned development and concomitant increase in population. The Cayman Islands is approaching a tipping point, where close to half its land area has been modified in some way by the population.



Funding

It can be difficult to leverage grant funding. The Cayman Islands status as a developed country, and as an Overseas Territory of the United Kingdom, can make the NTCI ineligible as a grant recipient. Many of the larger grantors do not allow the use of their funding to purchase property, and those that will are often alarmed at the high price of land in Cayman, preferring to devote their funding to projects in other countries where more land can be purchased at a lower price.

Traditional funding for land purchase and reserve and species management has included:

- Donations from members, corporate partners and the public, including legacy donations.
- Donations to the Land Reserve Fund, including to the Mangrove Fund for the specific purchase of wetlands by companies such as ReFuel Cayman.
- Donations from International Partners and other organisations, e.g. RSPB and Rainforest Trust, and other charitable trusts.

In recent years, new arrangements for land protection have arisen, including strategic partnerships:

- Lease agreements with the Cayman Islands Government for Colliers Wilderness Reserve and the RSPB for the Salina Reserve expansion
- In the future, achieving the adoption of mitigation requirements for developments that destroy important natural areas could be a useful tool in protecting areas without the need for outright purchase as part of an overall "mitigation hierarchy" approach following internationally agreed best standards (BBOP, 2012)
- Partnership with Island Offsets for the carbon offset programme whereby sale of offsets feed into the NTCI Mangrove Fund.



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Strategic Actions

As per the goals outlined in Section 2, the strategic actions associated with each goal are listed below.

6.1 Completion of Existing Reserves:

The NTCI will focus on more completely protecting critical habitat surrounding existing reserves. The NTCI has established 11 protected areas in total, five of which are regarded as above 50% completion when checked against the proposed reserve footprint. The purchase of additional properties for existing reserves will allow the NTCI to ensure these areas, which have been the focus of more than 26 years of conservation efforts, are fully protected.

Complete protection of the reserves will bring the total land area protected by the NTCI to 8% of the terrestrial area of the Cayman Islands. The reserves will also expand their footprints to include adequate buffer zones against development pressures, habitat or species shifts resulting from climatic changes, and other conservation challenges. This combination of land acquisition strategies should bring the NTCI to the overall goal of protecting 11% of the Cayman Islands' land areas.

Actions include:

- Create a conservation easement model that will work effectively in the Cayman Islands.
- Approach landowners of strategic parcels for purchase, lease, or easement.
- Create legal document designed to allow the NTCI to enter into a contract with landowners to obtain the right of first refusal on potential purchases to allow time for fundraising.
- Establish a legacy programme to facilitate and encourage the bequeathal of land to the NTCI.

6.2 Habitats Underrepresented in the Trust's Protected Area System:

The NTCI will assess which habitats are currently underrepresented in its system of protected areas. These habitats will subsequently be targeted with input and guidance from the NTCI Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC).

Actions include:

- Create a report detailing habitat types represented within protected areas
- Ensure that all habitat types present in the Cayman Islands are represented within protected areas
- Ensure that seasonal wetlands and ponds are singled out for protection as a high percentage have already been lost and their presence is critical for migratory and endemic bird species.

6.3 Habitats Vital for Sustaining Threatened Species:

Concomitant to the assessment in 6.2, the NTCI will conduct a study on the habitat used by threatened species in the country, as well as regionally and internationally, to determine the extent of natural areas required to sustain healthy populations. The IUCN Red List, known Important Bird Areas (IBAs), etc. will be used to help prioritize these sites. Habitats will be highlighted which are least available for the majority of the most threatened species, per island.

Actions include:

- Work with the Department of Environment to determine the needs of endemic species
- Increase protected areas sizes where necessary



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6.4 Creation of New Protected Areas

The Trust will create new protected areas to set aside ecosystems that are currently underrepresented (and/or are important for endemic species) in our existing reserves.

Actions include:

- Approach landowners of strategic parcels for purchase, lease, or easement.
- Screen parcels offered by landowners or their representatives against Trust-approved criteria.
- Seek community involvement to ensure that any new protected areas will have buy-in from local stakeholders.

6.5 Wildlife Corridors:

Actions include:

- Identify land parcels of high value as wildlife corridors
- Approach landowners of strategic parcels to purchase or create conservation easements
- Research and propose safe wildlife crossing options in areas where land purchase and/or protection is not possible

6.6 Funding Reserve Management:

Actions include:

- Build on the success of the annual Land Reserve Fund cocktail party and new fundraising campaigns such as “Buy Back Cayman.”
- Capitalise on lease arrangements with reputable partners. Explore new avenues such as: crowdfunding, especially for more challenging mangrove habitat preservation, carbon finance and other blue-green project financing.
- Develop a strategy for partnerships that allows for the NTCI to meet protection goals
- Through the management plans, provide people with the opportunity to participate in outdoor activities that promote the appreciation of natural areas that are safe, educational and enjoyable through trails, interpretive signage, boardwalks, etc.
- Determine what level of visitor interaction is appropriate for each site
- Create visitor opportunities and infrastructure
- Promote use of visitor opportunities and infrastructure
- Monitor and maintain infrastructure to ensure safe, educational experiences for visitors

Monitoring, Evaluation & Review

Internal monitoring of progress toward goals and targets using selected success determinants, key performance indicators or other measures for evaluating implementation of action plans. Regular reporting of deliverables to the Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC), National Trust Council, and membership at monthly meetings, in annual reports and via other means.

Central to this includes tracking the percentage of land acquired and declared inalienable against the protection target set (11% by 2030). Seek external evaluation of the strategy by close partners (RSPB, DOE/NCC, key corporate partners, etc) for added accountability and transparency.

Conduct an annual review of the Natural Heritage Preservation Strategy (prior to the AGM) to keep the strategy current and useful for effective decision-making. Methods and priorities may have to be adjusted periodically ahead of the 5-year strategy update to be responsive to unforeseen situations or capitalise on unexpected opportunities.

References

Business and Biodiversity Offsets Programme (BBOP) (2012). Guidance notes to the Standard on Biodiversity Offsets. Retrieved from: https://www.forest-trends.org/wp-content/uploads/imported/BBOP_Standard_Guidance_Notes_20_Mar_2012_Final_WEB.pdf.

Churchyard, T., Eaton, M.A., Havery, S. et al. (2016). The biodiversity of the United Kingdom's Overseas Territories: a stock take of species occurrence and assessment of key knowledge gaps. Biodivers Conserv 25, 1677–1694 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10531-016-1149-z>

UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum (2021). Unique biodiversity. Retrieved from: <https://www.ukotcf.org.uk/unique-biodiversity/>.

Contact the National Trust for the Cayman Islands at environment@nationaltrust.org.ky to learn more.

