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Pitcairn

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PITCAIRN

The islands of Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie, and Oeno (commonly known as Pitcairn) make up a single territory, the last remaining United Kingdom Overseas Territory in the Pacific Ocean. As of March 2017, Pitcairn, the only inhabited island of the group, had a total resident population of forty-one—a near historically low figure. The entire population lives in the lone settlement of Adamstown. The only way of accessing the island is by sea, but due to the difficult terrain, ships must moor offshore, with longboats operating between the ships and the landing at Bounty Bay. Due to its relative isolation, its small and aging population, and the high level of subsidy provided by the UK government, there are concerns over the future viability of the settlement. Therefore, during the period under review (1 July 2016–30 June 2017), there was significant focus on the ways in which Pitcairn’s future could

be secured. Also considered in this review are implications for Pitcairn of “Brexit” (the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union [EU]); problems of smuggling between Pitcairn and French Polynesia; and Pitcairn’s mayoral elections.

The sustainability and security of Pitcairn have been long-standing concerns not only for the Islanders but also for the UK government. Over the past year there has been a concerted effort on the part of both groups to discuss what the future might hold for Pitcairn, and what initiatives could be undertaken to secure its future as a permanent settlement. However, the fundamentals underlying this process are extremely difficult. Pitcairn relies almost entirely on budgetary support from the United Kingdom—totaling £3.48 million in 2016–17 and £3.01 million in 2017–18 (£1.00 = US\$1.31). The per capita spending is £73,000 (DFID 2017, 2, 14). Over 60 percent of the funds go toward supporting government and civil society activities, and 20 percent for other social infrastructure and services (DFID nd). The amount of money spent on Pitcairn is not usually considered a big issue in the United Kingdom, although in January the *Daily Express* tabloid published an article criticizing UK financial support of Pitcairn (Culbertson 2017).

Pitcairn does have a few domestic revenue streams, such as tourism, craft sales, and the production and sale of honey, but these are limited. The highest revenues derive from passenger fares and landing fees, totaling NZ\$295,000 in 2016–17 (NZ\$1.00 = US\$.72). Other sources of revenue that were successful in the past are

now struggling. For the 2016–17 fiscal year, for example, the sale of stamps and commemorative coins recorded a loss of NZ\$4,500 (DFID 2017, 9). Thus, as a report from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) suggested that Pitcairn’s reliance on financial aid “will not change in the medium term” (DFID 2017, 3), DFID has ruled out ending financial aid for the time being, suggesting that “public services would collapse and the islanders would return to basic subsistence or leave the island” (DFID 2017, 12).

A second, associated concern relates to the aging population and the declining number of Islanders who are economically active. For example, the minutes of the Pitcairn Island Council meeting of 21 November 2016 noted “that the island’s aging population has resulted in fewer and fewer locals being fit enough to traverse some of the existing tracks and to safely guide tourists” (PIC 2016, 2). Of the total resident population, as of March 2017 there were 26 Islanders in paid employment, with only 8 of this group under fifty years of age. Also, only 4 women of childbearing age live on the island. As DFID stated (2017, 15), “By 2025, based on current projections and assuming there are no children on the island, the population could reduce to 33, with 18 over 65.” As things stand, it looks unlikely that there will be a meaningful increase in the population, so the United Kingdom made it clear that there has to be a “frank discussion of the viability of the island” (DFID 2017, 6). Such discussions certainly became more pronounced during the period under review.

An important opportunity for the sharing of views about Pitcairn’s future came with the visit of two officials from the Overseas Territories Department (OTD) of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) from 23 to 26 February, marking the first visit from the OTD in almost two years. The OTD officials participated in a range of meetings including with the mayor, deputy mayor, and the Island Council. Discussions covered a range of issues such as repopulation, capacity constraints, the shipping service, and the effect of child safety measures (Hebb 2017; PIC 2017c, 1–2). The OTD officials noted that the visit marked “the beginning of an on-going conversation so as to develop closer ties with Pitcairn” (PIC 2017c, 2).

In conjunction with these discussions, a number of initiatives were also undertaken or continued in an attempt to improve Pitcairn’s future. First, with regard to the repopulation plan, several new applications for residency were approved, although as of March 2017 none of the successful applicants had moved to the island (DFID 2017, 6). Second, the tourism industry was more heavily promoted with new marketing agents placed in the United States and Europe, as well as with Pitcairn’s participation in international cruise ship events in Miami. Third, the long-delayed Alternate Harbour Project was completed in March. This included the building of a jetty at Tedsid, on the northwestern side of the island, and improving the condition of the road leading to it. It was hoped that, now that these projects were completed, tenders would be able to more easily transport cruise ship passengers to the island. During 2016,

656 passengers landed on Pitcairn from cruise ships, yachts, and other vessels (DFID 2017, 9). However, these successes were relatively modest in scale and thus had minimal impact on the underlying problems facing the island.

Further, there were several other factors that made it difficult for Pitcairn to plot a clear path ahead. Perhaps the most important of these factors was Brexit. Pitcairn is an Overseas Country and Territory (OCT) of the European Union. OCTs are not part of the European Union and thus are not directly subject to EU law, but they do have associate status and thus receive various forms of assistance from Brussels. Under the European Development Fund (EDF) Pitcairn receives some financial assistance—equivalent to just under 10 percent of the support the United Kingdom provides. During the year, EDF 10 focused on developing the island's tourism industry, while discussions were held on how funds from EDF 11 should be spent. At the Pitcairn Island Council on 1 February, the importance of EU aid was made clear: “[It has] helped create a platform to facilitate our developing tourism industry, to improve our environmental protection, [and] to increase our sustainability” (PIC 2017a, 3). There were thus understandable concerns that the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union would put this support at risk.

Some assurances over funding were given at the UK–Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council in November (FCO 2016, 2), and Councilor Leslie Jacques, who helps oversee relations with the United Kingdom and the

European Union, suggested “that Councillors trust the [Brexit] process, trust in HMG (Her Majesty's Government), trust in our Ministers, [and] take a positive and optimistic view” (PIC 2017b, 1).

Despite these assurances, the overall lack of clarity provided by the UK government over the Brexit talks, coupled with the indecisive outcome of the June 2017 UK general election, further muddied the waters and seem poised to complicate Pitcairn's efforts to strengthen its economy and social structures. This was illustrated with the British pound's decline in value against the New Zealand dollar, the operating currency of Pitcairn. The pound fell by 28 percent after the Brexit vote, meaning a shortfall in budgetary support. As a consequence, the United Kingdom released some additional funding in December to cover the unexpected deficit (DFID 2017, 8). Another problem highlighted by Brexit was the possibility that the crucial trade route between Pitcairn and French Polynesia might become more difficult. Indeed, there were already real tensions around the route because of the significant amount of smuggling of goods from Pitcairn to the nearby island of Mangareva. It was noted that the French Polynesian authorities “requested” a stop to the smuggling of alcohol and cigarettes on *Claymore II* (the cargo-passenger vessel servicing Pitcairn), and Pitcairn was reminded that their use of Mangareva was “a privilege and not a right” (PIC 2017d, 3). New measures were enacted to deal with the problem—for instance, all exports from Pitcairn now require an Export Declaration Form—but the governor remained concerned

and warned smuggling “posed a risk to the very future of Pitcairn” (PIC 2017e, 3).

Another issue constraining Pitcairn’s development and that was discussed during the year was the community’s ongoing progress in adopting and embedding child safety measures—a legacy of past and more recent cases of child sexual abuse. Several child safety workshops were held, and a formal “reconciliation” process began. There was debate over how this should be planned. Pitcairn’s Family and Community Advisor (FCA) suggested two options: that a statement admitting past actions and harm done be developed and signed by those who had been convicted, or professional support be sought to work with the entire Island community. The second option was favored (PIC 2017a, 4–5). As a result of these efforts, the governor stated that he “believed Pitcairn is now seen as a vanguard of progress,” and he hoped “the Visitor’s Notice that is currently being distributed to all visiting vessels, could be discontinued” (PIC 2017e, 2). The Islanders of course welcomed these sentiments, but the issue is one that continues to affect Pitcairn, including in relation to its repopulation plan.

There were two other events of note during the period under review. First, on 15 September 2016, Pitcairn’s entire Exclusive Economic Zone was officially declared a marine protected area—the second largest contiguous and undisputed marine protected area in the world after the zone around the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. The announcement came at the “Our Ocean Conference” held in Washington DC and attended by FCO Minister

Sir Alan Duncan (UK Government 2016). The protected area prohibits all fishing save for some sustainable local fishing by Pitcairn residents. Then, on 9 November, the Island’s mayoral election took place, with Shawn Christian beating former Deputy Mayor Simon Young. Voting is compulsory on Pitcairn.

The year under review witnessed a great deal of work around improving the viability and sustainability of Pitcairn. Important measures were taken in relation to promoting tourism, working toward the island’s repopulation, and ensuring that EU funds were secured for the future. Also significant was the visit by the FCO officials. However, Pitcairn’s future as a viable settlement was now being debated more than ever, including by Pitcairners themselves. It is clear that the United Kingdom will not withdraw its funding, but the small and aging population is an almost impossible trend to reverse. In addition, Pitcairn was buffeted by other concerns—particularly Brexit and the smuggling of goods to French Polynesia—which placed the island further on the back foot.

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