

Mediating sovereignty for the environment in the British Overseas Territories

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ABSTRACT: Island-based states and territories harbour abundant wildlife, are acutely vulnerable to impacts of environmental degradation, and are often deemed non-self-governing due to associations with sovereign metropolises. Addressing environmental issues in these contexts can be dependent on governments having the appropriate authorities to engage in environmental action, but also the capacities needed to do so effectively. This paper develops an empirical analysis of environment and sovereignty in the context of the British Overseas Territories (UKOTs). Focusing on the mediation of sovereign powers for environmental action, the paper presents findings from interviews with representatives of government, civil society and scientific organisations to explore the authorities, needs and capacities for environmental action in the UKOTs and the perceived benefits and limitations that arise from the contextual condition of smallness in some territories. The paper synthesises suggestions for mediating relations of environmental sovereignty going forward in the context of Global Britain.

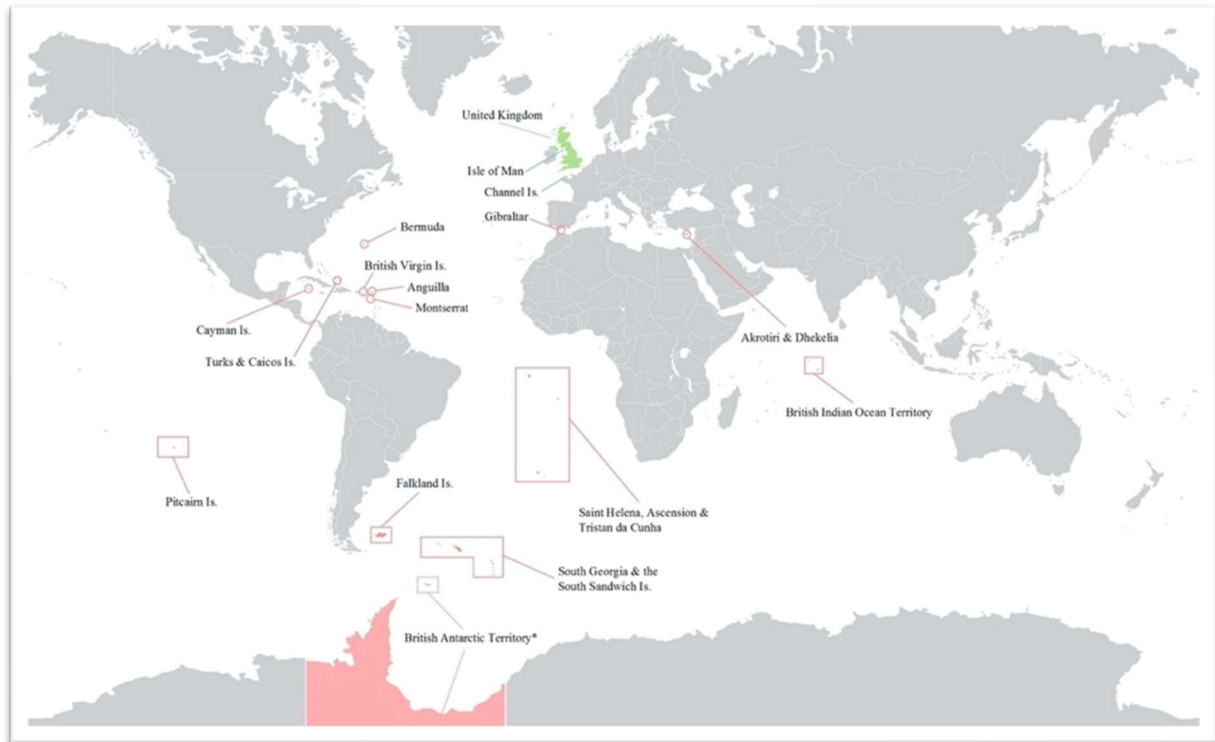
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Introduction

The rich but vulnerable natural environments of small states and territories are gaining increased recognition in international science and policy. This is particularly the case for island-based states and territories, which are home to a great diversity of unique species and ecosystems (Whittaker & Fernández-Palacios, 2007) and are at the forefront of negative impacts from environmental degradation, such as climate change (Thomas, Baptiste, Martyr-Koller, Pringle, & Rhiney, 2020). Many island-based territories are also constitutionally tied to other sovereign ‘metropolises’, making them non-sovereign or non-self-governing according to international law (Armstrong & Read, 2021). Engaging with environmental opportunities and confronting environmental challenges can therefore be complex in island-based territories, which will have variable needs and capacities based on their small size, but also the need to negotiate forms of sovereign power for the environment with their metropolises. This paper examines the mediation of environmental sovereignty in the case of the British Overseas Territories (UKOTs), a collection of fourteen populated and un-populated islands, archipelagos and peninsulas that are constitutionally-tied to the United Kingdom ([Figure 1](#)). The paper presents empirical findings on the implications of smallness for the needs and capacities of environmental action by UKOT governments, and identifies principles that could help guide the mediation of environmental sovereignty between the UK and the UKOTs going forward.

Figure 1: Map showing the 14 UK Overseas Territories.



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The environment is an important arena for small states and territories that allows them to ‘punch above their weight’ in international relations (i.e. Chan, 2018). The group of small island developing states, for example, have become an important voice in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and were pivotal in securing text on keeping global average temperature increases below 1.5 degrees Celsius in the Paris Agreement (Thomas et al., 2020). Other small island states have sought to redefine themselves as ‘large ocean states’ by asserting new forms of global environmental stewardship by establishing marine protected areas in their vast exclusive economic zones (Chan, 2018). Focusing on the environment, therefore challenges common assumptions that small states and territories are necessarily weak, vulnerable and dependent, and offers an opportunity to explore more optimistic and constructive approaches to thinking about their international and domestic development.

This paper explores the domestic and international dimensions of sovereignty for the environment in the context of the UKOTs. Like other island-based territories, the UKOTs have globally significant wildlife (Churchyard et al., 2016), are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Loft, 2021; Petit & Prudent, 2008), and are also playing a growing role – often in partnership with the UK – in global environmental politics (UK Government, 2012, 2021). This paper begins with a discussion of environmental sovereignty in the context of small states and territories in order to show that sovereignty can be usefully understood as mediated in and through relations of dependence, independence, and power sharing between a non-self-governing territory (NSGT) and its metropole. Focusing on the environment as a distinct domain of action, the paper then turns to the empirical case study of the UKOTs: setting out the background of this case, the methodology employed, and a set of findings about the benefits and limitations of smallness, as well as principles to guide UK-UKOT environmental relations

going forward. The paper concludes with a discussion of the ways in which environmental sovereignty may be usefully understood as a domain of constitutional authority that potentially enables the emergence of new forms of sovereignty for small states and territories.

Environmental sovereignty in small states and territories

Small states and territories are at the centre of a growing field of scholarship that seeks to understand both the opportunities and challenges presented by their small size and scale (Baldacchino, 2018). Within this field, there has been particular interest in states and territories that diverge from the Westphalian archetype of an international sphere of equal states, each with a right to self-determination. Studies have identified at least 49 inhabited states and territories that are deemed to diverge from this Westphalian norm either by being non-self-governing (i.e. NSGTs) or having forms of partial sovereignty as a result of constitutional ties to other sovereign 'metropole' states (Armstrong & Read, 2021). These examples offer potential to rethink and revise traditional ideas of sovereignty in international affairs (Prinsen & Blaise, 2017).

There are many different ways to consider sovereignty, depending on disciplinary backgrounds and the ontological stance taken by the analyst. With regards to nation states, sovereignty is a concept with both internal (national) and external (supranational) dimensions (Paterson, 1997). At once, sovereignty is associated with forms of self-determined identity as a sovereign state (Rajan, 1988), but it also often associated with a number of capacities, such as being able to conclude international treaties, engage in structured forms of interstate diplomacy, and domestically to enact top-down forms of command-and-control over a given territory and polity (Krasner, 1999). While sovereignty may be seen in realist terms as the innate quality of a nation state, sovereignty can also be analysed from a post-structuralist perspective, whereby it emerges in and through the domestic and the international actions taken by a given state or territory that brings its claims over territorial control and identity into being (Kuus & Agnew, 2007, p. 98).

In practice, sovereignty might be understood as negotiated and dynamic. NSGTs, for example, are subject to a "constant tug-of-war between subnational units and their 'home' state" (Baldacchino, 2018, p. 10). And scholars have noted that they are increasingly developing new forms of sovereignty that suit their size, needs and dependencies (Bosque, 2020). A more pluralist conception of sovereignty is considered particularly relevant for states and territories that have previously experienced colonization by European powers (Mawyer & Jacka, 2018). Indeed, understanding sovereignty can be informed by post-colonial scholarship that calls for the unsettling of relations of responsibility between the colonising and colonised people and places (Noxolo, Raghuram, & Madge, 2012; Raghuram, Madge, & Noxolo, 2009). Sovereignty is thereby not only a totalising art of governance (or governmentality), but is also subject to multiple conceptualisations, including rearticulation through Indigenous self-determination, which enables the imagination of more just ecological futures (Mawyer & Jacka, 2018). Prinsen and Blaise (2017), for example, take account of Indigenous perspectives in exploring how island-based NSGTs, such as New Caledonia, are increasingly asserting their rights (and responsibilities) to decide upon and negotiate the interdependencies that they have with others. This emergent 'Islandian sovereignty' is thought to assert their identity as a distinct state apparatus (of territory and polity) without severing constitutional ties or threatening the territorial integrity of their associated metropole (Prinsen & Blaise, 2017). Sovereignty for NSGTs, by this account, is mediated in and through relations of dependence, independence, and power sharing, which aligns with suggestions that sovereignty of states and territories

might be better described as a spectrum, rather than as a binary measure, i.e. that you are either sovereign or you are not (Alberti & Goujon, 2020; Grydehøj, 2016)

Spectrums of sovereignty for NSGTs can also be parsed out differently in relation to different authorities, from executive to legislative power (Alberti & Goujon, 2020). As is the case for the UKOTs, some NSGTs may also retain dependencies with a metropole for some policy domains, such as defence and security, while enacting forms of sovereign power over other domains such as health, education, and the environment (Clegg, 2012). The devolution of these powers is not always complete, however, and powers that are retained by a metropole – such as foreign policy or good governance – can overlap and interfere with parallel devolved powers. As such, when looking at sovereignty for the environment in the UKOTs, this paper breaks down sovereignty into two dimensions, including: domestic sovereignty, by which a territory and its polity is governed through legislative, decision-making and budgetary authorities, and international legal sovereignty, by which territories enter into intergovernmental treaties. As I explore in this paper, the distribution of these authorities is not always straightforward. Not only are there constitutional settlements, but there are also specific benefits and limitations associated with the small size of NSGTs that shape their needs and capacities to engage in environmental actions.

While this paper focuses on environmental sovereignty, this is not to suggest that there is ever complete or totalising control over the environment by a sovereign (be it a government or other ruler); but rather that there are particular responsibilities that can be recognised as state-like actions that are linked to a sovereign state identity. These authorities are often enacted by governments, but none the less rely upon the support of not only a domestic polity, but also input from a range of other partners, such as civil society organisations, scientific researchers, and businesses to fulfil their authorities..

The UKOTs and their natural environments

As is the case for other island-based states and territories, the natural environment is particularly important to the UKOTs. These territories stretch from the polar regions to the tropics, and boast over 94% of the unique species that the UK is internationally responsible for (numbering at least 1,549 endemic species, Churchyard et al., 2016). This biodiversity plays an important role in the UKOT economies, through tourism, fishing and research, but is threatened by coastal development, increasing storm frequency, ocean acidification, plastic pollution, invasive species, and more (O’Leary et al., 2019; Sheppard et al., 2017; Weber & Weber, 2020). Yet, the environment of the UKOTs has not always been at the forefront of UK politics. As William Hague, the UK Foreign Secretary, stated in the preface to the Overseas Territories White Paper in 2012: “We have not in the past devoted enough attention to the vast and pristine environments in the lands and seas of our Territories. We are stewards of these assets for future generations.” In the decade since, the UK government and parliament has sought to do more in relation to environmental issues in the UKOTs through funding schemes, enquiries, and briefings (Loft, 2021). Indeed, both the UK 25-year Environment Plan and the Global Britain foreign policy agenda identify protecting and investing in nature in the UKOTs as key priorities (UK Government, 2018, 2021). However, the natural environments of the UKOTs are not (entirely) a UK government responsibility.

The UKOTs are deemed by international law to be “plainly not independent sovereign states.” (Hendry & Dickson, 2018, p. 13) and the ten inhabited UKOTs are listed as non-self-governing territories by the UN Special Committee on Decolonisation. However, each of the UKOTs also has a distinct constitution, administration, and specific devolved powers, which set them apart from the UK and each other (Clegg & Gold, 2011). The administration of each of the territories is formalized by a written constitution made as an Order in Council by the British Monarch (Queen Elizabeth II) acting on the advice of the Privy Council. These set out the division of powers between the UK, which is responsible for ensuring the security, defence and good governance of the territories, and the UKOTs that take on a range of other responsibilities, including the environment. The permanently inhabited territories have legislative and decision-making structures, such as the Pitcairn Island Council or the Parliament of the Cayman Islands, and each has a Governor (or equivalent office holder) appointed by and representative of the British monarch, who plays a role in overseeing the executive branch of government and providing Royal Assent to legislation (Hendry & Dickson, 2018). These arrangements reflect the fact that many of the UKOTs have been under British rule for hundreds of years and were described as British Crown Colonies up until 1983 (Cawley, 2015, p. 5).

According to the current constitutional settlements between the UK and the UKOTs, each of the UKOT governments are deemed to be “responsible for the protection and conservation of their natural environments” (UK Government, 2012, p. 40). This means that the environment – including biodiversity – is a devolved issue falling under the legal authority of the UKOT administrations. While this rule is widely recognized in theory, there is a general understanding that the division of power between the UKOTs and the UK for the environment is necessarily more blurred (see section on Responsibility, for example, in Environmental Audit Committee, 2014). The UK Government retains reserved powers related to good governance, defence and foreign policy in the UKOTs (UK Government, 2012), which has implications for both the domestic (legislation, decision-making, budgeting) and international (international treaties) dimensions of sovereignty in the UKOTs. In practice, these forms of sovereign power are often exercised with cooperation, support, and associated power struggles between the UK and the UKOTs (Environmental Audit Committee, 2014). It is also significant that the authorities of environmental sovereignty are not the only means by which environmental action takes place in the UKOTs. Government departments, public bodies, and non-governmental (civil society) organisations across the UK and the UKOTS also play an important role in supporting research, fundraising, policy development and conservation actions. As such, the environmental sovereignty explored in this paper can be thought of as a necessary but insufficient condition for living well with nature in the UKOTs.

The UKOT legislatures maintain most *legislative authority* within their territories. This means that environmental legislation, such as the National Conservation Law of the Cayman Islands (2013), is drafted and approved by the legislatures in the UKOTs and royal assent is provided by the relevant British Governor. However, the UK government, via the Privy Council, retains an ultimate ability to legislate on behalf of the territories. As an FCO minister explained to the UK Environmental Audit Committee in 2013: “In theory, we could impose from the outside environmental legislation on the Overseas Territories, but we do not think that that would be constructive.” (Environmental Audit Committee, 2014) The UK does on occasion support the UKOTs with drafting legislation for matters considered urgent and those related to the UK’s international commitments, such as biosecurity (Key, 2019). This follows concern that the legislative process in the UKOTs is sometimes too slow for environmental legislation. Indeed, an assessment of environmental protection in the UKOTs found that “many

of the more populous Territories [had] draft pieces of legislation or policy that would remedy many of the most pressing gaps in their environmental governance [...but they were] stalled within the political and bureaucratic process.” (FIELD & RSPB, 2013) The flagship National Conservation Law of the Cayman Islands, for example, was first tabled in the Legislative Assembly in 2002, and again in 2007, but did not become law until 2013 (Pelembé & Cooper, 2011, Cayman Islands Appendices).

The UKOT administrations also maintain *executive decision-making authority* with regards to the environment, with UK support in some areas. In particular, UK public bodies such as the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), make a clear effort to forward evidence-informed decision making in the UKOTs through research and data analysis. The UK government also occasionally sets a general agenda for environmental action that extends to the territories, such as the 25-year Environment Plan, and more recently has developed a flagship Blue Belt Programme to strengthen marine protection around some of the UKOTs. Both UKOT and UK-based NGOs, such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum (UKOTCF), also engage in campaigning, evidence gathering and conservation work that supports decision-making in the UKOTs.

The UKOT governments are charged with *budgetary authority* for the environment in the territories. In practice, this largely centres on allocating budgets for operational and staff costs in environment and natural resource departments for environmental management, such as regulating fisheries and tourism. However, these funds are often limited. More specific conservation interventions and strategic policy planning in the UKOTs, such as natural capital assessments and marine spatial planning projects, are funded by external sources. The two major funds supporting strategic environmental action in the UKOTs are the Darwin Plus Fund, dedicated to environment and climate projects in the territories, and the Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), that is directed towards UK national security and aid objectives (Loft, 2021). The UKOTs are highly reliant on UK funds, because they are often excluded from accessing other international funds (i.e. from the UN) because they are deemed to be non-sovereign territories for purposes of international relations (Clegg, 2018). There are also a number of active international philanthropic donors that support environmental work in the territories, such as those contributing to marine conservation in partnership with the Blue Marine Foundation. There is undoubtedly a trade-off for the UKOT governments between retaining executive decision-making authority and relying on external funds to undertake environmental work in the UKOTs.

In contrast to the other powers of environmental sovereignty, the ability to conclude *international treaties* falls within the reserved powers of the UK government (as seen in relation to the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union, Bosque, 2020). The UKOTs themselves are unable to directly sign Multilateral Environmental Agreements, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), however the UK through its own membership of these agreements can extend the ratification of these treaties to the UKOTs on a case-by-case basis (see [Table 1](#); Environmental Audit Committee, 2014). Some of the UKOTs, such as the Cayman Islands, are enabled by their constitutions to take on responsibility for the conduct of external affairs as assigned or delegated by the Governor (Hendry & Dickson, 2018). Indeed, in the Caribbean region, the UKOTs hold membership or associate membership of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) which has implications for environmental management in the territories.

Table 1: Administrative loci of the UK Overseas Territories and the extension of biodiversity-related UN conventions.

Name	Region	Administrative Locus	CBD	CITES	Ramsar	CMS
Akrotiri and Dhekelia (Cyprus)	Mediterranean	Sovereign Base Areas Administration			Yes	Yes
Anguilla	Caribbean	Government of Anguilla		Yes	Yes	
Bermuda	Caribbean	Government of Bermuda		Yes	Yes	Yes
British Antarctic Territory	Southern Ocean	UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office				
British Indian Ocean Territory (Chagos)	Indian Ocean	British Indian Ocean Territory Administration		Yes	Yes	Yes
British Virgin Islands	Caribbean	Government of the British Virgin Islands	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cayman Islands	Caribbean	Cayman Islands Government	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Falkland Islands	South Atlantic	Falkland Islands Government	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gibraltar	Mediterranean	Government of Gibraltar	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Montserrat	Caribbean	Government of Montserrat		Yes	Yes	Yes
Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie and Oeno Islands	Pacific	Government of the Pitcairn Islands		Yes	Yes	Yes
Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha	South Atlantic	St Helena Government; Ascension Island Government; Tristan da Cunha Government	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
South Georgia and the	South Atlantic	Government of South Georgia and the South	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

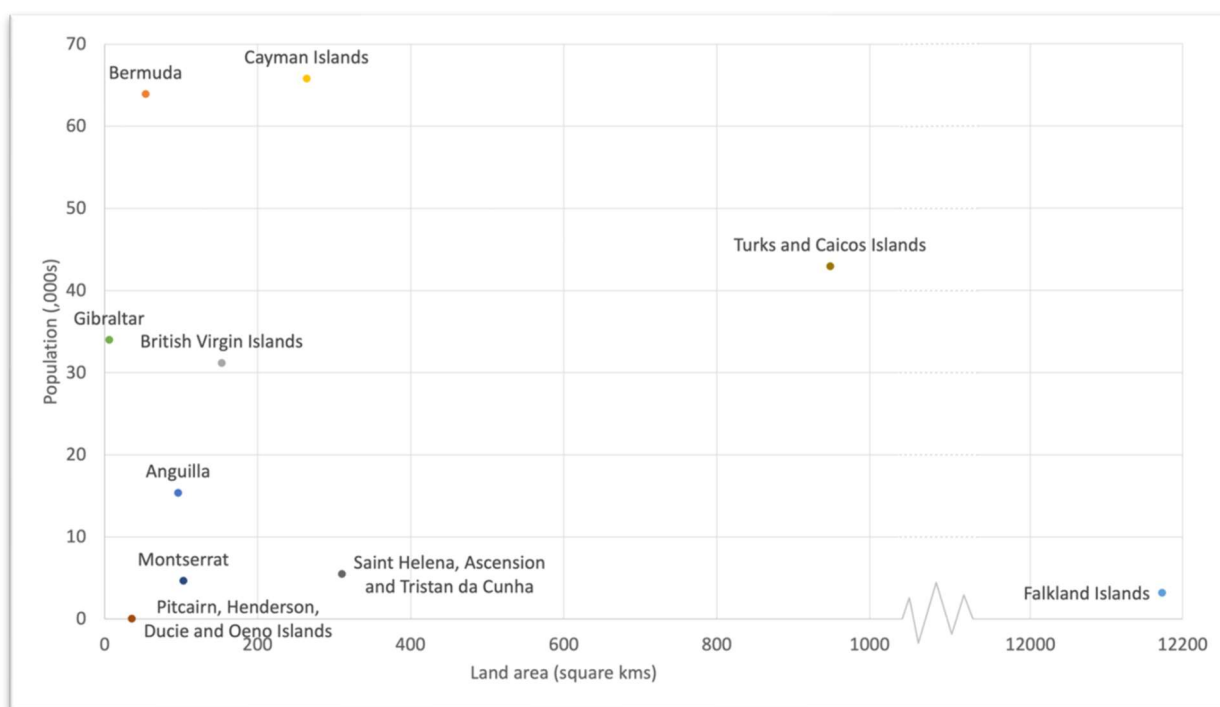
South Sandwich Islands		Sandwich Islands				
Turks and Caicos Islands	Caribbean	Turks and Caicos Government			Yes	Yes

Legend: CBD = Convention on Biological Diversity. CITES = Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, Ramsar = Convention on Wetlands, CMS = Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals.

Source: CBD country profiles; CITES country profiles; UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum; CMS UK National Report 2019 (March 2022);

As seen in relation to these domestic and international authorities, there are some generalisations that can be made about sovereignty and the environment in the UKOTs. As this paper shows, for the inhabited UKOTs, there are common characteristics found in their island identities and the smallness of their land areas and population sizes; although the Falkland Islands is an outlier on land area: see [Figure 2](#).

Figure 2: The relative land areas and population sizes of the inhabited UKOTs.



Source: United Nations Non-Self-Governing Territories (March 2022).

However, there are also many particularities to each territory based on their distinct histories, geographies, and economies, which continue to shape the mediation of sovereignty today (i.e. in the Caribbean, Clegg, 2009). It is important to consider that the UKOTs have a colonial past and present. Many were drawn into the atrocities of Transatlantic slavery including the associated human and environmental exploitation that still have repercussions today in the Caribbean and beyond (i.e. McConnell & Dittmer, 2017, Sheller, 2020). Others are active UK military outposts and are used for military purposes that shape their

environmental governance (i.e. De Santo, Jones, & Miller, 2011). Great diversity in population sizes and economic activities also set the UKOTs apart. Four have no permanent population, while the others have populations ranging from around 50 to over 60,000. While some of the UKOTs are deemed to be high-income countries (i.e. Bermuda with a GDP per capita of around US\$98,000, see comparisons in Armstrong & Read, 2021), others (i.e. Montserrat, Saint Helena, and the Pitcairn Islands) are recipients of Official Development Assistance from the UK (Loft, 2021). Nine of the UKOTs had association with the EU through the UK's membership, and therefore benefited from cooperation on economic and environmental issues, and development assistance (Clegg, 2016). Independence from the UK has been considered in the past by some of the UKOTs, however it is now not considered desirable because the UK is still seen to offer stability, security and soft-power for the UKOTs (Clegg, 2012). These highly varied and changeable contextual conditions in the UKOTs means that the distribution of the four authorities of environmental sovereignty is shaped by the specific realities in different UKOTs at a given time.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative methodology (following Bryman, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with forty-five professionals from government departments, public bodies, civil society organisations and scientists from the UK and UKOTs. Interviewees were first identified from organisational websites and publications relating to the UKOTs, and from introductions made at UKOT-specific events, such as the Blue Belt Symposium in 2019. The interviewees were mid-level professionals and reflected a wide range of different organisations working on biodiversity and natural resource management in the UKOTs. Higher-ranked officials (i.e. UKOT and UK Ministers, UKOT Governors and permanent secretaries) were not included in this analysis. Each interview involved an online video call lasting approximately 45-60 minutes between September 2019 and February 2021. Interview transcripts were analysed using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti) following a thematic analysis protocol (Bryman, 2015). Face-to-face interviews and participant observations in the UKOTs themselves was not possible due to the SARS-Covid-2 pandemic. Ethical approval was obtained from the Central University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oxford (June 2019).

The condition of smallness

Most interviewees recognised that the authorities of environmental sovereignty in the UKOTs is achieved as a result of interdependencies between the UKOTs and the UK, rather than something that is fully possessed by one or the other. There were explicit tensions noted in interviews with regards to how to best recognise and navigate the past and present colonial relations between the UKOTs and the UK. As one interviewee emphasised, the UKOTs collectively have a population of over 250,000 people and their interests are expected to be protected by the UK under Article 73 of the UN Charter. For some interviewees, this international obligation is a reason why the UK should have a heightened responsibility for the natural environments of the territories. For others, the impetus to further de-colonise the UKOTs by supporting their self-government (also an international obligation under the UN Charter) is a specific reason why the UK should avoid further interference in how the UKOTs use and manage their natural environments. Despite these divergent perspectives, there was broad recognition amongst interviewees that the contextual conditions of the UKOTs needed to be taken into account in the way in which sovereignty for the environment is mediated between the UK and the UKOTs.

Interviews suggest that smallness can be understood as an important contextual condition under which the division of power for the environment plays out for the inhabited UKOTs. In discussing the needs and capacities for environmental action by UKOT governments, interviewees pointed to a range of perceived benefits and limitations of smallness related to both the small land areas of the inhabited UKOTs and the small population sizes in comparison to other sovereign states and territories (Table 2).

Table 2: The perceived benefits and limitations of smallness on the needs and capacities for environmental action by UKOT governments.

	Perceived benefits	Perceived limitations
Impacts on needs for environmental action by UKOT governments	Small land areas means people more connected to the natural environment than in larger countries	Small land areas means more vulnerable to the negative impacts of environmental change
	Fewer people means environmentally damaging activities are less numerous than in larger countries	Small land areas means more chance development will impinge on land and ocean also needed for nature
Impacts on capacity for environmental action by UKOT governments	Fewer people means more dynamic politics, shaped by the leadership of individuals	Fewer people means more unstable politics, subject to rapid changes in agenda
	Fewer people means generalist staff with varied experience working across government roles	Fewer people means less access to specialists and technical experts within UKOT governments

The small land areas of inhabited UKOTs was identified as a benefit for its propensity to enhance the proximity of relations between people and nature in the territories. Reflecting on the closer collective experiences of environmental change, such as natural disasters, and the dependence on nature for individual livelihoods, one interviewee explained that: “local people living in the territories are more connected to components of the natural environment than they are in larger countries” (UKOT NGO Interview). Having a small population was also identified as offering benefits, because in UKOTs such as Ascension Island the impacts of environmentally damaging activities, such as fishing and tourism, are likely to be an order of magnitude less than in larger countries. As an interviewee noted: “Obviously, things do happen, but the scale at which they have an impact is smaller” (UKOT NGO Interview).

Small populations are also seen to bring benefits to the capacities for environmental action by UKOT governments. Fewer people opened up an opportunity for more dynamic politics, shaped by the leadership of individuals. As an interviewee noted:

personal leadership can’t be underestimated, especially when you are talking about OTs where the populations are often really small. ... Personal leadership goes a long way - as it does in a much more populous jurisdiction, but even more so in a smaller place (UK Government Policymaker Interview).

The benefits of having a small pool of people to draw upon in staffing environmental roles within government, was also noted to have benefits in the breadth of contextual experience that each person can bring to their roles. As one interviewee explained:

because the administrations are so small in terms of number of people, you have people that have policy experience, of actually advising Ministers and coming up with ideas, as well as operational experience on the ground. So you have people that are developing policy that are very close to the frontline of biodiversity and conservation. Who have actually checked agricultural goods at the border in a former life (UK Government Policymaker Interview).

Relatedly, a number of interviewees commented that there has been consistently more and more UKOT nationals taking up and retaining roles within UKOT government departments, leading to a growing sense of care about the environmental issues being managed, due to their feelings of proximity to nature and place.

These perceived benefits of smallness were paralleled by limitations. In particular, the small land areas of the territories are seen to create tensions for economic development plans because there is a greater chance that development will impinge on land and ocean space that might otherwise be needed for nature. As an interviewee from a UKOT government department explained: “we’re a small country; we’re always looking for developments to occur.” (UKOT Government Policymaker Interview). Furthermore, some interviewees challenged the idea that environmental impacts in the UKOTs were of a smaller scale than in other places. They noted that small scale impacts can rapidly accumulate when you have limited territorial areas. This is particularly the case because many of the unique species found in the UKOTs are limited to very small areas. As an interviewee noted:

they are small islands with endemic species and because the area is small, there is not too much space for people to settle so if people need to move around because of any problems or if there are new developments, then these species are the first ones that are going to disappear (UK Government Scientist).

Plants in particular can have very restricted distributions in the UKOTs. In the Cayman Islands, for example, the entire species of the shrub *Verbesina caymanensis* is restricted to one area of marine cliffs (Proctor, 1994).

There were also noted limitations arising from having small populations that resulted in more unstable politics that were subject to rapid changes in agenda, which made it difficult for some environmental managers to fully develop and enact environmental management plans. Smallness also had perceived limitations on capacities in the UKOTs because small populations meant less access to specialists and technical experts within UKOT governments. As an interviewee explained, in some cases there might be just one or two lawyers drafting all of the legislation in a UKOT and one minister responsible for the environment alongside a very wide portfolio of other responsibilities. The same issue was noted for the number and range of scientists available in the UKOTs to support governments with evidence-informed decision making, with one interviewee questioning: “with a small population and small pool as well, are you going to have specific experts on certain types of biodiversity and animal groups?” (UK NGO Interview).

These findings offer a mixed picture with both positive and negative implications of smallness on the needs and capacities for environmental action by governments in the UKOTs. These findings supplement the understanding of the international obligations of the UK to both support the UKOTs with their environmental ambitions and their efforts at self-government.

Four principles for mediating environmental sovereignty

With the different needs and capacities of the UKOTs in mind, all interviewees emphasised that relations between the UKOTs and the UK in respect to environmental policy were not finalised outcomes. Indeed, some offered specific suggestions about how things could be different. In different ways, interviewees each suggested that there were particular attitudes that could be mutually recognized by the UK and the UKOTs going forward to support the mediation of environmental sovereignty. These are synthesised here as the principles of inclusivity, differentiation, responsiveness, and reciprocity.

The first principle of *inclusivity* centres on the idea that the UKOTs should be included in all decisions about their environments, including those that are made in the UK or in international forums. Interviewees noted important progress in this regard in relation to the agreement to allow one or more officials from the UKOTs to be part of the UK Delegation to the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties. This specifically provides the opportunity for the UKOTs to have a platform to talk about the work that they are doing in an international forum and thereby enhance their global standing. Inclusivity also plays out in the Joint Ministerial Council meetings, where UKOTs are allowed to share their perspectives. However, as some interviewees noted, inclusivity should also extend to situations where the UKOTs cannot be in the room to speak for themselves. Indeed, one commented:

You need a dedicated resource in [any relevant UK government] department reminding everyone of the importance [of the UKOTs and the UK relationship with the UKOTs] (UK Government Policymaker).

The second principle of *differentiation* refers to the fact that each of the UKOTs is unique and requires a tailored, territory-specific approach to support environmental action. The UKOTs were described as “an accidental grouping” with such a noted difference in their geographies, histories, relative wealth and population sizes (UKOT NGO Interview). The division of power for the environment therefore necessitates bespoke solutions in order to work. No doubt, navigating different legal and political relationships across the UKOTs can be challenging for UK government, civil society and scientific organisations, but interviewees noted the importance of differentiation in order to re-centre an understanding of environmental sovereignty within the UKOTs themselves. As one interviewee noted: “If you look at legislation or policy, then perhaps some of those things are not as robust as they are in a UK context. But sometimes that whole framework of policy is not necessarily required.” (UKOT NGO Interview). Further attention to differentiation between issues reserved to UK Government and those devolved to the territories is also deemed to be important. In other words, some interviewees suggested that officials in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, or the Ministry of Defence, who are used to unilaterally exercising reserved powers for the UKOTs need to be more attentive to the authority of the UKOTs when working on environmental matters, such as marine protection.

The third principle is that of *responsiveness*, in which both the UKOTS and the UK make efforts to understand each other's particular needs and values, and respond to them in a spirit of mutual ambition and obligation. Interviewees emphasised the importance of good communication to strengthen collaboration and consultation across the UKOTs, and the need to avoid unidirectional environmental agendas focused solely on international obligations or UK priorities. Many interviewees expressed a desire to increase the extent of communication on the environment between the UKOTs and the UK. Many had distinct ideas about how this could be achieved, ranging from better use of the Governors to represent the UKOT's interests back to the UK, to the need for the UK to engage more directly with elected government leaders and senior officials in the UKOTs. Others emphasised the value of existing lines of communication, such as the Council of Environment Ministers meetings that bring together environmental ministers from the UKOTs on a semi-regular basis, and the establishment of a dedicated minister in the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs with explicit responsibility for the UKOTs. As well as the UK understanding the needs and values of the UKOTs, interviewees noted that the UKOTs should also recognise the UK as a strategic partner with cross-cutting oversight of the territories. One interviewee therefore warned against the UK "hiding behind devolution" and instead emphasised the UK's unique position to identify pressures and formulate responses that might be better dealt with as a collective (UK NGO Interview).

The fourth principle is *reciprocity*. This means that both parties recognise and invest in their mutually-beneficial relationship. As one interviewee explained it was important for the UK to continue supporting the UKOTs, because the UKOTs "actually want to be in a partnership with the UK and invest a lot of time and political energy and good will in that relationship." (UK Government Interview). The Blue Belt Programme of marine protected areas around some of the UKOTs (promised in the 2015 Conservative Party manifesto), for example, was referred to by one interviewee as an example where the UK Government should ask themselves:

what are the [UK] going to do [for the UKOTs] in return? ... The UK government gets the kudos of declaring a large scale marine protected area, but then ... has to guarantee long term funding [to the UKOT] to ensure that you can have a marine protected area that people are proud of and not just the age old saying: 'a paper park' (UKOT Government Policymaker Interview).

In this sense, reciprocity also means sharing the benefits that are obtained from enacting forms of environmental sovereignty in the UKOTs.

Discussion

The UKOTs fall under the category of small states and territories that are sometimes considered to be non-sovereign. However, as noted, this category obscures the distinct constitutional relations that have been put in place between these territories and their associated metropolises and the fact that sovereignty might look differently for different domains of action. The perspective offered in this paper of environmental sovereignty as a mediated phenomenon that is supported by principles of inclusivity, differentiation, responsiveness, and reciprocity is therefore in line with scholarship that has sought to go beyond binary distinctions of state sovereignty (Alberti & Goujon, 2020; Grydehøj, 2016).

This paper has shown that, by focusing on the environment as a distinct domain of sovereignty, the relations between the UKOTs and the UK take on a distinct appearance. For the UKOTs, environmental sovereignty is defined not only by the constitutional devolution of the environment to the UKOTs. As this paper shows, the contextual condition of smallness is another important consideration for thinking about how the rights and responsibilities of environmental sovereignty can and should play out in the UKOTs. Combined with the four principles for mediating environmental sovereignty synthesised here, the implications of smallness depict an understanding of environmental sovereignty that is “situational and subjective” (following Noxolo et al., 2012, p. 424). In these terms, the ability of UKOT governments to engage in productive environmental action is ultimately enabled by the fostering of shared attitudes, ambitions, and obligations between the UK and the UKOTs that are not dissimilar to those upheld in the multilateral forums of the UN, but are steeped in their own historical and cultural meanings. It is notable that there were efforts in 2001 to create Environment Charters between the UK and the UKOTs that went some way to define these shared commitments to environmental action, but have broadly faded from recognition and use in the decades since (Environmental Audit Committee, 2014). Of course, the constitutional basis of environmental sovereignty for the UKOTs is unlikely to be a problem to be simply ‘solved’ (and thereby permanently settled on paper). Rather environmental sovereignty is more likely to be an emergent and contingent property that may be fostered in different ways at different times. There are still many lessons to be learned and dialogues to be had, and insight might be gained for the UKOTs by considering the implications of the ‘Islandian sovereignty’ documented elsewhere, which is focused on actively negotiating constitutional arrangements (in law and in practice) that serve present values and needs (Prinsen & Blaise, 2017). This research therefore does not support a definitive call for either more or less intervention by the UK in the UKOTs. Instead, it suggests the distinction between intervention and non-intervention might be rethought. This would mean that if the UK takes a more active role in supporting the territories with environmental action, it would be carried out in a spirit of mutual benefit in response to their particular needs and capacities, cognisant of democratic processes and environmental vulnerabilities, and as the enactment of a collective responsibility towards the peoples and environments of the territories.

In future research, there is a need for more in-depth understanding of the contextual conditions for environmental sovereignty in each of the territories. This would include further research that more explicitly engages with and involves the populations of the UKOTs, either focusing on the concerns of civil society, or on elite communities of UKOT administrators that could shed insight on the tensions and enabling conditions for environmental sovereignty in each territory. Following scholarship on the politics of NSGTs elsewhere (Veenendaal, 2016, p. 149), there is also scope to better understand the role of local politics in the agenda setting and financing of environmental actions in the UKOTs. Future research can delve deeper into the pasts and presents of colonialism, slavery, democracy, financial services, tourism, and other concerns that shape the UKOTs today. Research can also look to the future, recognising that the relationships of the UKOTs with the UK has been tested in recent years prompted by the UK’s exit from the EU, the perception of a slow UK response following natural disasters in the UKOTs, and a number of policy divergences between the parties (i.e. on financial services regulation, Clegg, 2018).

Conclusion

The environment is a domain of sovereignty that raises the stakes for small states and territories, because they harbour an abundance of unique wildlife, while being vulnerable to the impacts of environmental change. If sovereignty is, as poststructuralists argue, constituted through the practices operating in a state's name (Kuus & Agnew, 2007, p. 98), the environment is a domain in which island-based NSGTs have a lot to offer in defining what it means to be a responsible sovereign for the environment in the 21st century. The future of the environment in small states and territories is therefore not so easily dismissed as “parish pump politics in goldfish bowl societies”, of no consequence to outside observers (Lillis, 1993, p. 6). Instead, the environment is a domain in which small states and territories are both pushing for greater action at a global level (Thomas et al., 2020), but also showcasing themselves to the world as ‘large ocean states’ that are leading the charge in biodiversity conservation (Chan, 2018, p. 545). In this context, the position of small states and territories in international relations is potentially less defined by their land area, population size, or military might (Rajan, 1988), and more by the diversity of their wildlife and their vulnerability to environmental harm that allows them to engage in “active (re)articulations of sovereignty in conception, legal constitution and everyday engagements with island environments” (Mawyer & Jacka, 2018).

For the UKOTs, the significance of their environments as a source of identity, economy and global standing is becoming increasingly clear; as is their potential to support the UK in its new foreign policy agenda of Global Britain. The UK's Blue Belt Programme, formalizing the protection of over 4 million km² of ocean around the UKOTs, exemplifies how the territories are well placed to showcase the credentials of this ‘British Family’ as global leaders in environmental issues. If the relationship between the UK and the UKOTs is carefully developed in a way that takes account of international obligations, the specific needs and capacities of the UKOTs, and the principles of inclusivity, differentiation, responsiveness, and reciprocity, then the mutual benefits of mediating environmental sovereignty for the environment in the UKOTs may be better realised.

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