
Preface

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Phil. Trans. R. Soc. Lond. B 1965 **249**, 258
doi: 10.1098/rstb.1965.0012

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PREFACE

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The four islands of the Tristan da Cunha–Gough Island group are very isolated. They contain a unique fauna and flora. Knowledge of these is very incomplete in important respects. Such knowledge could not only help towards understanding the origins of the geographical distribution of plants and animals, it could also throw valuable light on the factors governing colonization of isolated regions.

But it is not only the unique biota which is of scientific interest in these islands. We have here a natural ecological balance between the endemic species of an impoverished and therefore simple fauna and flora. Such islands could thus allow us to study with comparative ease the factors which control ecological stability; a study of the great importance to mankind today. Moreover, fortunately there have now been found in these islands evidence of datable remains of the geologically recent biota, so that there is a reasonable chance that we shall one day be able to trace the ecological evolution in time.

All this becomes scientifically possible because three of the islands, and even to some extent Tristan itself, are as yet not very seriously altered by the impact of man. That degree of preservation is rare today elsewhere in the world; and unfortunately there is every reason to suppose that information at present available from study of the biota of the Tristan group will soon be impossible to obtain. Hence the value of the present studies.

But these studies are only a beginning. If we are to get further information there must be some organized attempt at conservation. Conservation is not the conservation of nature. Man's destruction is itself part of nature. But it is both scientifically and aesthetically of the utmost value to conserve both individual species and also eco-systems. Often, as in great national parks, ancient eco-systems can only be maintained by artificial control, particularly by control of the boundary conditions of an unnaturally limited region. But in such islands as those we now consider conditions for preservation are optimal. Essentially all we need to do is prevent invasion by man, and the destruction he causes.

These are some of the considerations which led biologists and the World Wild Life Fund to embrace the opportunity of studying the biota of Tristan on the occasion of the geological expedition to study the recent eruption. Indeed it was originally supposed that there might perhaps be far greater volcanic activity with far greater destruction of the biota; and there was also the possibility that we should have here an island from which the human population would remove itself for a long period. The return of the population is indeed to be welcomed, for it may well help us in preserving the unique biota and unique eco-systems so that valuable scientific information can be gained in time.