Degrowth and the Blue Belt: rethinking marine conservation in the British Overseas Territories

Peter Howson* Northumbria University Newcastle, Lipman Building, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST.

*Correspondence: pete.howson@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract

The UK Government has developed a 'Blue Belt', a network of large Marine Protected Areas involving seven British Overseas Territories. The Blue Belt is now one of the world's largest enclosures of space for conservation, enclosing four million km^2 of ocean in some of the most remote spaces on earth. To be economically feasible, the UK's bold conservation targets are integrated with wider tourism, fishing, and economic growth-motivated governance agendas. This commentary argues for a degrowth alternative to the Blue Belt's development. The goal of degrowth is not to prevent increases in Gross Domestic Product, nor is degrowth the equivalent to recession in a growth economy. Sustainable degrowth provides a conservation framework for ensuring a just transition from neoliberal forms of governance that places local well-being and welfare needs above the interests of state actors, private investors, and holiday makers. In the current context of the Blue Belt, the commentary considers three nascent degrowth concepts for improving things: 1) blue degrowth, 2) degrowth tourism, and 3) degrowth environmental governance. The paper argues that instead of separating the UK from other spaces where biodiversity targets are realised, these targets should be used as opportunities to reconcile the UK's colonial relationships with the territories, to build local capacity, and resilience.

Keywords: Degrowth; Blue Belt; Marine Protected Areas (MPAs); Tourism; Fisheries; Environmental governance.

1. Introduction

Coastal communities reliant on international tourism are experiencing significant change. The current COVID-19 pandemic will likely eliminate 50 million tourism sector jobs globally, translating into losses of around US$50 billion in spending by international visitors (UNWTO, 2020). Most countries are currently enforcing travel restrictions, including all of the British Overseas Territories (BOTs). Lock-down arrangements have resulted in the partial hibernation of fisheries brought on by the closure of restaurants and other fish retailers (Slack and Newbery, 2020). Recovery for the travel and fishing industry will be slow, and for the UK this will converge with disruptions caused by the country's exit from the European Union (or Brexit) (Boyes and Elliott, 2016). When recovery does commence, the fraction of ocean species within biologically sustainable levels will likely continue to follow a decreasing trend, from 90% in 1974 to 67% today (Howson, 2020). To help protect what remains, the UK Government has developed a 'Blue Belt' – a network of large Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) enclosing 4 million km^2 of overseas territorial waters (MMO, 2019). However, in light of the current pandemic, Brexit, the continuing slowdown of the global economy (see Dorling, 2020), and ongoing decline in quality of marine environments globally, this commentary suggests that now is an ideal time to rethink conservation and development in the BOTs.

The Blue Belt programme constitutes one of the world's largest enclosures for marine conservation, involving a network of seven BOTs. The territories accommodate over 90% of the UK's biodiversity, meriting five UNESCO World heritage sites of natural and cultural significance as well as 15 Ramsar designated wetlands (MMO, 2019) (see Figure 1).

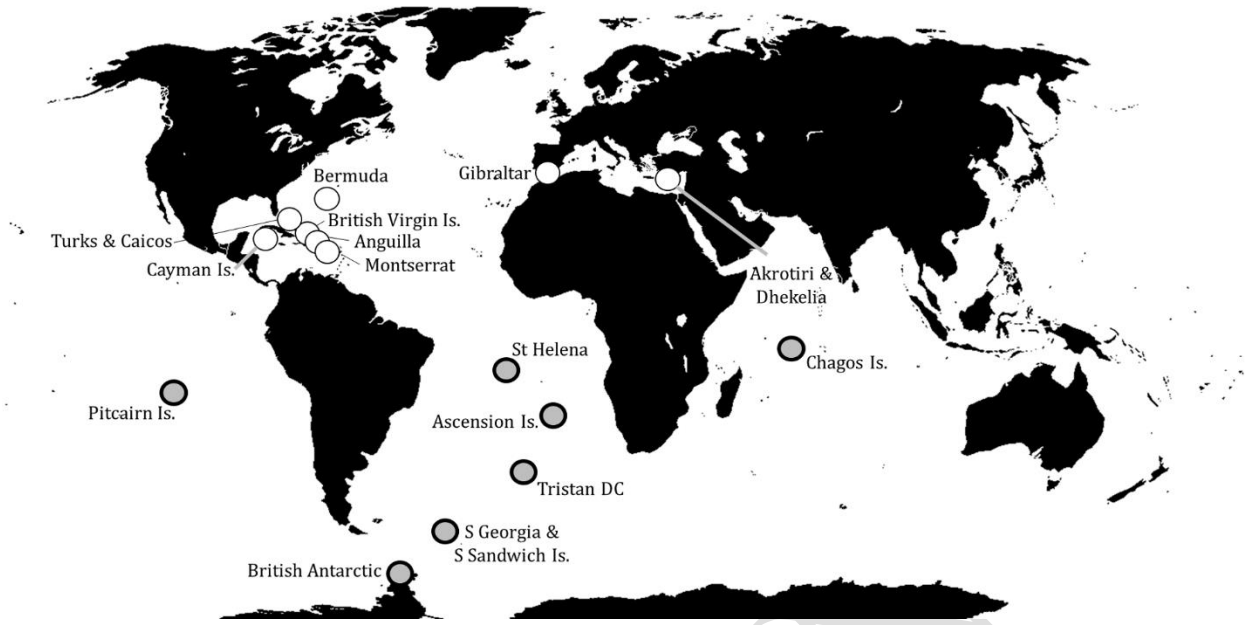

Figure 1: The Blue Belt programme sites (grey) and other British Overseas Territories (white)

MPAs have historically been established as relatively small, inshore areas of coastal waters each tailor-measured to protect specific habitats, ecosystem structures, functioning and integrity, and species diversity (Mora and Sale, 2011). In recent years, international conventions have challenged the traditional approach by calling for large-scale conservation networks enclosing up to 500,000km^2 of ocean at a time (Nelson and Bradner, 2010; Visalli et al., 2020). To be economically feasible, these bold conservation objectives are integrated with wider tourism, fishing, and neoliberal governance agendas (De Santos, 2020). For the Blue Belt, many large MPAs do not offer protection to the most biodiverse and vulnerable inshore environments, favouring instead the least-threatened remote areas of ocean that are residual to commercial fishing (MMO, 2019). This 'green growth' model of marine conservation, based on 'win-win' approaches for government, investors and the environment, can undermine biodiversity targets whilst leading to inequitable distributions of costs and benefits, disproportionately impacting the lives of local people and their environments (Chaigneau and Brown, 2016). With a focus on the Blue Belt network of MPAs, this commentary argues for a degrowth approach. Such an alternative places local well-being and welfare needs above the interests of retreating state actors, profit-seeking private investors, and holiday makers. Ultimately, understanding the local human dimensions of the Blue Belt – the social, political, and economic costs and benefits of these very remote areas – is

what the network's conservation concerns depend on. To seriously pursue degrowth would likely require drastic transformations to biodiversity policy, fisheries, the global tourism industry and its metabolism (Fletcher et al., 2019). The following section broadly considers what degrowing conservation might look like. The paper then explores the current neoliberal context of the Blue Belt specifically, before considering opportunities for shifting to a degrowth alternative. As a theoretical principle, degrowth is new, yet its applications are already numerous. The commentary considers three of these nascent degrowth concepts relevant to the Blue Belt: 1) blue degrowth, 2) degrowth tourism, and 3) degrowth environmental governance. The paper concludes with some recommendations for future research.

2. From green growth to degrowth

For the UK, the Blue Belt is part of a wider green growth discourse, promoting industrial growth to enable marine conservation (UK Gov, 2018). Green growth is flexibly defined as economic growth that is low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive (UNEP, 2016). The concept is rooted in sustainable development rhetoric, which ignores the ways economic growth eventually exhausts non-renewable energy and material resources while posing unrealistic expectations of efficiency improvements. The ascent of green growth thinking shows that things green have become big business and an integral part of the mainstream growth economy (Fletcher, 2012). However, far from decoupling material consumption with economic growth, green marketing has been shown to increase consumption as relative prices fall (Kallis, 2019). In line with conventional economic theory that informs most green growth thinking, 'eco-tourism' and other cultural services markets are seen as an economically efficient means of conserving biodiversity, without curtailing growth. Despite historical and forecasted increases in carbon emissions and resource use from tourism, green growth has become an integral component of industry discourse on tourism and sustainability (Hall, 2013). The rapid consumption of marine ecosystems including for tourism purposes calls into question the feasibility of growth itself including the extent to which tourism can remain sustainable in the face of negative impacts (Fletcher et al., 2019). The UN International Civil Aviation Organisation (UN-ICAO) forecasts that sector emissions of over

900 million tonnes in 2018 will triple by 2050 (ICAO, 2019). These emissions would take up 25% of the global anthropogenic carbon budget (Pidcock, 2016). Increasing flights to well-conserved pristine places, is unlikely to improve things (Howson, 2018). Tourism does not automatically protect local biodiversity either. More often than not, instead of raising awareness and providing a stake in conservation efforts, tourists' close-encounters with endangered species actually increases the likelihood of environmental crime and consumption of those species (Rizzolo, 2017). If an imperative for growth is the obstacle in the face of sustainability globally, then such a model needs challenging.

Arguably, the goal of any growth-based model is to maintain economic stability. Despite the proven unsustainability, fragility and inequality exposed by cyclical meltdowns in the global economy, perpetual growth is commonly judged to be a stabilising force on society, while a sustainable degrowth alternative is considered intolerably unstable (Jackson, 2017). This logic is faulty. The sustainable growth paradigm is rooted in a cognitive dissonance that ignores the impossibility of ever-expanding growth on a planetary scale. Furthermore, as Jackson (2017, 161) confirms, "our degrowth is not their recession". The goal of degrowth is not to prevent increases in GDP, nor is degrowth the equivalent to recession in a growth economy. Prolonged recessions cause unemployment, economic insecurity and associated negative social impacts. Degrowth is "a missile concept designed to open up a debate silenced by the sustainable development consensus" (Jackson, 2017, 162). GDP will inevitably decline as an outcome of degrowth policies, but in a socially and environmentally sustainable way (Kallis, 2019). Green growth, inclusive growth, sustainable growth: these would all be coherent concepts, and necessary approaches to managing an accelerating economy. However, the global economy has hit a wall. The slowdown, according to Dorling (2020), is not a temporary blip on the way to sunnier uplands, as humanity continues apace with 'the great acceleration'. Short term events, like the COVID-19 pandemic and associated global lockdown, are partly to blame. However, population growth and demographic changes globally clearly highlight a radical change in direction. The question is, does the end of the great acceleration signpost a need for more neoliberal market environmentalism, or a just transition to something else?

3. Neoliberal governance of the Blue Belt and its discontents

The UK government's growth-orientated conservation strategy of the BOTs have followed the geopolitical aspirations of the neoliberal state. The BOTS are made up of 14 dependent territories under the jurisdiction and sovereignty of the UK. Each territory has a unique legal relationship to the UK, but none are constitutionally part of it. The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) retains responsibility for matters of defence and diplomatic relations. Vagueness around UK-BOT relationships have allowed for governmental flexibility in terms of UK welfare provision obligations over time, and opportunities for value extraction (Clegg et al., 2016). Drower (1992, 49) explored how particular territories have been used for colonial extraction of resources and "scoring party points," rather than promoting the well-being of their inhabitants. Evolving UK-BOT relations have been dependent on individual UK MPs' interests in certain territories. Constantine (2015) examined these informal geopolitics, highlighting how, following a visit to the territories in 1958, Anglesey MP, Cledwyn Hughes became *defacto* constituency Member of Parliament (MP) to St Helena. With just a few brief exceptions, the BOTs have not come to prominence in UK public debate collectively (Harmer, 2018). Individually, Anguilla and the British Virgin Islands (BVI) have recently been publicly implicated in the 'Panama Papers' scandal (Pegg, 2018). In 2016 delays and overspending on airport developments on St Helena placed the tiny South Atlantic territory into the public consciousness if only fleetingly. In 2017, Hurricane Irma caused significant damage across several Caribbean territories. The slow response and insufficient scale of the UK Government's response received international criticism, particularly in comparison with swift and effective French and Dutch relief efforts on neighbouring islands (Davidson, 2017). The implications of Brexit for BOTs like Gibraltar have also helped highlight the vague relationship between the UK government and the territories (Boffey, 2020).

From 2010, the UK's conservative led government's vague leadership of the BOTs was echoed through its strategy on global environmental issues. Although their 'Vote Blue, Go Green' slogan had a positive impact on the party's image, the Conservatives failed to enhance their green credentials, especially with regards to climate change and marine conservation. In 2015 the Great British Oceans coalition (consisting of Marine Conservation Society, Blue Marine Foundation, Greenpeace, Pew Trust, Royal

Society for the Protection of Birds, and Zoological Society of London) was keen that the flood of public concern inspired by the popular *Blue Planet II* TV series was channelled towards the UK Government in order to protect 4 million square kilometres of ocean in a Blue Belt around the BOTs by 2020 (GBO, 2015). A social media campaign with the hashtag *#BackTheBlueBelt* was used to persuade *Blue Planet II* viewers to contact their local MP asking them to sign-up to a Blue Belt Charter. Celebrity advocates marshalled their massive followings. During the final episode of *Blue Planet II* focusing on the scourge of oceanic plastic, the hashtag was used every 1.8 seconds with someone tweeting their MP every 7.5 seconds (Lorenzo, 2018). As the Blue Belt would have minimal impact on the lives of UK voters, the conservation strategy was a simple way to deliver Conservative green growth election pledges. Although the Blue Belt MPAs proposed for the BOTs could do very little on their own to reduce plastic pollution in remote areas of ocean, plastic was the UK environment secretary, Michael Gove's focus. The images of oceanic plastics and the damage done to the world's oceans shown in *Blue Planet II*, he said haunted him (Rawlinson, 2017).

Images of environmental challenges in the BOTs had provided helpful cover for UK geopolitical interests in the past. In 2010 the UK's foreign secretary, David Miliband, gave the go-ahead for an IUCN category 1 ('no-take') MPA covering 640,000 km^2 of ocean surrounding the Chagos Islands. While the MPA suited the UK and the US, who operated a large military base and site for US strategic 'nefarious activities' (Cobain, 2015), it caused insult to injury for many exiled Chagossians. These exiles, many of whom had never moved away from Gatwick, their port of disembarkation 40 years earlier, had been subject to arbitrary arrest and forced removal from their homeland. The MPA existed to stymie their return whilst enabling the ongoing UK-US lease agreement (Pearce, 2014).

The developing Blue Belt strategy connected with the UK government's neoliberal apron-string cuts – enabling reduced dependence for the territories on the UK treasury for day-to-day spending, whilst meeting national conservation objectives (UK Gov, 2019). Neoliberal streamlining of funding for the BOTs was also understood as an effective means by which relationships with the UK could be strengthened. A UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report entitled *Global Britain and the British Overseas Territories: Resetting the relationship*, explained how the government's "long-

term vision must be based on a clear-eyed assessment of how the UK will balance the needs of individual [BOTs] against value for money for UK taxpayers. There must be scope to ask hard questions about the long-term sustainability and viability of individual [BOTs] without further significant levels of UK capital investment. If the Government does not think significant capital investment is possible, then it must be frank about what it will spend and towards what end" (p4). Despite the grand neoliberal agenda and significant investments from the UK Government in various BOTs, success was rarely achieved. The UK Government reported serious concerns in 2019 stating that "despite significant capital investment in some [BOTs] in recent years, much more remains to be done to provide infrastructure in [BOTs] such as Montserrat, Tristan da Cunha and St Helena, with no clear end in sight (UK Gov, 2019, p7)".

BOTs providing reliable revenue streams for the UK treasury have been omitted from the Blue Belt programme, for example, with the discovery and development of the Sea Lion oilfield in the Falkland Islands (Ficenec, 2015). However, the Government of the Falklands is expecting the economic benefits of fossil fuel extraction to come with significant environmental and social impacts as well as geopolitical implications (Dodds and Benwell, 2010). Highly populated Caribbean islands have also been excluded from the Blue Belt. The Cayman Islands are a central territory in the global tax haven network. The territory provides legal efficiencies, tax-minimisation and secrecy for many large UK companies (Peretti, 2016). The territory has also been implicated with illegal logging in the Brazilian Amazon as well as being implicated in illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing globally (Galaz et al., 2018). Despite their fragile ecosystems, territories like these are not low hanging fruit ripe for Blue Belt MPAs. Such interventions have been reserved exclusively for the least-threatened remote areas of ocean that are mostly residual to commercial interests (De Santo, 2020). The most remote territories, such as Pitcairn and St Helena, are dependent on UK aid and are struggling to navigate the UK Government's growth agenda. If the territories do grow, some will no longer qualify for Official Development Assistance, but will be too poor to manage without it (Thomas, 2018). For the Blue Belt territories, responding to growth requirements means scaling-up tourism, fisheries and marine conservation while managing the social and environmental trade-offs between them.

4. Towards a degrowth model of conservation for the Blue Belt

4.1 Blue degrowth

Concepts such as the 'blue economy', 'blue capital', and 'blue growth' have evolved as synonyms, all with the same basic premise to promote economic benefits from human activities within ocean spaces, while ensuring sustainable economic growth (Eikeset et al., 2018). Degrowth has not been discussed in the context of marine conservation and fisheries until very recently. Through an analysis of regional fisheries and maritime policies, Hadjimichael (2018) argues that economic growth is the main and principal driver behind neoliberal sustainability narratives. In much the same way as the UK's Blue Belt programme, growth is the root cause of most social problems within marine environments (Ertör and Hadjimichael, 2019). A blue degrowth approach is required to open up this discussion. Tourism and fisheries development within the Blue Belt will undoubtedly equate with increased consumption of local fishes. For St Helena, Tristan da Cunha (TdC) and South Georgia & South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI), developing economically sustainable fisheries has meant scaling up, rather than scaling back, commercial fishing. To ensure a world class diving (and dining) experience for tourists, the St Helena government have advocated catch-size increases to enable a local fishery able to meet the forecasted demand increase (St Helena Government, 2016). Elsewhere in the tropics, where year-round tourist destinations include inshore reefs, dive tourism has been shown to contribute significantly as a stressor on highly-sensitive eco-systems, necessitating some authorities to restrict even the use of sunblock whilst bathing (Handley, 2020). Tourists visiting dive sites also tend to eat the important fish species they are viewing (Wabnitz et al., 2018).

To increase catch sizes across the Blue Belt, cold storage facilities have been constructed in TdC and St Helena by the Falkland Islands-registered Argos Fishing Company. The St Helena facility was originally purposed for processing mostly South Atlantic toothfish caught in the waters around the Falklands. In 2015 Argos vacated the facility, which was massively oversized for the relatively small catches of tuna landed by St Helena's 14 independent, mainly inshore fishing boats targeting fish using a one by one method advocated by the International Pole and Line Foundation (IPNLF). In the hands of the St Helena Fishing Corporation, a state-owned entity, to allow the facility to cover its overheads

required significant increases in domestic catch sizes passing through for processing. To scale things up quicker, long-lining was promoted through provisions in marine management plans, despite high levels of shark bycatch reported by observers (St Helena Gov, 2016). To discourage independent fishermen from selling their artisanal catches independently of the Corporation, all fish sold had to meet stringent hygiene and labelling standards, which could only be ensured for fish passing through the giant processing plant. Prices for these fish were dictated by the Corporation. All other fish sales from small-scale artisanal efforts was considered 'black market' by the St Helena authorities, attracting fines and other penalties (St Helena Gov, 2017). The Blue Belt programme also allows for upscaling in the Pitcairn Islands. Although situated within a strict no-take MPA, Pitcairn islanders are able to fish inshore waters without restriction (MMO, 2019). These catches will unfoundedly increase with tourism development, disrupting the current sustainable metabolism of the islands.

For degrowth thinkers, social metabolism refers to the material and energy flows required to maintain social systems at various scales and levels (Bogadóttir, 2020). Across the Blue Belt a growth-based path towards self-sufficiency and independence increases the social metabolic rate, necessitating greater levels of material consumption, yet this is the goal of the UK government in constructing the Blue Belt. Due to their size and remoteness, the Blue Belt territories are never likely to operate sustainable growth economies (Lewis 2018). Despite this, in Foreign Affairs Committee meetings in 2018, discussing 'the future of the UK Overseas Territories', Lord Ahmad, UK Minister for the Commonwealth and UN, concluded that "if one were to say, 'What do I aspire to as the Minister responsible for Overseas Territories?' it is to create economies that are self-sustaining and growing". A degrowth model of development for the Blue Belt needs to challenge this neoliberal assumption that dependence is a scourge, while its opposites – independence, autonomy and freedom – are unproblematic (Ferguson 2013). If independence requires scaling-up catch sizes to unsustainable levels, then dependence and degrowth must be considered preferable.

4.2 Degrowth tourism

As a mechanism for funding marine conservation, tourism is problematic. As Buscher et al (2012) argue, disingenuous eco-tourism is rarely sensitive to local people or eco-systems. Even the most responsible projects of tourism often fail to deliver the societal and environmental benefits they promise (Scheyvens, 2011). Where the practice avoids causing direct harm to those under foot, tourism remains dependent upon structural inequalities and global patterns of spatially uneven development (Harvey, 2006). 'Nature-based', 'eco' or 'conservation' tourism are key drivers of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2018). The ecotourism industry is claimed to be the most rapidly expanding sector of the tourism industry (Fletcher & Neves, 2012). Yet, to get on the ecotourism shelf, outfits only need to produce a few spurious claims through disingenuous marketing of environmental performance. Potential for a degrowth approach to development has been explored in relation to a variety of economic sectors. Application of the concept to coastal tourism development has been relatively limited (Fletcher et al, 2019). Buen vivir (Caria and Domínguez, 2015), localism and slow tourism have all made important theoretical contributions for conservation and could contribute to efforts towards a degrowth model for the Blue Belt. Across the seven Blue Belt nodes, five currently promote themselves for tourism development, of which three offer on-island accommodation to tourists. Although airfields operate on four of the Blue Belt territories, only St Helena currently welcomes tourists arriving via regular scheduled flights. Pitcairn Islands and Tristan de Cunha allow visitor access via scheduled sea crossings (see Table 1).

Territory	**Population**	**Tourist access**	**On-shore tourist accommodation**	**Conservation status (International Union for Conservation of Nature category)**
Ascension Island	800	Wideawake Airfield (military and diplomatic flights only), private yacht, cruise ship	None	IUCN Category 1 MPA (100% Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) – 445,390 km^2)
British Antarctic Territory	250	Rothera Airfield (research and commercial charter	Camping	IUCN Category 1 MPA (high seas - 94,000 km^2)

		flights), private yacht, cruise ship		
Chagos Islands	3,500 US military personnel and contract workers	Diego Garcia Airfield (US military and diplomatic flights only). No tourist access. 1-week heritage visits for exiled Chagosians are possible.	None	IUCN Category 1 MPA (100% EEZ – 640,000 km²)
Pitcairn Islands	45	Private yacht, fishing boat, monthly supply ship	Home-stays and guest houses	IUCN Category 1 MPA (100% of offshore EEZ – 834,000 km²)
South Georgia & South Sandwich Islands	35	Private yacht, cruise ship	Camping	IUCN mixed category MPA (100 % EEZ – 1.07 million km²)
St Helena	4,500	Jamestown Airfield (commercial flights), private yacht, fishing boat, supply ship	Hotels, home-stays and guesthouses. Spa resort in development	IUCN Category 6 MPA (100 % EEZ – 445,000 km²)
Tristan da Cunha	240	Private yacht, cruise ship, monthly supply ship	Home-stays and guest houses	MPA in development

Table 1: Tourism capacity for each Blue Belt node

For Busher and Fletcher (2020), a convivial form of conservation requires a shift from eco-touristic voyeurism, which is often directly responsible for ecosystem destruction (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019), to meaningfully engaged visitation focused on social and ecological justice. For the Blue Belt, this may necessitate swapping fast planes for slow boats. Until very recently, the Blue Belt territories remained some of the few places in the world where travel times from any major port of embarkation could be measured in days. Decommissioning St Helena's only regular connection with the outside world, the Royal Mail Ship (RMS) St Helena, in favour of a commercial airport has had significant impacts on St Helena's economy and environment. Up until 2017, St Helena was two days away from its nearest neighbour, Ascension Island, and five days from South Africa. The Island's natural habitats were burdened by just a few hundred 'slow-tourists' each year, attracted in part by isolation, Napoleonic

heritage and the well-conserved natural terrestrial and marine environment (JNCC, 2019). The island is now on target to realise projections of 30,000 tourists a year by 2030 (St Helena Gov, 2018). Associated infrastructure development includes airport facilities and a new dock, as well as dive shops, an 18-hole golf course and a 165-bedroom hotel and country club. The cost of a return flight from South Africa to St Helena is the same as ten days on-board the RMS, where all-inclusive buffets, quizzes and cabarets provided the tourist, interested in meaningfully engaged visitation, with opportunities to befriend St Helenians (or Saints) (Ros and O'Hare, 2019). Most tourists now fleetingly reside as strangers.

Across the Blue Belt, tourists continue to rely on campsites, private homestays and guesthouses, staying with or in the homes of local residents. Accommodation platforms, like AirBnB are not widely used due to unreliable and expensive internet connections. A degrowth model of development should restrict such modes of platform capitalism, which reintermediate and thereby appropriate the monopoly rents generated through a privileged market position (Srnicek, 2017). Alternatives could include decentralised platform cooperative models (see Crandall, 2019). Large private resorts would likely marginalise local hosts altogether. Green taxes and tourist levees could help provide the necessary social support systems for local people. However, social safety nets dependent on these revenues alone could lead to increasingly precarious livelihoods. Slow tourism, which might go some way to diversify these revenues, is not unproblematically sustainable (Dodds, 2012). Slow tourism usually coexists with fast modes of travel and neither are inherently sympathetic to local welfare and well-being (Oh et al., 2016). However, broadening the scale of degrowth's application, promoting democratic and convivial tourism across the Blue Belt, as well as a less alienating economy at home means people probably will not need to go on short/fast extractive annual holidays anyway.

4.3 Degrowth environmental governance

For advocates of degrowth there is a tension between a desire for local autonomy and the need for action at a broader scale (Kallis, 2018). Relocalising an economy, namely shortening the distances between production and consumption, is a common degrowth principle, and a necessity for global sustainability even if local production does not always mean lower environmental impacts close by (Otero et al., 2020). Degrowth conservation must also be decolonising, that is, it must reconcile scars from colonial

appropriations of land and property. Decolonial degrowth is a strategy of "recovery, renewal, and resistance (resurgence) through practices of re-rooting and re-commoning" (Demaria, et al, 2019, 440). While decolonial degrowth is unlikely to arise out of current global governance policies (Ford and Kuetting, Forthcoming), successful examples of community level environmental governance are evident and may serve as inspiration for degrowth within and beyond the Blue Belt.

The neo-liberal environmental governance of the Blue Belt to date has entailed shifting responsibility for resource governance from states to non-state actors where possible, while also maintaining a colonial presence. For most Blue Belt territories, skilled civil service roles are filled by UK candidates on short contracts, usually 2-years in duration. Transience in these critical roles causes knowledge deficits in the early stages of contracts, with many staff lacking necessary proficiency, until becoming more experienced and knowledgeable of local conservation contexts, at which point they are replaced. Environmental governance also relies on networks of NGOs. The UK and BOT governments have resisted calls by a number of large international NGOs to implement strict 'no-take' (IUCN Cat 1) MPAs in some cases, but actively supported them in others. The Pew Charitable Trust and other members of the Great British Oceans coalition, have successfully lobbied for such an approach for Pitcairn, Ascension, Chagos and part of the Antarctic territory (CIWEM, 2020). Such an approach was considered desirable in these locations due to a near total absence of a domestic off-shore commercial fishery (MMO, 2018). Category 1 'no-take' MPAs in these and other locations have proven far more effective in attracting donor-support, compared to Category 6 approaches (Hill, 2017). Such support is considered essential for resourcing the necessary monitoring, surveillance and enforcement infrastructure, including expensive off-shore patrol vessels able to apprehend unlicensed fishers. However, it is only through engagement with local fishers, that IUU fishing is controlled (CEFAS, 2012). Maintaining an effective Category 6 approach to environmental protection in St Helena and TdC was partly enabled through the deferral of such responsibilities away from central government planners and NGOs, towards a network of local users of these environments (IPNLF, 2018).

To enable local capacity building in conservation policy, as well as to incentivise sustainable stewardship, Fletcher and Buscher (2020) advance a proposal for a conservation basic income (CBI) as

a novel strategy for funding biodiversity conservation that moves beyond market-based instruments or performance-based cash transfer schemes. Replacing UK government aid packages for those Blue Belt nodes in receipt of them, these CBI payments could be considered as forms of decolonial reparation or as a payment for ecosystem service provision. CBI could be considered a form of compensation for opportunity costs – the impact of conservation interventions on recipients' lives. Contrary to Wilson's (2016) Half Earth logic, for territories where 'local'/'native' populations have been erased by the colonial state, for example in the Chagos Islands where expelling indigenous knowledge has proved destructive to local habitats. People in these spaces have proved crucial parts of the ecosystem controlling invasive rat populations whilst enhancing coral reef productivity and functioning (Graham et al., 2018). Aiming to separate humanity from non-human nature is not a degrowth aim. Where human populations are unsustainably low, for example in Pitcairns, this should concern the Blue Belt's conservation goals.

5. Conclusions

The UK Government has established a Blue Belt, a network of large MPAs enclosing four million km^2 of overseas territorial waters. The Blue Belt is now one of the world's largest enclosures of space for conservation, involving seven BOTs. The UK's strategy of enclosing 48% of its maritime space for sustainable use is not a radical one. France plans to protect 22% of its marine territory as MPAs, the US has reached 26% (De Santos, 2020). The IUCN is keen to adopt a target of fully protecting at least 30% of the world's oceans (IUCN, 2016). To fit with mainstream growth agendas, these bold conservation objectives tend to be integrated with wider tourism, fishing, and neoliberal governance. In the aftermath of COVID-19 global lockdowns, international tourism will slow down (Dorling, 2020). Britain's exit from the European Union means the UK is undergoing radical changes in fishing arrangements, which will likely put pressure on overseas territorial waters. The British Commonwealth and BOTs have been frequently promoted as a reasonable alternative set of trading partners to the EU (Watts, 2017). Casting UK nets towards remote BOTs, may prove politically uncomplicated, but will have significant consequences for citizens of those territories who were denied a Brexit vote. With a business as usual

growth-oriented post-COVID-19 recovery, increased tourism may prove environmentally and socially disastrous for the BOTs. This commentary suggests a rethink for the Blue Belt, based on a sustainable degrowth model of conservation. As a theoretical principle, degrowth is new, yet its applications are already numerous. The commentary has considered three nascent degrowth concepts relevant to the Blue Belt: 1) blue degrowth, 2) degrowth tourism, and 3) degrowth environmental governance. In order to ensure the Blue Belt develops as an effective environmental governance strategy, rather than simply as a mode of re-regulating post-colonial territorial arrangements, local welfare and wellbeing must be central to conservation objectives. This convivial Blue Belt should avoid dividing the UK's growth economy from other spaces where the UK's biodiversity policy targets are realised. Such targets should be used as opportunities to reconcile scars of colonial injustice, to increase local capacity and in some cases, reintegrate humans as essential elements of sustainable ecosystems.

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