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Human Trafficking – A Geographical Perspective

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Introduction

Human trafficking is the second largest illegal industry globally, behind the drug trade. Before 2000 there was no internationally agreed definition of human trafficking. This changed in 2000 when the United Nations drafted the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Human Trafficking, Especially Women and Children (also known as the Trafficking Protocol) in Palermo, Sicily. The Trafficking Protocol was one of two Protocols signed at the time under the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Crime (the other was the Protocol on Smuggling of Human Beings) (United Nations 2000). This was an important time because it lead to a huge amount of interest in the problem of human trafficking by many governments and non-government organisations around the world. Many governments and other organisations, including in Australia, recognised the problem and began thinking about ways to address it for the first time in 2003 when the Trafficking Protocol came into effect.

The definition laid out in the Trafficking Protocol states that human trafficking is:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

To simplify this definition we can say that human trafficking normally involves three interconnected elements; means (how trafficked persons are recruited), mode (how trafficked persons are moved) and purpose (exploitation of the persons trafficked at the destination).

Most governments and international organisations base their definition of trafficking broadly on the one set out above by the United Nations. It is hard to know exactly how big the problem of human trafficking is since it is a clandestine activity; trafficked persons are usually described as ‘hidden populations’ meaning that they are kept out of sight in inaccessible locations (such as in private homes or on fishing boats) or they are under the control of someone else even if they are publicly

Figure 1: Human Trafficking’s Global “Epicentres”

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN FOR HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Reported trafficking origins
- Very high
- High
- Medium
- Low
- Very low
- Not reported

SOURCE: UNODC (2005)

Source: http://untotheleastinternational.org/images/_44425220_human_traffick_416map.gif
visible (such as being watched by someone whilst on the street begging or selling flowers, for example). Moreover, the profits from human trafficking often go through a process of money laundering making it hard to trace activities of traffickers. Despite these problems, some international organisations working on the problem have come up with some estimate to help establish the scale of human trafficking globally and within various regions of the world. Some of these (taken from the UN-GIFT 2008) include:

Numbers of trafficked persons:
- The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates the minimum number of persons in situations of forced labour (including in the sex industry) as a result of being trafficked to be 2.5 million at any one time; of these 1.4 million are in the Asia-Pacific region, 270,000 in industrialised countries, 250,000 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 230,000 in the Middle East and North Africa, 200,000 in countries with economies in transition (such as the Central Asian Republics), and 130,000 in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- According to a United States government sponsored research project (2006) approximately 800,000 people are trafficked across borders globally at any one time. This does not, of course, include those who are trafficked internally and whose numbers may be equally as large or greater.
- The non-government organisation (NGO) Free the Slaves estimates that 27 million slaves exist in the world today. According to them, more than 1.3 million people are enslaved in Latin America and the Caribbean, nearly 1 million in Africa and the Middle East, and 24 million in Asia.

Profits:
- The ILO estimates that globally USD 31.7 million profits are generated annually from the exploitation of trafficked persons, half of which (USD 15.5 million) is generated in industrialised countries.

Scale:
- No region or country in the world is deemed to be immune from human trafficking but South Asia, Southeast Asia and Eastern/Southern Europe are considered ‘epicentres’ of human trafficking (see Map One, below).

One of the problems with the way human trafficking has been discussed is the overriding focus on women and girls trafficked into the sex industry (for example, Skinner 2008, Kara 2009). Consequently much more information for all regions globally exists concerning this particular dimension of human trafficking. In an effort to reduce human trafficking a lot of resources have been put into prosecuting traffickers with other areas of counter – human trafficking not given quite so much attention. This means protecting victims of trafficking (for example by providing them with adequate shelter and psycho-social services) and preventing human trafficking (for example by educating poor and vulnerable communities or by providing vulnerable groups with income earning opportunities to reduce their poverty) fall behind efforts to prosecute traffickers.

I now turn to human trafficking through brief case studies which help illustrate the geographical reach of human trafficking, excluding cases of the sex industry. In the conclusion of the paper I briefly review what these different trends mean for the way human trafficking is understood and expressed.

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Human Trafficking: A Complex Issue

The following three brief case studies highlight some of the different manifestations of human trafficking that occur outside the sex industry. These are: boys trafficked from South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan) to the Middle East (United Arab Emirates) as camel jockeys; men trafficked internally in the Philippines for removal of their kidneys; and the trafficking of disabled persons into a range of industries.

Child Camel Jockeys in the Middle East

Asghar (2005: 37) has documented the way boys from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are recruited around five years of age to be camel jockeys when they are normally sold by their parents to agents. The agents go around villages and towns in poor districts and provinces in these countries and offer to take male children away to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to work as camel jockeys. They tell parents that the children will earn large sums of money, some of which will be sent home to the families. However parents are deceived about the conditions of work and are normally lead to believe that the children are going to good jobs and that they will have a better future than if they remain at home. Most of the children themselves do not know who is taking them abroad or for what purpose. None know they would become camel jockeys.

Upon arrival children are transferred to azbas (camel training complexes) in the desert. The children are subject to several forms of abuse during their sojourns including lack of food and electric shocks as punishment. Lack of food is common as their owners try to maintain their weight at less than 20 kg for racing purposes. Deaths and injuries of children during racing is another major concern. If children die as a result of an accident during a race they are usually buried straight away so as to avoid police investigations of the death.

Children also do not leave the complex. They sleep on cardboard boxes and are therefore prone to scorpion bites. The children rise at 4 am to begin exercising the camels. Every day they take the camels for rides until 11 am and then allowed to rest for two hours before feeding and cleaning the camels and
then exercising them again until nightfall. The children are supposed to be paid for their work but almost always the agent takes the salary and keeps it him/herself without passing any on to either the child or his family.

Running away is a virtual impossibility for children deployed as camel jockeys since the azbas are usually in remote desert locations. Usually children leave when they become too old and/or heavy and are no longer considered suitable for camel racing purposes. Other children are sent home because they become seriously injured whilst racing. Police or immigration rescues are virtually unknown in the azbas.

Internal Trafficking in the Philippines for Selling Organs

The Philippines has been dubbed one of the ‘top five’ organ trafficking nations in the world, according to the World Health Organisation, with the others including China, Pakistan, Egypt and Columbia. In 2002 the Philippines government issued the ‘National Policy on Kidney Transplantation from Living Non-Related Donors (LNRDs)’ that recommends living ‘donors’ undergo counselling and medical evaluations. It was this law that opened the way for a lucrative underground kidney trade.

One example was in 2007, when the Philippine police uncovered a trafficking ring that involved recruiting adults (mainly men) by offering large sums of money for the sale and removal of their kidneys. Two victims gave sworn statements and provided detailed information about the modus operandi of organ trafficking. Victims were recruited by being offered large sums of money (in this case PP300,000 or USD 7500 each). After agreeing they were brought to a hospital for a check-up then back to the province where they came from.

Three days later they were brought to the NKTI (National Kidney Transplant Institute) for more tests then asked to wait in the kidney broker’s house. After two weeks they were brought to a different hospital and the operations were performed. The kidney providers then went back to their homes three days later and were paid only PP 100,000 instead of the promised PP300,000. Victims/providers almost always stay at the house
of the broker between the time they have the tests and the time they are scheduled for the operation. In this way it becomes difficult for the provider to change their mind or ‘escape’. Providers are ‘reminded’ that the broker has already spent a lot of money on them for transportation, completion of forms, tests, and food/ accommodation. This makes it difficult to back-out of this arrangement.

In this case there were a range of different actors involved in the organ trafficking process including the recruiter, his assistant (who accompanied the donors to hospital for check-ups), the driver of the van who ferried the donors, the boss running the supply of organ providers, his mother who owned the house where the victims stayed, and the transplant surgeon and his team who organized the sale and removal (themselves operating through internationally organized operators connecting with patients in demand countries).

The scope of the problem in the Philippines and elsewhere is largely unknown and rests on anecdotal and piecemeal evidence. One Philippine NGO data gathering exercise carried out in three districts of Batangas province, Southern Luzon, over six days for example, located more than 200 providers. From information they provided it was revealed that 6 hospitals were involved in the removal of the organs, and that many of the donors did not receive the full amount promised to them. The recipients in these cases were mainly wealthy Japanese and Arabs who travelled to the Philippines as ‘transplant tourists’. Early media reports on the issue also cited evidence that prisoners were selling kidneys in order to have their sentences reduced (see Yea 2009).

**Trafficking of People with Disabilities**

Disabled people, especially in the developing world where social welfare services are fewer, are often prime targets for traffickers. They are often deployed in begging or in brothels, but recent reports found trafficked disabled people in factories as well. In many cultures disabled people are seen as a shame or burden on their families and are therefore easily recruited by traffickers from their families (World Vision Asia-Pacific 2009, p. 40). In Thailand, UNICEF has claimed that many brothel owners deliberately target deaf girls and women because they are less able to communicate their situations to clients, police or others who might be in a position to help them (cited in World Vision Asia-Pacific 2009, p. 40).

People with disabilities are also demanded by organised begging rings in Asia, Latin America, Africa and Southern Europe. Because they are thought to generate more sympathy – and therefore more money – traffickers often target children born with disabilities and disfigurements and send them to the streets to beg where they are constantly watched by an overseer.

In India and Bangladesh this is very common with many previously healthy, normally developing children thought to also have been deliberately mutilated and disfigured by traffickers. One report in India suggests joints of the bones of children who are abducted or sold are injected with bleach which produces infection and, eventually, amputation. Afterwards the children are sent to the street to beg, often for upwards of 15 hours a day. Often these children are bought from impoverished parents with false promises that the children will be provided with work and an education. Tourism is thought to fuel this business since disfigured child beggars are usually deployed in areas where there are high numbers of foreign tourists who tend to be highly sympathetic to the plights of these children, not knowing the circumstances that lead to their begging (see Child Right 2006).

In China in 2007 more than 1300 people were rescued from forced labour in brick kilns in a number of government-initiated rescues. Many of them were children and around one-third were disabled. The trafficking of disabled children into brick kilns was discovered after hundreds of parents posted ‘missing person’ signs outside railway stations where they thought their children may have been abducted from (Asia News, 18 June 2007).

**Conclusion**

The above case studies provide just a few examples to illustrate the complex nature of human trafficking globally. Other sectors where trafficking has been documented include for begging (for example, Surtees 2005), domestic servitude (for example, Anti-Slavery International 2006), in the mining, fishing, agricultural and construction sectors (for example, OSCE 2009), and in small factories and sweatshops producing goods such as garments.
Through the case studies it is possible to see that human trafficking is an issue that goes well beyond the stereotypical understandings of women and girls in the sex industry. Trafficking happens equally to men and boys as it does to women and girls, and often the sectors into which different populations are trafficked are gender and age specific. Similarly, in geographical terms, trafficking occurs both internally (within a country, as in the cases of organ trafficking and disabled person trafficking illustrate) and transnationally (between two or more countries, as the case of the child camel jockeys illustrates).

When various governments began to enact laws against human trafficking and slavery after the UN Protocol was signed in 2000 they nonetheless focused on the sex industry and women and girls, leaving some of these other types of human trafficking out. The large number of prosecutions globally for ‘sex traffickers’ may fuel the perception that the sex industry is numerically the most important sector where trafficking occurs and that it is a female-specific phenomenon but the picture is more complex.

**STUDENT ACTIVITIES**

7. The three case studies (boys trafficked from South Asia to the Middle East as camel jockeys; men trafficked internally in the Philippines for kidney removal and the trafficking of disabled persons into a range of industries) provide some insight into the age and gender of those involved. Provide a summary diagram for each case study showing the links between those being trafficked and the people involved in the trafficking. What is the overriding reason for these injustices being performed?

8. Photo analysis. Study the three photos by completing the following for each:
   
   a. Copy this table into your notes and describe your observations in detail.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Activity/ies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   b. Use your observations and describe four things that you infer from the photograph.

   c. Now list all the questions that the photograph raises for you. Share these with others in the class.

   d. How could you get answers to your questions?

9. Describe the main difficulties in overcoming this global problem.

10. Outline what the UN is trying to do to combat this problem. Go to <http://www.no-trafficking.org/> and summarise some of the strategies being implemented.

11. Go to <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm> and read the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Identify the articles that are being contravened in the case studies described in this article.

12. Take action! Use the websites listed to develop an awareness campaign at your school about the issue of human trafficking. What other action can you take regarding this issue?

**Further Reading**


**Further Information and Resources:**

UN-GIFT: <http://www.ungift.org/>

International Organisation for Migration (IOM): <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/pid/748>

UN-IAP (United Nations – Inter-Agency Project in the Greater Mekong Sub-region): <http://www.no-trafficking.org/>

Free the Slaves: <http://www.freethechildren.net/Page.aspx?pid=183>

Save the Children International: <http://www.savethechildren.org/emergencies/protection/?WT.mc_id=1109_hp_prog_protect>


ECPAT International: <http://www.ecpat.net/EI/index.asp>

La Strada – European Network Against Trafficking in Human Beings: <http://www.lastradainternational.org/?main=traffickinghumanbeings>
It’s 7th November 2008. Looking at the radar of the merchant ship, *CEC Future*, owned by Danish company Clipper Projects, the captain fears the worst. The ship’s lookout has spotted that a speedboat, with armed men, is gaining ground. The 13-man crew has been on alert since entering the Gulf of Aden (Figure 1), between Somalia and Yemen. Half of all global hijackings take place in this region. Fire hoses are at the ready to help the crew to resist attack by pirates who have increasingly held ships to hostage in this area.

On captain’s orders, the ship changes course and increases speed to try to get away. But a rocket-propelled grenade cuts across its bows. The captain observes the pirates taking aim at the crew, and gives in. The pirates board the ship, and order the captain to make for Eyl, beginning a two-month ordeal for the crew.

Rising Trends

This story is one of 406 piracy incidents which took place globally in 2009. The number is increasing sharply (Figure 2). In this case, the ship’s owners were advised to do nothing, but sit and wait. A few days after capture, the ship reached Eyl, a Somali port used by pirates. The CEO of Clipper Projects received a phone call from a negotiator for the pirates, demanding US$7m (A$7.8m) ransom. He threatened that a lack of response would result in the ship being capsized.

The company made an offer of US$300 000 (A$333 000). The pirates reduced their ransom to US$5 million (A$5.5 million), but refused to go lower. The company insisted on a sum under
US$2 million. Over two months, and with threats to the safety of the crew, agreement was reached for between US$1 and $2 million; the owners never revealed the exact amount. The money was delivered to the ship sealed in a watertight container by a private security company.

Once payment had been made, dozens of onshore shopkeepers and traders crowded on-board, wanting payment for two months’ supplies. In return for credit, they charged hugely inflated prices. After arguments, they left 16 hours later, several hundred thousand dollars richer between them. After costs, such as hiring the boat and weapons, the pirates divided the remaining 30 per cent of the ransom and left.

Globally, piracy cost shipping companies US$60–70 million in 2008. Everyone feels the effect of this through higher prices of consumer goods. Shipping companies, faced with high security costs, insurance premiums, ransoms and the extra fuel for longer routes that divert away from the Gulf, pass on the increased costs in their fees, so that these are reflected in prices on the high street.

**The Wider Picture**

According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), of the 406 attacks in 2009 (Figure 3):

- not all were successful. 34 (or 1 in 9) resulted in successful hijackings. 153 vessels were boarded, 49 vessels hijacked and 120 vessels were fired upon.
- a total of 1052 crewmembers were taken hostage, 68 were injured, and eight were killed.
- over half of the attacks were by Somali pirates. Of the 49 successful hijackings, Somali pirates took 47.

As Figure 3 shows, other regions of concern to ship owners and their crews in 2009 included:

- the South China Sea (in which nine reported attacks occurred, all successful);
- The Straits of Malacca in Malaysian waters (with 14);
- Off the Indonesian coast (28);
- In the anchorage off the port of Chittagong in Bangladesh (12 – ten of which were successful);
- Nigerian waters, where 20 were reported in 2009, but at least the same number again went unreported. Eight of the 20 were in the area around the largest port, Lagos. Nigerian attacks have involved violent robbery of the crew, rather than possession of the ship. In three of the last five attacks in 2009, the port authority or Nigerian navy was informed, yet but no vessel received any assistance and authorities refused to become involved.

**Who Are The Pirates?**

In 2008, the BBC reported that pirate gangs normally consist of three ‘types’:

- ex-fishermen – the ‘brains’, who know the sea. Piracy has been a problem in Somali waters since the 1990s when traditional fishing methods of Somali fishermen lost out to illegal trawlers raiding their waters. These trawlers took advantage of Somalia’s lack of government in fishing there.

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**Figure 3: Global distribution of piracy events in 2009**

What Happens To The Ransom Money?

Piracy is difficult to monitor as a transnational crime. Somalia is poorly governed, with few rules about money transfers, or means of investigating them. There is no need for pirates to launder ransom money because of the Somali financial system, known as ‘hawala’. It works through trust and honour, and is spoken, carried out without documentation, bypassing banks and other financial institutions. In different times, it is honest, and encourages trust between people; pirates exploit this, making it impossible to track ransom money. Hawala companies in the developed world have become regulated in recent years, but within Somalia money transactions are difficult to trace.

Piracy has developed into a mini-economy. As the story of CEC Future above makes clear, the hi-jackers themselves do not get all the money. Piracy involves hundreds of people, each earning a share of the ransom. A UN report from Eyl showed how typical spoils might be divided (Figure 5). The UN found that others earn huge money from piracy, including:

- security companies,
- lawyers
- negotiators
- their contacts in ports in the Gulf of Aden.

Government officials and armed groups controlling different territories may get their share too.

**Figure 5: How the spoils from piracy are typically divided up**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People involved in the hijack</th>
<th>% share</th>
<th>Amount on a US $2 million ransom (in US$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marine Pirates – who carry out the actual hijacking</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>600 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shore groups who control territory where the pirates are based</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>200 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local community (elders and local officials)</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>200 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financier (who arranges the finance)</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>400 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsor (who puts up the initial money)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>600 000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Derived from several BBC News reports – www.news.bbc.co.uk

Costs too are high. Pirates use speedboats with outboard motors, often launched from larger ‘mother ships’ at sea. They are often equipped with rocket-propelled grenades and AK-47s. Weapons come from two sources:
• Yemen, across the Gulf of Aden from Somalia;
• Weapons dealers in Mogadishu, the Somali capital.

A number of rumours circulate about how piracy is controlled, and the extent to which outside interests use piracy. Theories include that:
• it attracts big-time global criminals;
• it is managed out of London;
• the ship owners themselves are involved
• the ransom money is laundered by crime syndicates in Gulf states e.g. Dubai.

However, the accepted view is that, with so many people taking shares of the ransom money, Somali piracy is unlikely to attract major crime organisations. But there are fears that it could grow, like South American drug trading.

Fighting The Piracy Threat
Controlling and fighting the threats of piracy is difficult. Pirates move fast and at night. Once pirates have control of a ship, military action is difficult because it threatens the safety of hostages. At least nine countries (including Germany, India and Russia) have sent warships to the Gulf of Aden and the waters off Somalia. Their target area extends over a quarter of the Indian Ocean, making it almost impossible to monitor ships and speedboats.

One difficulty is that there is no international law of the sea or legal system for dealing with those accused of piracy. There have been attempts to bring pirates to trial but these are always difficult to enforce. Some ship owners argue that a UN international court is needed, perhaps with an international prison for those convicted. Some progress is being made; in December 2008, UN Security Council approved a resolution allowing countries to pursue Somali pirates on land as well as at sea, extending the powers they already have to enter Somali waters to chase pirates. But while Somalia has little effective government, lawlessness on land and offshore will only grow.

Because international law presents so many difficulties, private organisations are filling the void. The International Chamber of Commerce has set up its own Commercial Crime Services (CCS), to which companies can subscribe. Its members include the legal profession, law enforcers, banking, insurance, and companies dealing with shipping, transport and trade, intellectual property and IT. CCS is sub-divided into three specialised Bureaux, which assist in commercial crime.

• The International Maritime Bureau (IMB) – for the prevention of trade finance, maritime, transport and trade fraud and malpractice; it has a separate Piracy Reporting Centre, which is dedicated to the suppression of piracy and armed robbery against ships.
• The Financial Investigation Bureau (FIB) – for commercial banks and the financial services sector and investors, to prevent financial fraud and anti-money laundering services that help its members to avoid financial scams.
• The Counterfeiting Intelligence Bureau (CIB) – an organisation for combating counterfeit products, and protecting its members from intellectual property and copyright abuse.

In the 20 years of its existence, it claims to have saved its members billions of dollars by assisting and advising in preventative measures to protect against physical hijack, financial fraud and the recovery of lost money. But this still represents a fraction of what is at stake, and the costs of retrieval are very high.

The Future Outlook
Whilst the number of 2009 incidents has almost doubled off the coast of Somalia, the percentage of hijackings that prove successful is actually reducing. This is almost certainly because of the increased presence of international navies, together with increased awareness and quick response by ships’ Masters in the region. As more countries take part in preventative action by sending warships, this trend may continue. But there is little doubt at present that the pirates have an upper hand.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES
6. Copy the following flow chart into your notes to summarise the many factors that have lead to so many Somali people turning to piracy (include data from Figure 4). Begin with the terms ‘poverty’ and ‘Somalia in conflict’ in the first square.

7. Write a summary statement about the socio-economic pressures that Somalia is experiencing.
8. Why is it difficult for organisations to track the ransom money paid to pirates?
9. Make a list of all the responses being used to counteract piracy. Rank your list, placing the action you consider the most to the least effective in order.
10. Go to the International Chamber of Commerce website (weblink?) and view the interactive map. Zoom in to the Gulf of Aden and locate and describe three successful pirate attacks. What was the cargo on board?
11. Commercial ships are not the only ones that are attacked by pirates. See if you can find examples of other vessels being attacked. What do the pirates demand in these situations?
12. Go to another region such as Asia. List four different types of vessels that have been hijacked in this region. Why is almost any ship under threat?
13. Go to the piracy prone areas and warnings part of the website. Which regions are listed? What is being done in particular in the Gulf of Aden and Somali coast?
14. Has successful piracy decreased over time? What reasons might there be for this trend?
15. Go to two news sites – The Australian and the BBC – and search for recent piracy articles. Write a summary of your findings.
16. Conduct a debate on the following: that the growing gap between the rich and the poor is the main cause of people turning to piracy.

Websites For Researching Piracy
• International Chamber of Commerce – International Crime Services – <http://www.icc-ccs.org/> This website has excellent maps showing piracy attacks and up-to-date reports on piracy since 2006.
• ‘The Australian’ news website – <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/> and then key in ‘piracy’ into the search facility for up-to-date reports
• BBC News – <www.news.bbc.co.uk> – and then key in ‘piracy’ into the search facility for up-to-date reports
A Tale Of Two Islands

In November, last year, an enormous iceberg 500 metres long and stretching 50 metres high above the waves drifted past a sub-Antarctic island. A few years earlier the fringing reef surrounding a tiny coral island in the Seychelles experienced a particularly severe bleaching event. For both ancient islands these were unusual events: icebergs do not often venture so far north and healthy coral normally survives well in balmy equatorial seas. Cousin Island (4° 19’ S, 55° 39’ E) is a tiny 29 hectare symmetrical spec in the Indian Ocean while Macquarie Island (54° 36’ S 158° 54’ E) is an elongated ridge stretching over some 12,785 hectares in the Southern Ocean.

Geologically, both islands are unusual. Among subantarctic islands, Macquarie is the only one to be totally oceanic in origin. It is a rare example of uplifted oceanic crust. The sinuous island has not been formed by volcanic activity. Similarly, Cousin’s fringing reef is not built around a volcano. It abuts ancient granite rocks that are remnants of the break up of Gondwana 64 million years ago, when India rafted away from Madagascar to leave behind the ancient granite core of the Mascarene Platform that underlies many islands in the Seychelles.

Both ancient islands have had their biogeography turned upside down by human intervention. In 2010, the United Nations International Year of Biodiversity, Cousin reminds us of just how successful conservation efforts can prove to be. At Macquarie, the world watches on as the Australian and Tasmanian authorities grapple with the complexities of a succession of catastrophes that threatens collapse in Macquarie’s ecosystem.

Until 1968, Cousin Island was a coconut and cinnamon plantation owned by the Seychelles royal family. It is now a nature reserve, its native vegetation restored and the ecosystem protected under Seychelles law as a Special Reserve. The Reserve is managed by Nature Seychelles, a locally-based NGO and partner of BirdLife International, which is a global alliance of conservation organisations working together to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity, and working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources.

It was BirdLife International that purchased Cousin. The Reserve has now become an inspirational example of best environmental management practice. Luckily, Cousin had not been inhabited by rats, cats and other feral pests so that tiny colonies of birds and reptiles were able to cling to life in this vulnerable environment. Following the removal of the plantation trees most of the plants on Cousin are now endemic. Nobody except Nature Seychelles has the right to land a boat on the island’s five surf beaches. Invited ecotourists take no shells in an effort to protect the hermit crabs, leave no polluting litter and deposit their faecal wastes in composting toilets. Their money is ploughed back into conservation. Ecotourists are attracted to Cousin to glimpse birds that have been brought back from the edge of extinction: among them magpie robins, warblers, fodies and paradise flycatchers. New Scientist journalist, Graham Lawton, refers to the Seychelles magpie robin, as one of the rarest animals on Earth. Staggeringly, there are now over 300,000 nesting seabirds of seven species throughout the island. The ecotourists cautiously move through the forests to spot rare skinks, geckos and giant tortoises. There are rare land and hermit crabs and the single most important nesting site for hawksbill turtles in the Western Indian Ocean. Cousin Island is a supreme example of ecological success and sound management.

Dana Bergstrom, a botanist with the Australian Antarctic Division, refers to a chain of events at Macquarie as a rare example of a ‘ trophic cascade’, the knock-on effects of the removal of one formerly abundant alien species. The island sees approximately 3.5 million seabirds and 80,000 elephant seals arrive each year to breed and moult.

Rats and mice jumped ashore from the sealing ships in the early 1800s and the sailors introduced cats to rid the island of these pests. They subsequently introduced rabbits in the hope that shipwrecked sailors would not starve on this windswept sub Antarctic island. The rabbits proved to be easy prey for the feral cats and the feline invaders also removed two endemic flightless birds, a rail and a parakeet. The rabbit population was further decimated by the introduction of myxomatosis in the 1970s to the extent that rabbit numbers fell from 130,000 to under 10,000 in just ten years. As the vegetation recovered from the ravages of the rabbit plague the cats began to feed on local burrowing birds. The cats clearly had to go, so by 2000 the last cat was shot on Macquarie. By 2006 rabbit numbers then recovered to the extent that these herbivores were blamed for a massive landslip that wiped out much of an important penguin colony and some 40 per cent of the island had been stripped bare of vegetation. The Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service has now embarked on an enormous eradication program to rid Macquarie of all 130,000 rabbits, along with the estimated 36,000 rats and 103,000 mice that live there.

In the first phase of the program, scheduled for winter this year, helicopters will spread pellet baits containing a toxic anticoagulant type of rat poison, so the animals die from internal bleeding. Global Positioning System (GPS) units in the helicopters that drop the baits will make sure that all areas are covered. This should eradicate all of the rodents and a large percentage of the rabbits. The Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service believes this method will be efficacious because similar baiting programs have successfully eradicated rodents from many islands around the world. In the second phase, in August 2010, field teams with specially trained sniffer dogs, will follow up on the ground eliminating surviving rabbits by shooting, fumigating and trapping them. The Service believes that the $25 million operation should be effective because the resilience of the island ecosystem has been demonstrated by the revegetation evident within fenced enclosure plots, and grey petrels have already returned to breed on the island following eradication of feral cats.

Two islands, and two very different environments, suggest both rewarding future directions and some pitfalls for ecosystem management practices.