

# Snorkel Trail

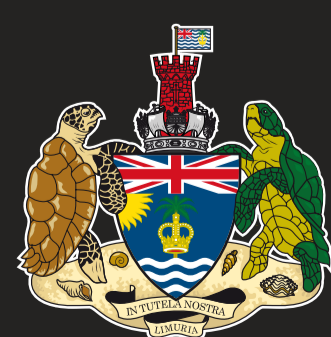
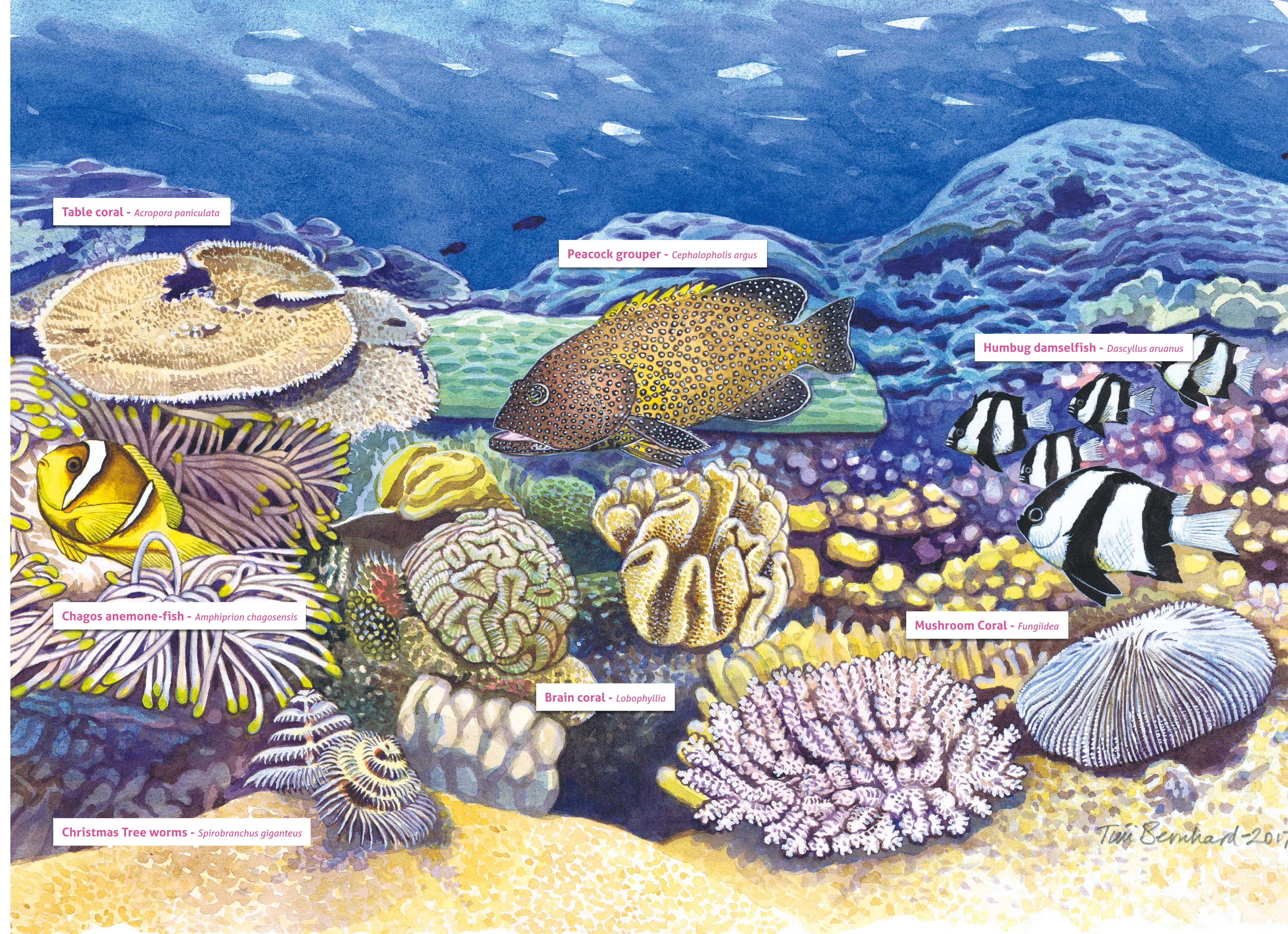
## Welcome to the Underwater Snorkel Trail!

In 2010 the UK Government created one of the world's largest no-take marine protected areas (MPA) in the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). The MPA covers 640,000km<sup>2</sup>, including 54 of the archipelago's islands and covers vast coral reefs, including the Great Chagos Bank, which at 13,000 km<sup>2</sup> is the largest coral atoll in the world. At least 301 species of coral, 821 species of fish and 355 species of molluscs (underwater snails) live in this incredible community and thrive in the beautifully clear water. Get a mask and snorkel from the marina office and have a look for yourself at the busy communities in this fascinating underwater world!

The snorkel trail in front of this board is marked by nine yellow buoys, which start near the shore and broadly mark the edge of a patch reef, in a backwards 'r' shape. At low tide, the water under the first four buoys is only a metre or two deep. This means that during periods of strong offshore winds underwater visibility can be reduced as the sand is stirred up. You can still see the reef, but if you can come back during calmer periods the water will be much clearer. Alternatively, as the five buoys which parallel the shore are moored in deeper water, visibility may be better there.

As you enter the water take care not to stand on the corals as these are fragile and slow growing species. Look at them! These strange plant-like structures are actually built by coral polyps – tiny, simple animals that live in colonies and build a communal skeleton. Look for their different shapes – branching corals and wide flat table corals for example. Some of the distinctive mushroom corals are able to crawl slowly the seafloor. The massive Porites corals may have rich purple colouration and some are home to beautiful Christmas tree worms. These massive corals grow only 0.3 to 2 centimeters per year, and although branching coral species may grow up to 10 centimeters per year, it can take up to 10,000 years for a coral reef to form from a group of larvae.

Fish are abundant everywhere. The gentle butterflyfish are often seen in pairs, working their way around the reef picking delicately at tiny creatures, including the coral polyps themselves. Smaller still are the damselfish, some nestle amongst the branching corals for protection, others are a little bolder and the garden damselfish will defend a small patch of weed or algae from all-comers - if you stay and float, or duckdive down to a particular spot, these little fish may swim right up to your mask to try and chase you off.



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