seychelles islands foundation

Newsletter

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SIF cancels Aldabra House project with great regret

Sadly, in July we announced the cancellation of our Aldabra House project, which would have given everyone the chance to experience the magic of Aldabra from Mahé. This was a difficult decision and means letting go of seven years of hard work and planning for the project. Aldabra House was conceived as an interactive visitor centre, based on Mahé, which was planned to feature a fully immersive multimedia exhibition using cutting-edge technology to inspire and educate its visitors.

Aldabra House plans © SIF

Regrettably, the plot of land which had been designated for Aldabra House sits within an area undergoing extremely dense infrastructure development. We felt that the level of building which has been proposed for the area surrounding the site is not compatible with the design concept of Aldabra House, especially the planned outdoor exhibition. After careful consideration and extensive discussion, SIF's Board of Trustees took the difficult decision to cancel the project.

Dr Frauke Fleischer-Dogley, Chief Executive of SIF, said "We deeply regret the cancellation of this project, which we have spent considerable time and effort planning over many years. Aldabra is a national treasure of Seychelles and of enormous importance for the whole world. I remain passionate about finding ways to share Aldabra with Seychellois and ensure that future generations are inspired to protect this unique and wonderful place".

Although the cancellation is a significant setback, we are determined to keep focused on our mission of bringing Aldabra closer to home and will be exploring other educational and outreach opportunities to engage the public with our research and conservation work on Aldabra. So watch this space!

SIF attends international island biology conference in La Reunion

SIF's research and conservation work was presented at the third International Conference on Island Biology 2019, hosted by the University of La Réunion, between 8th and 13th July. Five of our staff had the opportunity of a lifetime to attend the conference and showcase SIF's work through talks, posters and networking.

This international scientific conference, which covers island ecology, evolution and conservation, gathers scientists and practitioners who are working to research, manage and protect island ecosystems around the world. Held for the first time in the Indian Ocean, the conference gathered 385 delegates from 48 countries, representing over 200 institutions.

The conference was the perfect opportunity for island scientists, biodiversity managers and students to network, form connections and discuss collaborations. We caught up with

our past and present research collaborators and formed new links to advance research and conservation at Aldabra and the Vallée de Mai, particularly with other scientists in the Indian Ocean. For most of our staff attending, it was a new experience to attend this type of conference and they enjoyed the exposure and learning experience.

Our staff gave oral presentations on SIF's black parrot and frigatebird breeding monitoring work, plus the ring-necked parakeet eradication. One of our research collaborators, Dr Annette Fayette, presented the work on tracking the movements of Aldabra's tropicbirds and April Burt, PhD student, presented the Aldabra Clean-Up Project. Wilfredo Falcon, a former PhD student with SIF, presented the seed dispersal network of Aldabra. We also presented several posters which showcased our biosecurity work on Aldabra and PhD research by Annabelle Constance, Anna Koester and April Burt. Three of these posters won awards for their outstanding quality!

Annabelle Contstance, Alba Costa Lorenzo, Christina Quanz and Anna Koester with certificates for high quality posters © SIF

The conference was very well attended by Seychelles' organisations including strong representation from Green Islands Foundation (GIF), the Island Biodiversity and Conservation Centre of the University of Seychelles (UniSey, IBC), Terrestrial Restoration Action Society of Seychelles (TRASS), Seychelles National Parks Authority (SNPA) and the Plant Conservation Action Group (PCA). This was a great reflection of the strong emphasis the Seychelles places on research-based conservation and environmental protection and we were proud to be part of this group.

Representatives at the conference from SIF, GIF, UniSey, IBC, TRASS, SNPA, Fregate Island and various universities conducting collaborative research in Seychelles © SIF

This conference, held by the Society for Island Biology, was the third of its kind, the two previous events being held in Hawaii and the Azores. We would like to sincerely thank the organisers, Dr Dominique Strasberg and Dr Claudine Ah-Peng, and their fantastic support team, for their hard work in organising such an excellent and important event. We look forward to the next Island Biology Conference in July 2022 when we hope to once again share our work with a global audience of island biologists.

SIF Vacancies

We have several vacancies in the Vallée de Mai and Aldabra which need to be filled urgently. We are actively seeking Seychellois applicants for all of the positions. Details can be found on our website at http://www.sif.sc/jobs or contact HR on 432 17 35 if you are interested in any of the following positions:

Vallée de Mai:

- Sales clerk
- Senior Visitor Attendant
- Visitor Attendant

Aldabra:

- Electrical technician

- Marine mechanic
- Shopkeeper
- Logisitcs assistant with plumbing skills
- Relief skipper 60 NM
- Ranger/Boatperson
- Ranger/Trainee Ranger

Yellow crazy ant control gets a boost from invasive ant expert

In July Vallée de Mai staff welcomed Prof. Lori Lach, an expert in the field of invasive ant biology, to the forest. Lori, an Associate Professor at James Cook University in Australia, spent several days at the Vallée de Mai to examine the abundance and distribution of yellow crazy ants and advise on the best way to manage the population.

In a presentation to the staff, Lori showed shocking examples of the impact yellow crazy ants have had on natural ecosystems, agriculture and people's livelihoods. She explained the fascinating science behind ant control methods as well as the key things to consider to ensure the success of any attempt to control yellow crazy ants in the Vallée de Mai. Lori also trained the research team on methods that can be used to monitor ant activity before and after control operations.

Prof. Lori Lach with the Vallée de Mai staff © SIF

We are extremely grateful for Lori's time, expertise and support which will undoubtedly improve the quality of our yellow crazy ant management and our chances of success. Now watch this space for more yellow crazy ant news as the countdown begins until the start of a new, ambitious baiting programme, due to commence in late August!

Lori in the field with the Vallée de Mai staff © SIF

Focus on increasing awareness of yellow crazy ants

The most urgent conservation priority for us this year is tackling the invasion of yellow crazy ants in the Vallée de Mai. As part of our actions to

tackle the ants, we have been raising awareness in schools about the negative impact the ants have on the Vallée de Mai.

Knowing about the importance of the Vallée de Mai and the threats the ants pose to its fragile ecosystem will help motivate students and adults to protect it. Vallée de Mai field research assistant, Emmanuel Morel, and the education and outreach officer, Maria Brioche, have visited as many schools in Seychelles as possible to give presentations to over 1,000 pupils. Pupils as well as teachers were shocked to learn how a creature as tiny as the yellow crazy ant can harm and even kill much bigger animals than them. Most people do not realise how deadly these ants can be. Some pupils took the opportunity to share their own experiences of yellow crazy ants with us. It was inspiring and heartening to hear the children's ideas on how the ants can be controlled without affecting other species in the Vallée de Mai. They were also keen to share their views on how the Seychelles will be affected if the Vallée de Mai reserve is ever destroyed.

Maria Brioche presenting to schoolchildren © SIF

Following on from the presentations, we launched a poster competition for state and private schools this year. The theme for the poster competition is 'Yellow crazy ants: A major threat to the Vallée de Mai, problems and solutions". Using the information provided by Emmanuel and Maria, the students will now work on their posters to show as best as possible how the yellow crazy ants affect the palm forest ecosystem. This competition will be judged on the 8th November 2019 at the Vallée de Mai. We look forward to seeing the children's posters and admiring how much they have learnt about this invasive species.

Emmanuel Morel presenting to schoolchildren © SIF

Vallée de Mai staff enjoy lively team building activities

On the 9th and 10th July 2019, Vallée de Mai staff took part in team building and bonding activities run by CTF Consultancy. They spent half of the day studying theory in the Vallée de Mai educational area, and the other half doing practical activities on Anse Government beach.

Vallée de Mai staff doing team building activities © SIF

The facilitators began with an ice breaker activity to get everybody at ease with one another. This was followed by presentations where staff learned about team bonding and the important aspects of being a team. They worked in groups to discuss important values in the organisation.

In the afternoon, the staff participated in practical activities on the beach which involved:

- working as a team to place a long magic stick on the ground using only their index fingers
- trust activities where participants had to stand in a circle of people letting themselves free fall and the team had to make sure that the participant does not fall
- building a crates bridge where everyone had to work as team to get from one side of the beach to the other
- and finally participants had to lift other people making them cross a rope which was meters from the ground.

Staff enjoying team bonding activities © SIF

The staff enjoyed the activities and felt they learned valuable skills which they can apply to real work scenarios. They also had a lot of fun at the same time! A big thank you to CTF Consultancy for running such a fantastic programme.

Key fire fighting skills improved in the Vallée de Mai

Forest fires occur regularly on Praslin, making them one of the main risks to the Vallée de Mai. Fire could devastate this UNESCO World Heritage site and the essential habitat it provides for many endemic species. Keeping the fire-fighting skills of our team up to date is therefore vital.

Vallée de Mai staff doing firefighting training © SIF

Vallée de Mai staff took part in fire-fighting training on 4th July 2019 at the Fire Station in Baie St Anne, Praslin. Twenty staff members took part, mostly from the research, security and fieldworker teams. The training was divided into theory and practical sessions.

The theory session taught the trainees about the three aspects of fire; fuel, oxygen and heat.

They also learned about the different classes of fire and extinguishers, such as using water-based fire extinguishers to put out solid fires, and using foam based fire-extinguishers to put out liquid fires. The staff also learned about the damaging effects of smoke to human health, such as eye irritation, lung problems, skin problems and death. Another component of the theory session was learning about how fires can jump between buildings due to radiation.

In the afternoon, the trainees went outside to learn how to use fire hoses and fire extinguishers. During this session the trainees discovered that no matter how small or big the fire is, team effort is required to prevent it from spreading.

Firefighting training in action © SIF

Our staff were very pleased to have done the training since some of them did not know when and how to use a fire extinguisher or a fire hose correctly. We wish to thank the two instructors from the Baie St Anne Fire and Rescue Service and everyone who made this training a success.

aldabra atoll

SIF expands collaboration with researchers in the Indian Ocean region

SIF's visit to the Island Biology Conference in La Reunion in July gave us the perfect opportunity to expand our collaborations with researchers from the region. During the week of 8th–12th July we met with several Reunion-based research and conservation groups including IFREMER, IndoCet and the Indian Ocean Seabird Group.

IFREMER project meeting in La Reunion © IFREMER

IFREMER is a French organisation that carries out ocean research and monitors the marine environment. In January this year, the IFREMER

base in La Reunion launched the 'Indian Ocean Sea Turtles' project. This exciting venture brings together a network of scientists from across the region to monitor sea turtle movements in the south-western Indian Ocean basin. Key monitoring sites include Mayotte, Europa, La Reunion and Aldabra. We attended the kick-off meeting in La Reunion on 9 July and enjoyed meeting all the project partners and learning more about this project. The project plan is to develop low-cost beacons/tags to track marine turtle movements and identify the different habitat types used by turtles (such as sea grass beds, coral reefs, sand), not only for female turtles, which are the most commonly tagged group of turtles, but also for males and juveniles. The deployment of the new tags on Aldabra is scheduled for 2020 and we are delighted to be involved in this impressive new project.

IndoCet is a consortium that brings together scientists and managers working on cetacean research and conservation. They held a workshop during the conference which gathered participants from La Reunion, Mozambique, South Africa, Mayotte, Mauritius, Madagascar, Kenya and Seychelles. This was a great opportunity for members to present their work on cetaceans from projects such as photo identification, satellite tagging, acoustic projects and behavioral studies. We presented a summary of marine mammal sightings from Aldabra over the last ten years. It was a great platform to discuss collaboration in future regional projects and we look forward to working closely with this group in future.

The Indian Ocean Seabird Group is an informal group set up by seabird researchers from the University of La Reunion. Created in 2004, the group is currently made up of 94 members from 14 countries. The main objective is to improve and share seabird knowledge and conservation and set up joint regional projects. SIF staff and collaborators attended a lively and informative meeting on 12th July where we discussed the group's strategy and ideas for future collaborations.

Regional collaboration is vital for conserving migratory and large-range species such as sea turtles, cetaceans and seabirds. We are pleased to be part of all these groups which are dedicated to protecting these threatened species and look forward to contributing to their missions.

Analysis of Aldabra shorebird data reveals potential declines

Birds which use shorelines and tidal areas for breeding and foraging are commonly known as shorebirds. On Aldabra these include resident breeders such as herons, dimorphic egrets and several species of tern, as well as a diverse range of migratory birds, also known as waders, such as the striking crab plover, among many other species. Migratory waders arrive on Aldabra each year around October after travelling from their northern breeding grounds, and remain on Aldabra through the northern winter, until March or April.

Dimporhic egret on Aldabra © MSur

We have been monitoring shorebirds on Aldabra since 2003, and recently analysed the data to detect annual and seasonal trends. Our analysis observed recent declines observed in the numbers of resident terns, egrets and herons on Ile Picard, but these numbers do fluctuate every few years so at the moment the numbers are not a cause for concern.

The abundance of migratory waders arriving at Aldabra has also declined in recent years. This pattern almost certainly reflects reduced numbers at their breeding grounds, or along their migration routes. While overall abundance of waders on Aldabra is comparatively small, this trend aligns with records of wader numbers internationally and along the East African flyway, the pathway used by the vast majority of migratory waders over-wintering at Aldabra.

Crab plovers on Aldabra © SIF

The crab plover is the most common migratory wader which visits Aldabra. With an estimated over-wintering population size of 3000–3800 birds, Aldabra supports 4-6% of their global population. Daily and monthly counts indicate a relatively stable trend in numbers arriving each year. This result supports a recent study done at crab plover breeding grounds on the Arabian Peninsula, including the largest ones in Iran and Oman, which found that breeding populations are stable despite often being subjected to human disturbance.

Shorebirds bridge both marine and terrestrial environments, and cover vast distances in their migrations, and thus have the potential to be valuable indicators of environmental change, particularly in coastal ecosystems. We will continue our shorebird monitoring to investigate any trends or changes to their population size.

Aldabra staff enjoy annual Sports Day

Aldabra staff held their annual Sports Day in July. This year there were three teams and activities included golf frisbee, a three-legged race, a sack race, football, a sponge water game and last but not least an obstacle course!

Aldabra staff enjoying Sports Day © SIF

The Sports Day is always a fun way for Aldabra staff to relax and unwind from work while enjoying some friendly competition. This year was no different! You can watch some of the games in action in this short video.

You can download or subscribe to the newsletter at www.sif.sc

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