



Eradication of sisal from Aldabra nearing completion



The sisal patch at Ile Michel before treatment © SIF

This month several members of the Aldabra team visited the four locations on Aldabra where invasive sisal plants have previously been treated. The team were delighted to report that they did not see any re-growth of the plants at any of the locations.

Sisal (*Agave sisalana*) is considered an invasive alien species as it creates impenetrable 'stands' where other plants cannot grow. The plant outcompetes native flora, altering habitat and reducing biodiversity, which affects food sources for other wildlife. Sisal was likely introduced to Aldabra by early settlers for the use of its tough hemp-like fibres and has slowly spread at several locations on the atoll.

Efforts to remove sisal from Aldabra have been ongoing over the last 40 years at the four locations where it is known to occur; Picard (at the old settlement), Anse Polymnie, Anse Malabar and Ile Michel. Earlier methods of uprooting, removal, and burning of the plants had only been successful in areas where staff visited regularly (e.g. the area near to the research station on Picard). Sisal, however, is a hardy plant, tolerating a wide range of soil conditions and able to thrive in harsh, dry, saline conditions. Because of the plant's ability to spread vegetatively (via roots or fertilised plantlets), if any plant material or roots are left in the rock or ground this can lead to re-sprouting. Therefore in 2013 thorough research into the most effective and practical control method and follow up regime for the eradication of sisal at Aldabra was undertaken.



The sisal patch at Ile Michel after treatment in 2015 © SIF

Targetted herbicide application to the cut growth tip was trialled on the Picard sisal patch and was highly effective, especially in targeting the hard-to-reach root structures. Treatment of the patches at the locations was conducted in 2013 and 2014. To ensure success of the eradication visits



Four SIF staff members begin undergraduate and postgraduate degrees

We are proud to announce that four SIF staff members began further formal education this month on a variety of university courses.



Jessica Moumou © SIF

Jessica Moumou and Julio Agricole both begin the three year BSc Environmental Science course at the University of Seychelles. Jessica is the second recipient of the Professor David Stoddart scholarship for Seychellois university students in honour of Prof. David Stoddart, one of the 'founding fathers' of Aldabra's protection. A dedicated member of the SIF team Jessica spent two years on Assumption leading the introduced bird eradication programme and was instrumental in the eradication of the Red-whiskered Bulbul in 2014. Jessica has since been using her invaluable experience on the Ring-necked Parakeet eradication programme on Mahé. She is excited to be undertaking this course and hopes to use the knowledge and skills she gains to assist with the future work of SIF.



Julio Agricole © SIF

Julio joined SIF in 2012 and has worked in a variety of roles; on the introduced bird eradication programme on Assumption, as a member of the research team on Aldabra, with the Ring-necked Parakeet eradication team on Mahé and at Head Office as Assistant Project Officer. These varied experiences inspired Julio to further his education and he is looking forward to expanding his knowledge and skills during his BSc in Environmental Science.



Environmental education through the SIF Holiday Camp



The August 2015 holiday camp students in the Vallée de Mai © SIF

During every August and December school holiday period, SIF provides the opportunity for school children to learn about the Vallée de Mai and Aldabra Atoll through various educational activities held at the SIF holiday camp.

Nineteen children aged between 4 – 8 years old joined Education and Outreach Programme Officer, Maria Brioché, for five days of fun activities to increase their knowledge of different aspects of the natural world. Using the Vallée de Mai and Aldabra Atoll as examples the pupils learned about the endemic birds of Seychelles, the flora and fauna of the Vallée de Mai, how to reuse and recycle materials found in the natural environment, the threat that invasive species pose in the Vallée de Mai, and many other interesting topics.



Learning about the endemic Seychelles Crayfish during the river exploration activity © SIF

From birdwatching at Glacis Noire, to a river exploration in the Vallée de Mai, the children had a jam-packed week full of practical and theoretical activities. Several members of the Vallée de Mai team assisted Maria in delivering these activities and enjoyed the interaction with the pupils. The invasive species team led a session for the students where they learned about the invasive species that threaten the Vallée de Mai and what actions are being taken by SIF to control them. Putting this into practice the children visited the stewardship plot where they assisted in removing invasive plant species whilst also learning how to differentiate them from native plants.



and 2014. To ensure success of the eradication visits were made every few months to target any re-growth. Some re-growth was seen in January and April this year, but in August, for the first time, no re-growth was seen at any of the locations. Many people have dedicated hours of hard work to this project and we are all looking forward to the time when Aldabra can be declared sisal-free. However, although this recent visit has been successful follow-up visits will be continued into 2016 to ensure that there is no further re-growth of plants. This will be particularly important after the rainy season starts which may facilitate re-growth. Certainly the outlook is very promising and we will keep you up to date with this important conservation achievement for Aldabra.

Aldabra staff improve their visitor guiding skills



Ranger Sheril de Commarmond guiding visitors on Aldabra © M Baska

In preparation for the arrival of tourists during the north-west monsoon season in the next few months, the Aldabra team participated in a visitor guiding training session to improve their skills and therefore enhance the experience of Aldabra for their visitors.

The training was conducted by the Aldabra Island Manager, Jakawan Hoareau, and facilitated by the Senior Field Research Assistant, Terence Mahoune. The aim of the training session was to equip staff with the necessary tools to ensure that they provide engaging and interesting guided tours to visitors to the atoll. During the session, the participants engaged in various activities such as presentations, pair work and group work in order to actively engage with the subject. It was a productive training session and the participants had the chance to brainstorm ideas and discuss their previous experiences when working with visitors to help each other improve their skills.



The training sessions will allow the SIF staff to improve the Aldabra experience for their visitors © M Baska

To complement the training, a nature interpretation handbook was compiled and distributed to the participants. The handbook contains all the information that was delivered during the training session. Feedback and recommendations given by the participants during the training session were taken into consideration and incorporated into the handbook. Another training session will be held next month to reinforce what was learned in this session and develop skills further.

Knowledge development sessions at Aldabra



Annabelle Constance © SIF

The first recipient of the Professor David Stoddart Scholarship in 2012, Annabelle Constance, starts an MSc in Environmental Science at the University of Zurich. After joining SIF in 2011, Annabelle left to complete a BSc in Environmental Science at the University of Seychelles in 2012 and has been assisting the Ring-necked Parakeet team since finishing this year. Annabelle is looking forward to the wide scope of the course and how she can apply this to her work at SIF.



Wilna Accouche © SIF

A prestigious Chevening Scholarship was awarded to SIF Science and Projects Programme Officer, Wilna Accouche, to join an MSc programme at the University of Kent in Conservation Project Management. Wilna has been with SIF since 2010 after previously working at the Ministry of Environment for many years. With her extensive experience she is well placed to undertake this course and was awarded the Chevening Scholarship through the British High Commission. This scholarship is aimed at developing global leaders and offers an opportunity to study in the UK in order to develop both professionally and academically. Wilna is eager to get started and is sure that all the interactions she will have during the course will be instrumental in building new networks and gaining an international perspective on conservation issues and management.

In addition, previous SIF staff members Catherina Onezia and Dillys Pouponeau will also be joining the BSc in Environmental Science at the University of Seychelles. We wish all of our scholars all the best in their studies at their respective institutions and are delighted that we have been able to help facilitate this step forward in their careers.

SIF participates in Seychelles Sea Turtle Festival



The winning t-shirt design for the turtle festival © SSTF

SIF joined many other organisations at the annual Seychelles Sea Turtle Festival which was held for the third year running on 7th and 8th August 2015. The festival aims to raise awareness of the need to protect sea turtles and also to celebrate these incredible marine reptiles. The two-day event was opened by the Principal Secretary for the Ministry of Environment, Mr Alain de Commarmond at the Natural History Museum. The opening ceremony included the prize-giving for a postcard and t-shirt design competition that had been held in local schools, as well as several video presentations.



Whilst working at the stewardship plot the students were lucky enough to see a Seychelles Tiger Chameleon © SIF

It was a fun and productive week where the children gained a great deal of knowledge about Seychelles' two UNESCO World Heritage Sites. To demonstrate to their parents what they had learned, at the closing ceremony of the camp the students gave a short presentation, read out poems they had written and sang a song about their experiences. There was also a small exhibition of items that the children had made during the holiday camp, such as key rings made from flip-flops washed up on Aldabra, a model of a forest ecosystem using natural materials and pictures they had drawn of some of their favourite animals found in the Vallée de Mai. We look forward to welcoming our next group of students in December!

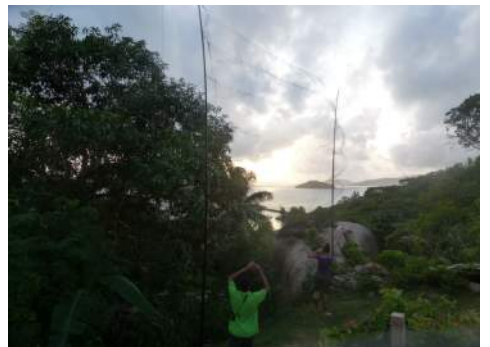
The mysterious white parrot



The white parrot on Praslin © SIF

In June, a member of the public reported seeing a white bird at Baie Ste Anne on Praslin to SIF. It was suspected that this was an unusual colour variation of the Seychelles Black Parrot but confirmation was needed. SIF, in partnership with the Ministry of Environment, has been monitoring this bird for the past month to learn more.

Vallée de Mai ranger and team leader of the Seychelles Black Parrot research programme run by SIF, Terence Payet, was tasked with undertaking observations to verify the species of this bird. Terence and his small team started monitoring the movements of the white parrot to identify the areas that it was frequenting. Two locations where the bird was most active were identified, Baie Ste Anne and Fond Ferdinand. Regular observations of the parrot's feeding behaviour and patterns were done early in the morning and in the late afternoon which required long hours by the team, but seem to be indicating that the white parrot has very similar behaviour to the Seychelles Black Parrot, and in fact, regularly interacts with them. The team are hoping to eventually capture the white parrot, which would be incredibly useful as measurements, photos and blood samples could be taken from the bird for further analysis. This would help to confirm whether the white parrot is indeed a Seychelles Black Parrot and whether it has any genetic mutations causing this colouration.



The team setting up mist nets to capture the white parrot © SIF

The team have been working hard setting up nets in different places where the bird roosts. The team remains optimistic and determined to catch the parrot and confirm its identity. We will update you on their progress!

Methods trialled for monitoring of

Ranger Stephanie Marie giving her presentation to the team
© A Burt

For the last few months, the Aldabra team have been furthering their knowledge through a series of weekly presentations given by different members of the team.

The staff have been selecting a topic of their choice which has led to a variety of interesting subjects being presented. The presentations have several key benefits for the Aldabra staff, practice in using powerpoint, honing their research and presentation skills, and becoming more confident in speaking in front of an audience. They have also been an excellent way for everyone to learn more about specific topics, broadening the staff's knowledge about a variety of species and ecosystems. This will be particularly helpful when providing information to visitors whilst conducting guided tours at the atoll.

The Aldabra Scientific Coordinator, started off the presentation series with one on mangrove ecosystems and later a thoughtful presentation titled "What is the point of wildlife conservation?" This topic reflected on the interconnectedness of humans with the natural world and the importance of conserving wildlife. Another topic covered was marine mammals of the Indian Ocean. This subject was particularly timely as Humpback Whales had just arrived at Aldabra. One of the rangers gave a presentation on the biology and differences between Dugongs and Manatees. This was particularly relevant to Aldabra as it is the only island in Seychelles that has a population of Dugong. Other topics presented included; seabirds of Seychelles, landbirds of Aldabra, and one on the eradication of the invasive Madagascar Fody from Aldabra. This was useful in providing a better insight into the work that has been undertaken and the importance of a successful outcome for this eradication. The presentations have been invaluable in expanding the knowledge base of the staff, who have reported that they have found them inspirational!



The busy SIF stand at the turtle festival © SIF

On Saturday, an informal family fun day was held at Beau Vallon beach on Mahé. The fun day was a great success, with many local organisations and businesses participating, showcasing ongoing work in turtle conservation and providing numerous activities for the public to participate in. Activities included turtle themed arts and crafts, turtle games, face-painting, a bouncy castle, and many more. All afternoon, the SIF stand was buzzing with excitement as members of the public got to create their own paper plate turtle, or learn how to be a turtle researcher and flipper-tag a turtle (a papier mache one of course!). The festival provided a great opportunity to publicise and talk about the turtle research conducted on Aldabra and the increase in the green turtle population since their protection. It is hoped that this festival will serve to keep sea turtle conservation on the agenda and at the forefront of people's minds so that these endangered animals will receive the protection they deserve. You can find out more about the Seychelles Sea Turtle Festival at www.seychellesseaturtlefestival.org



One of the younger SIF participants with her paper turtle © SIF

My work experience at the Vallée de Mai by Shanice Toule



Shanice on her work placement at the Vallée de Mai © SIF

'I am 15 years old and currently studying at Praslin Secondary School. Over the past two weeks I have had the privilege to complete a work placement at the Vallée de Mai. This experience has surpassed my expectations and I have thoroughly enjoyed it.

I have learned many new things whilst working at the Vallée de Mai, thanks to the SIF staff working there. My main goal was to learn more about the natural environment of the Seychelles and explore the issues that it currently faces. I undertook several activities whilst I was at the Vallée de Mai, including assisting with guiding visitors around the forest and sharing knowledge on the wildlife found there. I am a very courageous person who welcomes challenges, and I always do my best to succeed in what I do. During my two weeks at the Vallée de Mai I have faced some challenges, such as speaking French with visitors, but what really excited me was that with the help of the SIF staff I overcame these challenges and of this I am proud.



The Vallée de Mai team trialling sooglossid survey methods
© SIF

The Vallée de Mai research team were joined by James Mougall from the Seychelles National Parks Authority this month to trial techniques to monitor sooglossid frogs in the Vallée de Mai.

Since the discovery of sooglossid frogs in the Vallée de Mai in 2009, there has been limited research undertaken on them. A preliminary survey of the frogs was conducted by Vallée de Mai staff in 2010. In 2011 further research was undertaken by Jim Labisko, from the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology (DICE) at the University of Kent (Canterbury, UK), as part of his PhD. Jim took genetic samples and audio recordings of the frogs as vocalizations can assist in species identification as each species has an audible 'signature'. Two members of the Vallée de Mai research team, Nathachia Pierre and Dainise Quatre, assisted Jim in this data collection.



Ranger Shiira Padayachy looking for sooglossid frogs © SIF

Although this research has produced some interesting results, a long-term monitoring programme of sooglossid frogs in the Vallée de Mai would help to gain more insight into this species, including whether factors such as invasive species are having an effect on the frog's distribution within the forest. James spent two days in the Vallée de Mai with the research and invasive species team trialling field techniques that could be used to conduct surveys on the species. This was a useful session, although further discussion and trials will be needed before a long-term programme can be established.



Shanice leading a guided tour in the Vallée de Mai © SIF

As a proud Praslinois, there are many endemic plants and animals that form an important part of my environment and during my placement I was sad to learn that the Coco de Mer is in such danger from poaching. It is such a shame to see that people can just vandalize a Coco de Mer tree and steal its nuts with no thought for the consequences of their actions. I believe there should be a serious prison sentence for these people. I was pleased to learn that SIF is doing the best they can to protect the Coco de Mer and the Vallée de Mai in order to preserve its uniqueness. I am grateful to SIF for giving me this opportunity and I am looking forward to returning to the Vallée de Mai in the future to learn more about this wonderful forest.'

If like Shanice you would like to join the Vallée de Mai team and learn more about being a visitor guide, then please apply for a work placement position at the Vallée de Mai directly. For more information contact hr@sif.sc.

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