



## Seychelles students speak for Aldabra at the UN in New York

The first ever UN Ocean Conference took place in New York from the 5th to 9th June. At the invitation of UNESCO, three Seychellois students represented Aldabra in a World Oceans Day event during the plenary session in the General Assembly Hall on the 8th June. The students were Alvania Lawen, Jean-Yves Mancienne and Neil Commettant and they joined almost 30 other children from 12 different UNESCO Marine World Heritage sites assembled on stage to convince the assembled world leaders to pledge to safeguard our oceans for future generations.



*The UNESCO group © UNESCO*

The children were chosen due to their active participation in the environment related activities at their schools, and were chaperoned by Maria Brioche, SIF's education and outreach programme officer based on Praslin. They spent four days in New York representing Aldabra. During the trip the children were engaged in an intensive two day programme to prepare them for the UNESCO slot at the Ocean Conference. In addition to several rehearsals they also visited the Central Park Zoo and attended a dinner at Flanders House, New York Times Building.



*Clockwise from left: Maria Brioche, Neil Commettant, Alvania Lawen and Jean-Yves Mancienne © SIF*

During the presentation several of the students, including Alvania, described what the ocean means to them, and made impassioned requests that world leaders commit to protecting the oceans. It was a very proud moment for everyone involved to see the students on stage and Alvania's speech brought tears of joy to members of the Seychelles delegation at the conference which was headed by the Vice-President. The children then unveiled the pledge, titled 'My Ocean Pledge', and then invited world leaders to sign their commitment, following which the group participated in the signing of the pledge with various leaders and other influential conference attendees.



*Youth representatives on stage in the General Assembly hall © UNESCO*

Upon leaving the UN, the group attended a closing reception for the children, their chaperones and the UNESCO event organisers. The reception included performances by many of the participants, and the Seychellois attendees presented a poem to the group.

The students have described this opportunity as an experience of a lifetime. Upon their return to Seychelles they reflected:

*"It was a proud moment for us all and we felt very important to have been able to get the chance to speak to leaders of the world. Our presence also showed leaders of the world that we are aware of what is happening in the ocean and that it is our future, so they can take the first step to protect it" - Alvania*

*I really loved the experience. It was a chance of a lifetime. We had a good time over there and saw lots of things, especially in the conference where many points were raised in regards to protecting the environment for future generations" – Jean-Yves*

*"I am pleased to have got the chance to go to New York. It was a lifetime opportunity. I met other children who have the same interests as me – to protect the environment. I am more determined to work hard for the environment" - Neil*



*The Seychelles delegation to the conference © SIF*

The trip went extremely well and UNESCO and all of those involved consider the event to have been a great success, generating much

discussion about protecting the world's oceans. This initiative was hosted by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre Marine Programme and is made possible by the generous support of the Government of Flanders, the Explorers Club, Stefan & Irina Hearst and the Khaled bin Sultan Living Oceans Foundation. The event was coordinated locally by SIF, with support from the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development, the Ministry of Environment, Energy and Climate Change, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The students have returned to Seychelles with renewed enthusiasm for environmental protection and with friends from all over the world. For more information and to sign the pledge visit: <http://whc.unesco.org/myoceanpledge>.

## **SIF attends national biosecurity workshop**



*Workshop attendees © SIF*

During June the Seychelles GOS/UNDP/GEF Project Coordination Unit organised a workshop titled *"Pest abatement and biosecurity training"* under the outer island project: *"Expansion and strengthening of the protected area subsystem of the outer islands of Seychelles and its integration into the broader land and seascape"*. Three SIF staff members had the opportunity to participate in the workshop, which was attended by various organisations and authorities, such as the Islands Development



Company, Island Conservation Society, Green Islands Foundation, Seychelles National Parks Authority, Ministry of Environment, Seychelles Fishing Authority, National Biosecurity Agency and many more.

The two day training focused on invasive alien species, agricultural pests and insect introductions to Seychelles with special focus on invasive alien species pathways as well as prevention measures and pest control management. A valuable component of the training was the site visit to the Islands Development Company supply boat loading site, linked to a group exercise to outline measures to reduce the biosecurity risk in our day to day operations. One of the biggest threats to Aldabra's unique ecosystem is the introduction of invasive alien species, such as yellow crazy ants or the brown rat among many others.

It was a fruitful workshop, where many relevant contacts could be established for future cooperation. In addition it was very reassuring to see that the prevention and control of invasive alien species is not only a priority for SIF, but is being addressed nationwide. Meeting and sharing experiences with other organisations and authorities has increased our knowledge and will help us to implement the necessary measures to protect the outer islands from further introduction of destructive invasive alien species.

## Have you seen the parakeet?



*Ring-necked parakeet © SIF*

We've now confirmed the presence of at least one remaining ring-necked parakeet on Mahé and need to hear any information on this or other parakeets from the public. Bounty awards of **RS 200 for a parakeet sighting** which is confirmed by the eradication team, and **RS 2000 for a confirmed sighting which then leads to a cull by the team**, remain in place. If you have any information on recent sightings of these birds please contact the team as soon as possible on 2523623. Any remaining birds are likely to be very wary and cautious so please do not attempt to catch or approach them, just take note of what the bird is doing and the date, time and place, and then call SIF!



## SIF builds mini Vallée de Mai to delight visitors at the National Expo

The annual National Expo took place on Eve Island, Praslin on the 24th and 25th June, and SIF was delighted to be able to participate with a stall designed as a mini replica of the Vallée de Mai. SIF was also afforded the honour of providing the coco de mer podium and waterfall backdrop for the official opening of the event, and led by President Faure the VIP guests including Vice-President Meriton and Designated Minister Mondon started their exploration of the exhibition at the Vallée de Mai stall.



*President Faure leading the VIP guests through the Vallée de Mai stall © SIF*

The replica of the Vallée de Mai was conceived to give visitors a taste of the forest, and large palm branches were integrated with existing living trees to create a forested effect. Hidden among the branches and leaf litter were papier-mâché versions of many of the forest inhabitants made by Vallée de Mai staff. The Vallée de Mai team worked extremely hard to create the mini forest and their efforts paid off with the spectacular stall conveying a really sense of the actual UNESCO World Heritage site.



*Friends of the Vallée de Mai club member dressed as a coco de mer © SIF*

As well as all the foliage and papier-mâché animals there were several educational stations and games around the stall. On display were species specimens from the education room at the Vallée de Mai and many visitors were surprised to discover that there are scorpions in the forest. There was a photo exhibition which displayed historical photos of the Vallée de Mai, SIF staff and the visitor centre, in contrast with recent photos. For some it was a walk down memory lane to see how far the site has come, and it was eye-opening for others!



Younger visitors delighted in the games on display. There was a question and answer game where participants had to match questions to the right answer by pressing a buzzer and a life-sized version of snakes and ladders had children jumping around at the role of a dice, moving forward after landing on tiles like 'you saved a Seychelles chameleon from yellow crazy ants' and moving backward with dismay after finding out that they had been 'caught off trail'. Children and adults alike spent a long time on the Vallée de Mai treasure hunt, searching for ten hidden snakes in the vegetation. During the two day Expo over 160 people won prizes for participating in the games!



Children enjoying the educational displays and games at the Vallée de Mai stall © SIF

The National Expo was a great success; the Vallée de Mai management and staff are happy to have participated once again and are looking forward to the next edition.

## New Inva'Ziles project to address invasive alien species threats in Vallée de Mai

SIF has secured funding under the regional Inva'Ziles project, financed by the European Union and implemented by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), to

further manage and mitigate the impacts of invasive alien species in the Vallée de Mai. Invasive alien species are one of the most serious threats to the biodiversity of the palm forest. This includes species already present, such as yellow crazy ants, rats and tenrecs, as well as species which occur on Praslin or elsewhere but have not yet established populations in the Vallée de Mai, such as mynah birds.



Tenrec and yellow crazy ant © SIF

More than ten species of invasive plant have been managed at the Vallée de Mai by SIF under the recent EU-funded project. A few of these introduced species have been removed entirely from the site (e.g. Chinese fan palm), but methods to effectively manage other invasive species need to be identified. In December 2016, the annual survey of yellow crazy ants in the Vallée de Mai revealed a concerning increase in the distribution of the species at the site, which now occurs in 75% of the area. Invasive alien species problems in the protected area therefore required immediate action.

The timely approval of the Inva'Ziles project will address these and other invasive alien species threats in the Vallée de Mai within the next year.

By managing invasive alien species comprehensively and holistically, targeting not only one narrow group of species but rather a broad range of taxa, including plants, mammals and invertebrates, SIF expects that the project will bring ecosystem-wide benefits of invasive species control in the Vallée de Mai.



Cocoplum © SIF

## TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence awarded again!

SIF is thrilled to announce that the Vallée de Mai has been awarded a TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence again in 2017. This is the fourth consecutive year that the Certificate of Excellence has been received by the Vallée de Mai, and the fifth time since 2012. The Certificate of Excellence is based on the reviews made by visitors to the Vallée de Mai and it is an extreme vote of confidence to receive such consistently positive feedback from our guests.



TripAdvisor is the world's largest travel review site, providing details on over 7 million

accommodations, airlines, attractions and restaurants. Each month an average of 390 million visitors use TripAdvisor to find out about the listed sites. The Certificate of Excellence takes into account the quality, quantity and recency of reviews submitted by travellers on TripAdvisor over a 12-month period. To qualify, a business must maintain an overall TripAdvisor bubble rating of at least four out of five, have a minimum number of reviews and must have been listed on TripAdvisor for at least 12 months.

The Vallée de Mai is Seychelles' most visited natural site, and it is not only the superb primeval palm forest that keeps visitors coming, but also the world class visitor centre. The visitor centre was completely rebuilt by SIF, and since it opened in 2010 it has hosted hundreds of thousands of local and international guests. The site's facilities include cafeteria, lockers, souvenir shop, information desk and displays, toilets and a parking area. Thanks to the carefully designed centre and walking routes the UNESCO World Heritage Site is the only forest in Seychelles that is partially wheelchair accessible. A free information leaflet is distributed to every visitor on their entrance to the Vallée de Mai, which includes a map of the paths of the Vallée de Mai and a guide and checklist to common species. To enhance the forest experience, SIF also offers twice daily free guided tours in English, French or Creole. This certificate is a reflection of the excellent service and experience on offer at the Vallée de Mai and the satisfaction of our visitors.

The Vallée de Mai team is looking forward to continuing to improve our service and welcoming more visitors to this unique UNESCO World Heritage Site. Thank you to our visitors for your comments and suggestions that help us to ensure all visitors have the best possible experience in the Vallée de Mai!



## Praslin community marches in defence of coco de mer

Once again this year SIF organised a march to raise awareness among the Praslin community about the issue of coco de mer poaching on Praslin and Curieuse. This march was held as part of activities to commemorate World Environment Day. The event was well supported and in total 36 organisations gave their commitment, offering support towards the protection of coco de mer.



*Anti-poaching march © SIF*

A large crowd gathered at Cote d'Or on the day of the event. Escorted by the Seychelles Police, the crowd walked down the road via Marie Jeanne Estate, singing and calling out messages against the poaching of coco de mer. Routing the group through Marie Jeanne Estate increased the overall exposure of the event as many people came out of their houses to investigate the source of the noise.



*Enthusiastic supporters at the head of the march © SIF*

Upon arrival at Baie Ste Anne all participants gathered at the court next to the playground where there was a short ceremony to present each organisation with a certificate for their participation, thanking them for their support towards this very important cause. District Administrator Kenneth Pointe gave a short speech to show his support for the protection of the coco de mer. This was followed by a poem by friends of Vallée de Mai club members from Vijay International School. After each organisation had received their certificate, the Vallée de Mai site manager Mr Marc Jean-Baptiste concluded with a note of appreciation for their support. He stressed SIF's commitment to help reduce coco de mer poaching on Praslin and Curieuse. Thank you to everyone that participated in the march!



## Aldabra BRUV monitoring 2017: First results are in!

The research team recently completed the preliminary analysis of the Baited Remote Underwater Video (BRUV) survey on Aldabra for 2017. The survey took place earlier this year between March and May as part of the annual Aldabra reef monitoring programme. Similar to SCUBA fish surveys, BRUV monitoring is aimed at assessing fish assemblages around the atoll. However it has an additional value: it provides the opportunity to document large diver-shy species and to survey depths beyond which SCUBA surveys are possible.



*Groupers seen on the BRUV footage © SIF*

The 2017 BRUV monitoring marks the first baseline survey within the newly set up and enforced zoning scheme for Aldabra. The

zoning strategy delimits three management zones around the atoll, namely the conservation zone, the food security zone (the only zone in which subsistence fishing is permitted) and the tourism zone. The BRUV monitoring this year was focussed on fish abundance and diversity at 30 sites within the conservation and food security zones. This will help to determine the impact level of subsistence fishing on the fish community and enable SIF to respond with adaptive management strategies, if required, to reduce the impact – as stipulated in the new Aldabra Management plan.



*Blacktip reef shark © SIF*

The analysis of the videos involves visually documenting all target species and the time at which they are seen. The results are yet to be analysed in detail but seem to show that fish numbers and species are higher at shallow sites (0–10m) compared to medium (10–20m) and deep areas (>20m). In terms of fish families, butterflyfish, groupers and snappers comprised 49% of fish recorded in both management zones. Piscivorous fish, i.e. fish that eat other fish, were the dominant fish feeding group in both zones, which indicates that there is a healthy fish community across the atoll. A total of six different species of shark were recorded, with grey reef sharks (*Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos*) being the most common species in both management zones. The team was delighted to document one individual of the elusive and endangered giant grouper (*Epinephelus lanceolatus*) in the conservation zone. If you don't believe us, have



a look at the short video we have compiled of the main highlights of this year's survey: <https://vimeo.com/221129915>



*Giant grouper © SIF*

## Capacity building on Aldabra during the SE season

The months of May to October in Seychelles are known as the south-east season because of the strong south-east trade winds which result in much cooler temperatures and much drier weather. On Aldabra this season is also called the 'quiet' season because, due to rough seas, there are no transport options, no visitors, no supply boats and no staff movements. It is therefore a great opportunity to make progress on the research workplan as well as spend time dedicated to training the research staff in a variety of methods and skills and to improve their knowledge on a wide variety of topics. Staff on Aldabra are not able to attend workshops and training sessions organised elsewhere but SIF tries to ensure they are not missing out. In this respect, June was a very busy month for the Aldabra research team.

The Aldabra scientific coordinator instigated weekly presentations and an exam every two weeks during the research meeting; each staff member prepared a presentation on a topic of their choice to present to the team. These presentations aim to train the staff in compiling

information and designing a powerpoint presentation, communication of information to an audience, increasing their confidence in public speaking as well as enhancing everyone's knowledge on the selected topics. So far we have had presentations on conservation concepts, manta rays and defining whether a species is endemic, native, introduced or invasive. The aim of the exams is to ensure the staff are fully knowledgeable on the work they conduct, especially to ensure competency in species identification for high quality data collection. The first exam was on the identification of the 30+ plant species monitored in the phenology monitoring programme, probably one of the most difficult set of species to master but all staff did extremely well.



*Research meeting © SIF*

Several of the staff have also opted to take part in a Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) in biodiversity and climate change based at the University of Zurich. This course gives them access to university level information and course structure and mentorship by top level scientists. The course is eight weeks and works through several modules on globally important issues, expanding their knowledge beyond Aldabra and the Seychelles and opening their horizons to potential future career paths.

As well as these more applied learning sessions the staff have also been trained in a number of more practical skills. Firstly, staff have been



*Fish sampling © SIF*

provided with additional turtle tag training for both juvenile turtles captured in the lagoon and large nesting females tagged on the beach. There is a vast difference in the techniques and skill (and strength!) required to tag juvenile versus adult turtles and the staff have all been guided by the scientific coordinator in best practice, tagging rules and regulations and tricks to make things easier for both tagger and turtle. Secondly, staff were given several sessions of training in fish sampling techniques to ensure they can participate in the sample collection work that is part of a research collaboration between Seychelles Fishing Authority and SIF. This work included extracting otoliths (ear bones) from target fish species caught for the subsistence fishing, as well as successfully identifying and sampling fish gonads, liver, muscle and fin clips. All the staff enjoyed getting their hands dirty and are now all able to fully sample a fish. This training enhanced both their knowledge of fish biology and fish identification. Another fish related training session in June was done on venting fish that have surfaced with barotrauma (when the air in the fish's swim bladder expands during rapid ascent). Venting of certain species caught during subsistence fishing trips is done because these species are globally threatened and have been identified as being either highly vulnerable (due to large declines caused

by worldwide overfishing) or with very low resilience (slow population recoveries) to fishing pressures. So far in 2017 we are delighted to have had a 100% successful release rate for these restricted species! Lastly some of the staff who haven't had much opportunity to learn how to snorkel were taken on snorkel training sessions and two of the logistics team were also given a discover scuba diving session by the scientific coordinator, allowing them to experience the underwater world of Aldabra and building their confidence in working so closely with the ocean.



*Preparing for a dive © SIF*

Over the next few months we will continue to build capacity amongst the staff. Next up is marine species identification and GPS and GIS training!

## **Aldabra turtle database completed with new data tools**

Turtle emergence and nesting data has been regularly collected on Aldabra since 1996, but because of progress in computing and technology over the last 21 years, data collection and storage methods have changed markedly.

Initially stored on paper, and then in several types of database program, the latest iteration is



a user-friendly relational database designed to standardise data, and to make data entry quicker and easier for staff, as well as to minimise errors. Not only was the new database designed from scratch, but all historical data (some 2.5 million data points) had to be cleaned and modified to fit the new format; a time-consuming task, but a worthwhile one!



*Turtle tracks as evidence of emergences © SIF*

When turtles are encountered while nesting, they are given two numbered titanium ID tags, one in each flipper. Should one of these come out, the turtle is re-tagged on that flipper next time it is seen, meaning that turtles' tag numbers can change over time. Now, for the first time, turtles are automatically assigned a unique ID upon first capture to better enable temporal tracking (this has also been applied retroactively to all data) no matter how much the tags may change over time.

Now, by simply typing in one of the tag codes, users are able to track the emergence history of each tagged turtle, including when they were first

tagged, every time they were seen nesting, and how their shell measurements have changed over time.



*Aldabra turtle database © SIF*

The way data is physically collected has also changed; we now collect our daily emergence count data on a Trimble - a rugged, handheld computer – which we are able to directly upload to the database, saving time, paper and limiting data transcription errors ensuring our data is as accurate as possible.



*Turtle tagging © SIF*

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