



A different type of publicity for SIF's conservation efforts; the MOOC platform



Jessica Moumou recording her MOOC © SIF

Recently, SIF was approached to contribute case study videos to be used as part of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on species conservation in protected areas. As the name suggests, MOOCs are online courses aimed at unlimited participation and open access for anyone with internet access. Participants on the MOOC are provided with course materials, including filmed lectures, readings, tests, and interactive user forums to facilitate interactions between participants and their course leaders. The freedom provided by the MOOCs means that users can choose to learn on anything they want, from rocket science to art history, and do these in their own time and at their own pace (including the possibility to pause or restart a filmed lecture if you did not understand the first time!). With such endless possibilities of learning, and thanks to the increasing availability of faster internet, the MOOC platform had emerged as a powerful new tool of disseminating information.

With the great help of our local media partners, SIF contributed several case study videos for use on an IUCN MOOC platform (release details to be given in upcoming newsletter). The 3-minute videos showcased tangible success stories from SIF's conservation of Aldabra and the Vallée de Mai over the past 35 years including the successful re-introduction of the flightless Aldabra rail on Picard Island, the avian eradications on Assumption Island and reversing the unsustainable harvesting trends of coco de mer nuts in the Vallée de Mai. With similar MOOCs attracting up to 11,000 people, we are pleased to be able to showcase SIF's role in protected area management globally.



Green turtle MOOC © SIF

SIF would like to thank the IUCN for this opportunity and the MOOC presenters, Vicky Stravens, Jennifer Appoo, Jessica Moumou, Ella Nancy and Dominic Jean who had the impressive task of presenting memorised scripts in English and French on camera.

SIF staff attend Business Plan Workshop for Protected Areas

Recently, two of our staff attended a Business Plan Workshop for Protected areas, an initiative of the GOS-UNDP-GEF Outer Islands and

Protected Area Finance projects. The business plan workshop aimed at encouraging the custodians of protected areas to develop appropriate business plans in order to reach the financial targets required to effectively achieve their conservation goals. The workshop was financed by the Outer Islands project and facilitated by Andy Rylance, the Protected Area Finance project Technical Advisor (GOS-UNDP-GEF).



Business plan workshop © Joanna Prosper

Over the four days of training, our staff had the opportunity to increase their knowledge about the IUCN best practice guidelines for business planning in protected areas through animated presentations by local and international experts, coupled with group work to analyse examples of business and strategic plans from other countries. There were numerous dynamic discussions about financial constraints and challenges faced by protected areas and it was a good time to learn from each other and share best practices. Mary Hoareau, the SIF financial



Team members conducting observations © SIF

controller, said of the workshop: “we have learned a lot from the training and are ready to apply the knowledge we have acquired to improve the business plan for our organisation!” Thank you to GOS-UNDP-GEF for hosting such an interesting and informative workshop!

Crowdfunding new tropicbird research is underway

Dr Annette Fayet, a junior researcher at Queen’s College, Oxford, is currently crowdfunding for a very exciting tropicbird tagging



Red-tailed tropicbird © SIF

project that is planned for Aldabra in December this year, full details of this vital research can be found at: <https://queens.hubbub.net/p/aldabra-tropicbirds/?ref=44468>. Over the last few years Aldabra has seen declines in red-tailed tropicbirds (*Phaethon rubricauda*) but the reason for this is not clear. Annette plans to use state-of-the-art technology to track the feeding movements of tropicbirds to understand where



Annette holding a puffin on Skomer Island, Wales © Annette Fayet

they feed, what they feed on, and how this may relate to their breeding success. The project is a priority for SIF and we are meeting transport costs from Mahé to Aldabra and covering 75% of the cost of Annette's stay, but she still needs help raising the money for miniature GPS loggers and immersion loggers, please share the crowdfunding page with anyone you think might be interested!

SIF team gains new members



Cheryl Sanchez (left) and Elsa Lesperance © SIF

SIF recently had the great pleasure of welcoming two new staff members. Cheryl Sanchez joins the Aldabra team as the new Aldabra scientific

coordinator, and Elsa Lesperance joins the Vallée de Mai team as the new assistant administrative and accounts officer. Cheryl is a trained and experienced marine and terrestrial biologist, with an academic background in biology. She has a wide variety of experience in conservation, the last three years of which have been in Seychelles. She will be a great addition to the Aldabra team. Elsa joins the team with an educational background in tourism, and experience in the tourism and banking sectors. Elsa is Praslinois and her enthusiasm and hard work will serve her well in her new role. Welcome to the team, Cheryl and Elsa!

We have some new vacancies in the Vallée de Mai, open to Seychellois. Contact HR on 432 17 35 if you are interested in any of the following positions:

- Property Maintenance Supervisor
- Field Research Assistant
- Field Worker
- Housekeeper
- Sales Clerk
- Visitor Attendant



UNAIDS Executive Director visits the Vallée de Mai



The delegation with SIF staff © SIF

This month SIF staff were delighted to welcome a VIP guest to the Vallée de Mai. On Saturday 30th September UNAIDS Executive Director Mr Michel Sidibé visited the Vallée de Mai. He was accompanied by the Minister for Youth, Sport & Culture Mrs Mitcy Larue, Mr Jude Padayachy, UNAIDS Regional Country Director and Mrs Barbara Barbier, Mr Sidibé's Assistant. The delegation was taken on a guided tour led by the Vallée de Mai site manager, where they learned about the biology of the coco de mer.

Mr Sidibé was particularly fascinated with the mysterious nut, and the unique biodiversity of the UNESCO World Heritage Site. He described the visit as a wonderful experience and said that he will cherish the memories! Mr Sidibé was very positive about the work of SIF and it was a great pleasure showing him around the Vallée.



The delegation learning about the coco de mer © SIF

National black parrot competition held in schools to raise the awareness on Seychelles' national bird

SIF conducts a wide variety of educational and outreach activities throughout the year to help raise awareness on the flora and fauna of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Seychelles. As part of these activities, competitions in schools are organised each year aiming to instil in Seychelles' youth the importance of protecting these endemic species.



Terance Payet giving a presentation on the Seychelles black parrot © SIF

This year SIF launched a national competition in the schools on Mahé, Praslin and La Digue with the theme “*Protect the Seychelles black parrot, Seychelles national bird*”. The goal of the competition was for the students to become more aware of the vulnerability of the Seychelles black parrot and about ways to assist in their protection. The competition had two categories, poems were submitted by primary school students, and songs were written and performed by groups of secondary school students.



Plaisance Secondary School performing their song © SIF

There was a high level of participation in the competition and SIF is pleased to announce that 94 poems were submitted by primary school students and five of the ten secondary schools in Seychelles participated in the song competition. We were amazed by the quality of work that was submitted, and with the level of enthusiasm shown. The large number of excellent quality submissions made narrowing down the winners a difficult task, but the top three entrants in each category were selected.

The winning poems in the primary category were:

- 1st place: Travis Henriette from Anse Boileau Primary School
- 2nd Place: Yves Jumaye from Bel Ombre Primary School
- 3rd place: Angela Lesperance from Bel Eau Primary School

The winning songs in the secondary category were:

- 1st place: Beau Vallon Secondary School
- 2nd place: Plaisance Secondary School
- 3rd place: Praslin Secondary School



Competition participants © SIF

The winners received a great selection of prizes donated by some very generous sponsors including: Acajou Hotel, Berjaya Praslin Beach Resort, Big Blue Divers, Coco de Mer Hotel, Paradise Sun Hotel, and the Seychelles Sea Turtle Festival Committee. We believe that through participating in this competition, students’ knowledge about the black parrot has increased significantly, particularly for children living on Mahé and La Digue who are less exposed to Seychelles national bird, which reside only on Praslin. Thank you to all of the students and teachers that participated, to the Ministries of Education and Environment for the collaboration and to all of the extremely kind sponsors that made the event an exciting one for all students.

SIF continues the battle against invasive plants in the Vallée de Mai under the Inva’Ziles project

Invasive plants pose serious threats to the biodiversity of the Vallée de Mai because they colonise habitats rapidly, outcompete native plants, and exclude native animals. As such, since 2012 with the launch of the EU project, SIF has worked intensively on controlling more than



Cutting philodendron creepers © SIF

ten invasive plants in the Vallée de Mai using a combination of different control methods (herbicide application, drilling, ring barking etc.). A few of these introduced species have been removed entirely from the Vallée de Mai and many previously common invasives have been controlled and their populations

substantially reduced. The continuation of management on these invasive plants was mainstreamed into the Vallée de Mai workplan. On a monthly basis, the research team continues to control selected plants and importantly undertake 'tree checks' to evaluate the status of the controlled trees – information which then contributes to assessing the effectiveness of control methods used per species.

SIF is extending the scope of the existing programme under the Inva'Ziles project by tackling new plant species and determining the best control methods for lesser known but equally problematic invasives including the liana *Epipremnum pinnatum* (philodendron). Work on some of these species are progressing remarkably and while

a few years ago, philodendron had invaded many parts of the Vallée de Mai, using some innovative techniques and a great team effort from Vallée de Mai staff, currently only few isolated patches of the creeper remains in the forest.



Invasive species removal © SIF

With SIF targeting not only invasive plants but also rats, tenrecs and yellow crazy ants in the Vallée de Mai as part of the Inva'Ziles, we expect that if successful, the project will bring ecosystem level benefits to the nature reserve.

Clean Up the World Campaign



Hard at work during the clean up © SIF

The *Clean Up the World* campaign was held from the 15th to 17th September. It is a very important international campaign held annually to bring people together to make a positive contribution to a cleaner and healthier world. Each year SIF participates in this event, on Saturday 16th September the Seychelles Scouts Association joined with Vallée de Mai staff to collect rubbish from the side of the road between the visitor centre and Nouvelle Decouverte. A total of 35 gunny bags of rubbish were collected, an increase from last year. It is unfortunate that rubbish collection is required in such a beautiful place, but the participants felt a great sense of accomplishment at having contributed to the conservation of the area. SIF would like to thank the Seychelles Scout Association for helping keep Vallée de Mai reserve clean, together we can all contribute to keeping Seychelles tidy.



Rubbish collection along the road © SIF



First ever Aldabra symposium a resounding success



Aldabra Science Coordinator giving a presentation © SIF

On the 5th of September the first ever Aldabra symposium was held on the atoll. The symposium was hosted by the Aldabra staff for the benefit of the staff themselves. Work on Aldabra is coordinated within two departments; the research team responsible for the implementation of the long-term monitoring programme and project work and the logistic team responsible for all the operations on the atoll. Although the work of both teams is aimed at ensuring effective protection of Aldabra and closely linked and interdependent, they have different tasks. The symposium was therefore

a perfect platform for the teams to present a summary of their work to each other, with an emphasis on all the recent changes and accomplishments made over the last few years.

Topics presented by the research team included: the tortoise, turtle and marine monitoring programmes, biodiversity and climate change, the Aldabra tourism package, tour guiding and nature interpretation, the subsistence fishery, the frigatebird breeding cycle and first aid. The logistics team presented on Aldabra's boats, the solar photovoltaic system that powers the research station, maintenance on the atoll and the Aldabra kitchen and garden.



The Aldabra team at the symposium © SIF

The symposium was seen as a great team building exercise and greatly improved understanding of everybody's role and value on Aldabra. All staff put considerable effort and preparation into their presentations which were lively, interactive and filled with jokes. This was accompanied by sweet snacks, cakes, tea and coffee prepared by the staff themselves. The staff were congratulated and all received a certificate of participation for their presentations signed by the Chief Executive Officer. Overall, the symposium was a great accomplishment on all fronts, showing once again that the successes on Aldabra are built on good communication, motivation and excellent team work! For a full report on the symposium, including a summary of all of the presentations follow this link: <http://www.sif.sc/UserFiles/File/Aldabra%20Symposium%202017.pdf>

Busy season for marine megafauna at Aldabra sees humpback whale beaching



Spinner dolphins © SIF

The Aldabra team often see marine mammals on boat trips to the lagoon and the outside shores of the atoll especially resident spinner dolphins, sometimes in groups of up to several hundred, but the southeast monsoon season brings more wide ranging marine megafauna to our shores. This can include manta rays, whales and occasionally such rarities as orcas (killer whales) and whale sharks. The most conspicuous visitors however, are the humpback whales. 2017 has been a bumper season for humpbacks, with 97 sightings of groups of between one and five whales, including females with calves (in fact, the team were lucky enough to snorkel with two adults and a calf! See July newsletter).



Beached humpback whale © Adam Mitchell

On Friday September 22nd, Aldabra experienced a whale beaching at Passe Hoareau on the north coast. Returning from a field camp, rangers came across two stranded adult humpbacks and one still-swimming juvenile. They appear to have come into the lagoon on the high spring tide and become stuck on the reef as the tide receded, although it remains a mystery as to why they entered the lagoon in the first place. The causes of whale strandings often remain unknown, and whereas human impacts (such as pollution, injuries from boat collisions or noise from ships) have been implicated in some, Aldabra's isolation makes this unlikely. It is more likely that this was a sad, but natural event. Despite attempts to save them, the location and sheer size of the whales meant the team were not able to move or refloat the adult whales. The adults died where they stranded, and the juvenile was later found dead at Ile Michel on a return trip to the area two weeks later.



Sharks feeding on the whale carcasses © Adam Mitchell

The stranding of these three humpbacks, while a terrible end for the whales themselves, will provide a bonanza for reef organisms for weeks and months to come; deep-sea whale drops have been known to support entire ecosystems for decades!

The day after the deaths, nurse, lemon and tiger sharks converged on the whales. Staff rarely see more than one tiger shark at any one

time, so this was a special event – at least one of them was in excess of 4 metres long! The team will continue to visit the area weekly (as tides allow) to record progress and to observe the changing animal assemblages that use the carcasses over time. As of two weeks after the deaths, the sharks had still failed to penetrate the body cavity of either adult.



Whale carcass two weeks after beaching. The white protrusions on either side of the whale are not the pectoral fins (which are now gone) but the lower jawbones, now loosened from the rest of the skull © Adam Mitchell

Staff hope to eventually recover the bones of at least one whale which will be used for educational purposes at Aldabra House.

Heading into hawksbill season



Hawksbill turtle © SIF

Aldabra is known throughout the sea turtle community as a sanctuary for green turtles in the

Western Indian Ocean. Over the past decades, the strict protection of Aldabra including its turtle nesting beaches and surrounding waters, has enabled the incredible recovery in green turtle nesting numbers. What many of our friends and supporters might not know is that the less talked about, but not less important, hawksbill turtle, can also be found nesting on the atoll.

The hawksbills and greens dance to a different tune. Green turtles nest year-round on Aldabra but have a peak season in April/May. They also mostly emerge at night (or if you are lucky on an early high tide). Hawksbills tend to follow more of a nesting schedule than the green turtles, and tracks normally start showing up in August/September, with a peak season in November/December, and a gradual fading away by March. For reasons unknown, hawksbills nest mostly during the daylight hours in Seychelles.



Hawksbill turtle tracks © SIF

The number of hawksbill turtle tracks found on Aldabra is lower than the, green turtles, with the hawksbill turtle nesting mostly on beaches within the inner lagoon. Patrols looking for hawksbill tracks occur twice a month around the inner beaches of the lagoon and the first track this season was seen on the 27th September. In

spite of the lower number of nesting hawksbills, juvenile hawksbills can often be seen in large numbers foraging either on the fringing reef or in the lagoon, looking for preferred food amongst the sea grass beds or in areas with coral. The lagoon and surrounding waters of Aldabra are thought to play an important role for juveniles, with the atoll being a part of their very large range. Juveniles tagged at Aldabra have been seen in the inner islands on Silhouette and in the Amirantes.

The in-water rodeo programme (a long-term monitoring programme) has included catching and tagging juvenile turtles, confirming the importance of the atoll as a hawksbill haven. One favourite spot for staff to see hawksbills is on a seagrass bed at low tide near Middle Camp. The water is only about 10cm deep, and when looking from afar, there is the appearance of little rocks breaking the water flow which when inspected further, is usually a hawksbill half-exposed, munching away.



Hawksbill turtle on the seagrass at low tide © SIF

Different life stages of this migratory, charismatic megafauna have a place here on Aldabra, whether it is for using the safety of the lagoon to grow bigger or for fleeting moments of a gravid female laying the next generation of turtles. The Aldabra staff are excited to see how the upcoming season unfolds for the hawksbill turtles!

Articles contributed by: Jennifer Appoo, Maria Brioche, Dylis Cedras, Annabelle Constance, Marc Jean-Baptiste, Adam Mitchell, Lynsey Rimbault and Cheryl Sanchez; **Editing by** Annabelle Constance and Lynsey Rimbault