

Celebrating 30 years of conservation

Since the arrival of the early explorers to the Seychelles, the Vallée de Mai has inspired wonder and amazement in all those who visit. Named the 'Garden of Eden' by General Gordon in 1881, this prehistoric forest has long been a place of discovery and adventure. Part of a global network of natural and cultural heritage sites under the umbrella of UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation) the majestic Vallée de Mai was recognised as an area that needed protection as early as 1966 when it was declared a nature reserve by the Seychelles government. 2013 was a historic year for the Vallée de Mai when it celebrated its 30th anniversary as a UNESCO World Heritage Site on the 9th December.

Seychelles Islands Foundation (SIF), a public trust, manages both Seychelles UNESCO World Heritage Sites and the Vallée de Mai, that has been under the protection of SIF since 1989. Known as the 'Green Heart' of Praslin the Vallée de Mai has literally stepped out of the shadows in the past thirty years. Although famed for the Coco de Mer and Black Parrot, this ancient forest's secrets are starting to be unearthed with ongoing research finding many treasures. In 2009 a new species of frog was uncovered in the Vallée de Mai which occurs only on the island of Praslin. In the same year a forgotten species of chameleon, that was lost to science for nearly 200 years, was re-discovered in the forest. One of the largest gecko species in the world, the Giant Bronze Gecko, was



Image credit, Dennis Hansen

described just ten years ago and is found only in this palm forest, making it one of the world's rarest reptiles. In addition to this, an array of plants and animals has been studied increasing our knowledge of the many unique species that make up this mysterious palm forest. There have been many achievements over the



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past thirty years but despite this the Vallée de Mai is still in danger. Poaching of the beautiful and valuable Coco de Mer nuts puts the future regeneration of the forest in peril, and endemic plant species fight for space with virulent invasive plants threatening the native biodiversity of the site. Firm action has been taken against these threats with an EC funded project tackling the invasive plant species and an expanded environmental education programme growing the conservationists of the future. With enhanced visitor services and effective conservation management the Vallée de Mai has become a world class tourist attraction. Seychelles' number one visitor attraction, a visit to the Vallée de Mai is like a step back in time, to a world where dinosaurs roamed the earth. A 'must do' for any visitor to Seychelles! With thirty successful years under its belt, what next for the Vallée de Mai? With such a rich wealth of biodiversity that we are only just beginning to understand, the next thirty years will bring a great deal more research to help us to protect and manage the splendour of this forest. Alongside this, collaborative projects with the local community will ensure that there are 'forest custodians' for many years to come.



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