



President Faure visits Aldabra



President Faure and his delegation welcomed to Aldabra © SIF

In December Aldabra had the extreme honour of hosting the President of Seychelles, President Danny Faure, for a familiarising visit. President Faure who is also the Patron of the Seychelles Islands Foundation was joined by a delegation including Minister Pamela Charlette of Fisheries and Agriculture, the Attorney General Mr Frank Ally and Brigadier Leopold Payet. It has been over ten years since the patron visited Aldabra, and the visit was a very special event for SIF!



The delegation observing frigatebirds © Vanessa Lucas

During the visit key research station infrastructure was inaugurated by President Faure. One of these was the newly constructed cyclone shelter that was completed in 2017 to provide shelter to staff on the atoll in the event of a tropical cyclone like Fantala, the strongest ever recorded in the Western Indian Ocean, which devastated Farquhar in 2016. As the effects of climate change continue to be felt in years to come tropical cyclones are likely to increase in frequency and severity, and the cyclone shelter is a vital defence against threats to people on Aldabra. Of the cyclone shelter President Faure commented on the importance of keeping the dedicated Aldabra staff safe while they're far from home. The other key infrastructure to be inaugurated was the ground breaking solar photovoltaic (PV) system that powers the research station. The PV system is the first of hybrid off-grid system of its kind in Seychelles, and although it has been in operation for several years, President Faure's visit was a fitting opportunity to recognise this innovative system.



SIF Chairman Minister Loustau-Lalanne shows President Faure a newly hatched tortoise © Vanessa Lucas

During the visit the President and his delegation learned about the threats facing the atoll, including the global problem of marine waste. President Faure heard about the ambitious marine waste clean-up planned for Aldabra, he shared our concerns and agreed that global solutions need to be found.

The visit wasn't all work though, and the delegation also had the opportunity to explore magical Aldabra! SIF Chairman, Minister Loustau Lanne, and CEO, Dr Fleischer-Dogley, and the dedicated staff on Aldabra showed the delegation around the atoll. They explored the station and the old settlement, and went walking across the champignon landscape. They visited middle camp, one of Aldabra's satellite camps, snorkelling in the mangroves and viewing the frigatebird colony. They also went on a lagoon cruise and were able to appreciate the enormous scale of the atoll.



President Faure with Minister Loustau-Lalanne, SIF CEO Dr Fleischer-Dogley and SIF staff © SIF

The President enjoyed his time on Aldabra, creating memories that will be cherished forever. He was very impressed with the dedicated team on the atoll and expressed appreciation for the efforts they put into ensuring that the trip was informative and enjoyable, he stated that “the words to describe Aldabra still need to be invented”. As one of Seychelles’ two UNESCO World Heritage sites Aldabra is a site of national

and outstanding universal value; it was a great privilege to share it with President Faure and his delegation.

Major 2017 SIF achievements

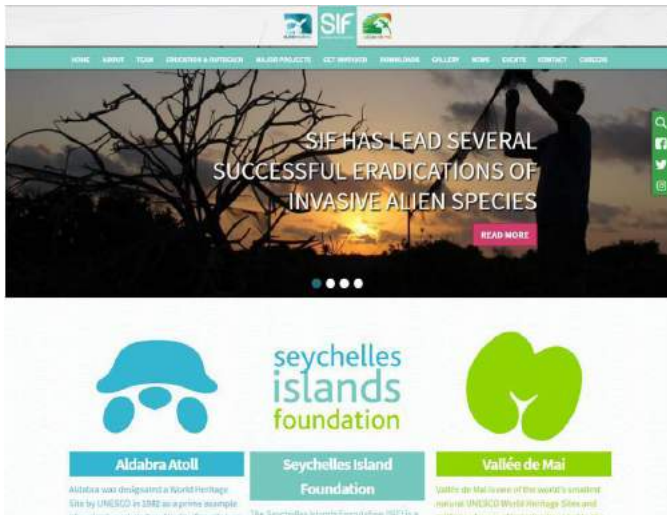
SIF would like to thank all our friends and supporters for their support and interest in 2017. It was a good year for SIF, Aldabra and the Vallée de Mai, some of the highlights were:



- Hosting President Danny Faure for visits to both the Vallée de Mai and Aldabra;
- Hosting Members of the National Assembly for the first time on Aldabra;
- Announcing the successful eradication of red-whiskered bulbuls and Madagascar fodies from Assumption and Aldabra, making Aldabra once again the largest tropical island free of introduced birds;
- Another record breaking year for visitors to the Vallée de Mai. In total 121,482 people visited the site, including local and international guests, school and outreach groups, official delegations and journalists;
- Once again sponsoring an Eco-Schools Award trip to Aldabra, and having three Eco-Schools students represent Aldabra at the UN Oceans Conference in New York;
- Construction of the long awaited cyclone shelter on Aldabra;
- Culling a ring-necked parakeet on Mahé, and bringing this ambitious eradication on step closer to completion;
- Launching of the SIF Instagram account and new website; and
- Inva'Ziles project started in the Vallée de Mai, representing a significant step towards controlling invasive species in the palm forest.

For full details of all of these exciting events our archived newsletters can be found at: <http://www.sif.sc/downloads?category=5>. May 2018 be just as successful!

New SIF Website launched



The website homepage © SIF

We are very excited to announce that after years of planning and development the new SIF website has been launched! The new website is packed with information on SIF, Aldabra and the Vallée de Mai, and will allow viewers a far greater understanding of SIF as an organisation, the two outstanding sites and the work done to protect and preserve them.



Staff profiles in the 'Meet the Team' section © SIF

The previous website was created 15 years ago and its style and content were outdated. The new website has a more modern look and has been designed to contain far more information, much of which will be updated regularly. As well as having much more comprehensive visitor information, the Aldabra and Vallée de Mai pages include species profiles, timelines, and much more. So if you're interested in learning about some of our favourite species or the

complex histories of the sites you know where to look. The home page will keep you up to date on SIF news and events, and in the meet the



Key species and habitats from both sites are described on the 'Aldabra' and 'Vallée de Mai' pages © SIF

team section you can get to know us like never before! Head over to www.sif.sc to check it out...

SIF Vacancies

We have several vacancies in the Vallée de Mai and Aldabra that are open to Seychellois. Contact HR on 432 17 35 if you are interested in any of the following positions:

Vallée de Mai:

- Visitor Attendant
- Property Maintenance Supervisor
- Trainee Field Research Assistant
- Sales Clerk

Aldabra:

- Ranger with boat handling skills
- Field Research Assistant with boat handling skills
- Cook/Gardener
- Maintenance and Logistic Assistant
- Skipper 60NM



Sooglossid survey begins in the Vallée de Mai

Seychelles harbours an endemic frog family of global significance, the Sooglossidae. The sooglossid frogs comprise two genera containing two species each. The *Sooglossus* genera with *S. sechellensis* and *S. thomasseti* and the *Sechellophryne* genera with *S. gardineri* and *S. pipilodryas*. They are unique among amphibians, being the only family entirely restricted to an archipelago.



Team members make their way to the survey sites © SIF

Until a recent discovery, the Sooglossids were thought to occur on Mahé and Silhouette. The Praslin population of *S.sechellensis* was first recorded in the Vallée de Mai in 2009;

a remarkable discovery given numerous biological, and dedicated herpetological surveys having taken place on the island over many years, some of which stated the absence of sooglossid frogs.

Following this discovery in the Vallée de Mai preliminary research was undertaken by a few individuals. Taylor et al. (2012) surveyed the population in 2010 estimating population size, identifying habitat preference, obtaining morphometric data, and sampling biological material for genetic analysis. Thanks to project funding from the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust a new project has started with the aim of assessing the status of the Vallée de Mai population since the last population estimate (2012).



Audio point sampling being conducted © SIF

The project started in December with the identification of feasible sites for the survey. This will provide SIF with the current population trend, and guide the setup of a long term monitoring programme of the species. The objectives are to: record presence/absence in the Vallée de Mai, map their distribution and assess the species habitat preferences. Habitat preferences will be assessed with particular reference to areas with bracken ferns, as this species is considered invasive in the reserve, and sooglossids have been observed in the bracken previously.

Sooglossids are extremely well camouflaged and difficult to spot, however they have a loud

call. In order to locate the tiny frogs 'audio point sampling' will be used, at each predetermined site two 30 second audio recordings will be taken, with the frogs counted using their calls. The survey will be done three times during both the dry south-east season and the wet north-west season to identify differences in distribution between the two predominant seasons in each study site.

Eight sites have been identified in the Vallée de Mai and the team has surveyed all eight sites, with four sites having been surveyed twice already. The wet season survey will continue during January and four will be conducted again during the dry season.

SIF Christmas holiday camp held



Bird focused art © SIF

The 12th edition of the SIF Christmas holiday camp programme was held from the 11th to 22nd December, as was the case in August, this was a special two week version of the camp with participants attending either of the weeks. Sixty pupils from Baie Ste Anne, Grand Anse and Vijay International Schools on Praslin attended the holiday camp. During the two weeks the participants learned about different environmental topics and the two UNESCO World Heritage Sites. They also participated in Christmas craft activities and went on a nature trail.

To learn about the birds of Seychelles the children received a presentation on the different birds found in the country and how to protect them. Following the presentation the children created bird inspired artwork, which was immediately put on display in the education room! After lunch, accompanied by their teachers, they walked up to Glacis Noire to observe birds in their natural environment.



Seeds were used in educational craft activities © SIF

Children learned about where seeds come from and how they develop to become plants, exploring the various seeds found around the world. They were very proud to plant their own seed and take it home with them! They loved exploring the fresh water ecosystems of the Vallée de Mai, and were thrilled to carefully catch and release some of the river's inhabitants. The Vallée de Mai site manager, Marc Jean-Baptiste delivered a presentation on Aldabra Atoll, and the children had a glimpse of the legendary atoll.



The holiday camp aims to promote an appreciation of outdoor activities © SIF

As with most island ecosystems, the Vallée de Mai and Aldabra are threatened by invasive species, and the holiday camp included a significant focus on this topic. The invasive species technical officer, Shanone Adeline gave a presentation on the threats that the invasive plant and animal species pose to the Vallée de Mai ecosystem. The Inva'Ziles project coordinator, Sarah Atkinson gave a presentation on the activities that the Inva'Ziles team are conducting to help them better understand the impact of invasive species. She also showed them a video of wolf snake being attacked by the yellow crazy ants.



Holiday camp participants © SIF

As part of efforts to increase opportunities for the children to explore nature the group went on the New Comme Trail. As they walked various plants and birds species were observed, and the children were able to identify a lot of the species they saw. After two weeks of fun and exciting environmental activities, the holiday camp ended with a Christmas party and carol concert for the participants of both weeks and children of Vallée de Mai staff.

Black parrot breeding season update

December has been very busy for the black parrot team at the Vallée de Mai. Besides discovering 19 eggs during the nest monitoring sessions, the team celebrated the hatching of

the first two chicks of the season! Rat control methods have been implemented at nests in the Vallée, and the team is hopeful that the chicks will survive the nesting season, and that more and more hatchlings will be found. So far it looks like this will be a good season with potential for many chicks successfully fledging in the near future.



Seychelles black parrot in an Albizia tree © SIF

On the 14th December the famous white black parrot was caught by a local farmer in the Kanper area who contacted the black parrot team straight away. Thanks to his cooperation, the white parrot was transported to the SIF office where the field workers took the necessary samples and the bird was fitted with black and purple rings to help with identifying him easily during future observations. Before the bird was released, he was treated to fruit and water before flying away happily. The white parrot wasn't the only parrot this month to be ringed; another four



The famous white black parrot © SIF

parrots can now be spotted with colourful rings on their legs in the Amitie and Zimbabwe areas, as the team continues to monitor these areas as well.

Inva'Ziles project makes progress with invasive mammals



Preparing rat traps © SIF

December was a very busy month for the Inva'Ziles project, as black parrots started their nesting in earnest! This meant rat traps were put in place around selected black parrot nests to hopefully improve nesting success. In the Vallée de Mai the smaller black, or ship, rat is present and these are known to readily climb trees, compared to the bigger brown rat seen in urban areas. A significant number of rats were caught initially, but thankfully these numbers have now decreased. This should significantly reduce the likelihood of black parrot nests being subjected

to rat predation. We are keeping our fingers crossed for these parrots and will continue to trap for rats until the chicks have successfully fledged.

Throughout the month we have also been working on a project to assess the dietary preferences of the tenrec, a mammal native to Madagascar and introduced to Seychelles, and which is thought to have an impact on invertebrates in the Vallée de Mai. This is done by examining their stomach contents and tenrecs seem to have quite a liking for jack fruit! Samples of beetles, centipedes and snails have also been collected and these will be identified at a later date. This information is crucial to understanding the impacts of invasive alien mammal species on the native invertebrates of the Vallée de Mai.



Trap deployed near a black parrot nest © SIF



aldabra atoll

Cruise ships visit Aldabra

The current north-west season is a very busy season on Aldabra, in addition to on-going research and monitoring, due to calmer seas most of the atoll's annual visitors come to Aldabra in the space of a few short months. In December, the atoll was visited several times by small-sized cruise ships of approximately 80 - 100 passengers, and by a vessel operated by our faithful local operator Silhouette Cruises. Although this doesn't sound like a lot, compared to the last decade, tourism is picking up in the Aldabra group! The increase in tourism is due to the abatement of piracy, but regulations in the Aldabra Management Plan, as well as the remoteness of the atoll, mean that mass tourism will never occur on Aldabra – luckily for the atoll's plant and animal inhabitants!



Cruise ship Serrinisama © SIF



Cruise ship guests enjoying snorkelling © SIF

Many visitors book a ticket on these expensive two-week cruises largely to have the chance to see Aldabra and SIF is striving to make the visits as enjoyable as possible for all guests. To coordinate these visits and minimise disturbance to on-going work on the atoll, SIF created a new seasonal position: Aldabra tourism coordinator. This year the post is being filled by Janske van de Crommenacker who worked on Aldabra between 2011 and 2014, first as scientific coordinator and then as resident researcher. Janske organises the schedule for the visits with the help of the other Aldabra staff and the cruise ships' crew.



The Aldabra 'souvenir shop'! © SIF

As a result of the newly adopted Aldabra management plan SIF has set up strict guidelines, boundaries and biosecurity measures to limit the impact of visitors on the atoll, and all activities are centred on and around Picard Island. Popular activities usually enjoyed by tourists are a lagoon cruise from Main Channel to West Channels, observing the frigatebirds colony, drift snorkelling in a channel or in front of the

settlement, diving, and a land visit. The staff on Aldabra must be multi-talented, in addition to their normal roles, the Aldabra team members have to ensure that all regulations are followed and also act as guides, giving marine and land-based tours. A souvenir shop is set up for each visit, including t-shirts, mugs, postcards and other items to remember this special visit. To top it all off, their passports are stamped with our official Aldabra stamp!



Guests on a land tour © SIF

The staff on Aldabra are looking forward to more visits as the season continues, it's always a welcome site to have fresh faces on the atoll, especially when the visitors are as passionate about discovering Aldabra as the staff are, and the chance to spend some time on a luxurious cruise ship is a real treat!

Aldabra reef monitoring successfully completed

The Aldabra staff have successfully completed season five of the Aldabra reef monitoring programme. Over three weeks the marine team, consisting of four divers, dived around the atoll and in the lagoon collecting data on the status of the marine environment.

Aldabra reef monitoring is an annually conducted marine monitoring programme, which aims to



The marine monitoring team © SIF

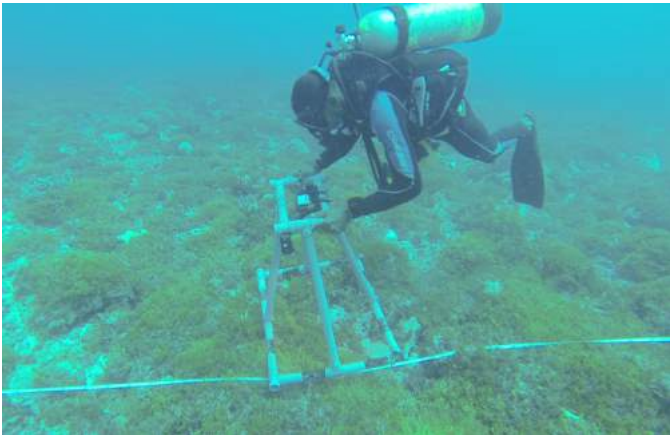
detect change to the reef ecology over time around the atoll. Coral reef benthic coverage and fish assemblage are surveyed at 12 permanent fixed sites every year. The monitoring of these parameters over successive years provides insight into the status and resilience of the reefs, and how this changes over time. The surveys were completed within a three week window from the 12th to 29th December. This year's surveys mark the fifth year in which this new but important programme has been running, and the second year in which this has been done entirely in-house.



Fish surveys © SIF

The monitoring consists of benthic photoquadrats and fish surveys. Benthic photoquadrats involve photographing the benthic cover using a 50x50cm quadrat and a camera along a 10m transect. This procedure is repeated three times over a total transect length of 50m. Fish

surveys entail recording a representative group of fish species that are indicative of ecosystem composition and resilience. This is done by swimming over a 50m transect and counting and sizing the fish within 2m on each side of the transect. This procedure is replicated three times.



Benthic photoquadrats © SIF

Aldabra's marine environment is not always diver friendly and the team was faced with bad weather and challenging sea conditions. Regardless the team worked around these issues and managed to complete all surveys within the required timeframe. Although an intensive and tiring period, the team was rewarded by viewing Aldabra's spectacular coral reefs with unique fish diversity and endangered marine species, a once in a lifetime opportunity! A full season report will be compiled once the data has been analysed, stay tuned for the results.

Biosecurity measures protect Aldabra from invasive species

In order to protect Aldabra from invasive species one of the Head Office team's jobs is to do biosecurity checks before planes and boats depart for the atoll. During December SIF had two planes and a supply boat travel to Aldabra with personnel, supplies and festive goodies. However, before they could depart for Aldabra

they needed to be inspected for any potential invasive species. As per the Aldabra Biosecurity Plan (2014) and the Mahé Biosecurity Protocol (2016), SIF's Mahé biosecurity officer must check all fresh food (meat, fruit and vegetables) for insect bite marks and signs of microorganisms. Additionally, the inspection requires the examination of containers and packages, as well as people's baggage, clothes and shoes for any seeds or other living stowaways. These checks involve unpacking parcels, inspecting fresh food and removing leaves on the fruit so as to mitigate the chances of any in-transit contamination. Briefing personnel and visitors on Aldabra's biosecurity measures and protocols also takes place as a vital part of the process ensuring Aldabra's biosecurity is effective. People's understanding and awareness of biosecurity contributes to the atoll's protection.

In December, all checks were conducted and no high risk invasive species were detected in the process. Black ants were found on some



Fruit and vegetables are checked for stowaway insects © imagesthai.com from Pexels

bananas, and although these were likely the same species as those found on Aldabra, as a precaution all ants were removed from the bananas by spraying them with water at high pressure.

After landing on Assumption Island further checks take place, carried out by Aldabra's biosecurity

officer. In particular shoes are checked for seeds before people board any of Aldabra's boats, this reduces the risk of spreading species from Assumption to Aldabra. The repetition of these checks and the considerable amount of time spent on making sure all biosecurity protocols are followed may seem excessive, but considering Aldabra's biodiversity, SIF takes their implementation seriously. It's a small price to pay for its preservation!



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