



## President René: a Champion for Seychelles' UNESCO World Heritage Sites



*President René © Seychelles News Agency*

Upon hearing the news of former President René's passing, it is worth reflecting on his contribution to the conservation of Aldabra and the Vallée de Mai. During his first year in Government as Minister of Works and Land Development, Aldabra was part of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). President René was instrumental in negotiating the return of the atoll to Seychelles at the event of independence in 1976. In 1979 President René created SIF by presidential decree, and he became the foundation's first patron. SIF was created with the purpose of managing Aldabra and he oversaw the handing over of the atoll from the Royal Society to SIF in 1980. In 1983 the Vallée de Mai was inscribed as a UNESCO World

Heritage site and under his patronage the palm forest was also managed by SIF from 1989.

In terms of environmental conservation President René was a man ahead of his time. He was acutely aware of the importance of the environment, recognising that healthy and productive ecosystems were a valuable resource. He created the first national parks in Seychelles, and unlike protected areas elsewhere at the time, President René appreciated the value of allowing people into the parks. President René loved Aldabra, visiting the atoll many times with the Board of Trustees for annual general meetings. He had a deep love for the ocean and connection with nature, and during his Presidency he helped to instil the same in Seychellois. His actions provided the foundations for Seychelles to become the environmental leader it is today. Thanks to President René the political will for conservation came even before widespread environmental consciousness in the population, helping to create a nation in which love for the environment transcends all groups and political affiliations.

## Vallée de Mai senior ranger attends Durrell Conservation Training in Mauritius

Terance Payet, Vallée de Mai senior ranger and head of the black parrot team was offered a place on a Durrell Conservation Training exchange programme, in partnership with Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), Mauritian Wildlife Foundation (MWF) and Association Vahatra Madagascar. The exchange programme aimed at building regional capacity

for biodiversity conservation and monitoring, and this phase was held in Mauritius from 14th January to 15th February 2019. It was the second part of the training, following the one in Madagascar in November 2018.



*The participants at Middlesex University, Mauritius © SIF*

Terance received skills training on different monitoring programmes with the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation, and had the opportunity to work at four different field stations over four weeks: Ebony Forest Reserve, Île aux Aigrettes, la Vallée de Ferney and Black River Gorges National Park. He gained skills in nursery management, including learning about different cutting techniques and planting. He also learned about the restoration programmes run by the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation, which involves the removal of invasive plants and animals from islands, and restoring native ecosystems by planting native and endemic species. As



*Terance especially enjoyed learning skills in nursery management © SIF*

the long-time leader of the Vallée de Mai black parrot team Terance was also very interested in the organisation’s bird conservation work. He helped with providing birds with supplementary food, joined in monitoring endangered species to understand their behaviours, maintained eco parakeet and kestrel nest boxes.



*Terance planting seedlings © SIF*

Terance also attended a one-week course at Middlesex University Mauritius where he received training on ‘how to train a trainer’, better ways to write scientific reports, grant proposal writing and basic statistics. Terance found the course to be useful, and he particularly appreciated the training on nursery management and also the ‘train a trainer’ course at Middlesex University.

## SIF Vacancies

We have several vacancies at the head office in the Vallée de Mai and on Aldabra. Details can be found on our website at <http://www.sif.sc/jobs> or contact HR on 432 17 35 if you are interested in any of the following positions:

Aldabra:

- Electrician/Mechanic Assistant
- Shopkeeper

Vallée de Mai:

- Visitor Attendant
- Fieldworker
- Housekeeper
- Ranger



## Black parrot breeding season drawing to a close

At the Vallée de Mai, the black parrot breeding season is entering its final weeks. The team have stopped discovering new eggs in nests and the early-hatching black parrot chicks have reached a good size, some of them have started to fledge! In February there were a total of seven fledglings from the monitored nests. There are now 11 nests remaining in the monitored area.



*Seychelles black parrot chick © Adam Mitchell*

Throughout the month the black parrot team have been checking all the known black parrot nests and monitoring the progress of eggs and chicks closely. In some cases this required drilling access doors into the nests to allow for the ringing of chicks when they are of adequate

size. This involved a lot of tree climbing and ladder setups, a very intensive and physically demanding process. The team also spent long hours in the field observing parrots and trying to identify the parents of the chicks from the different nests, something that requires a lot of patience. Some nests are very high and need a whole team of four to facilitate access. By the end of February a total of 14 chicks had been ringed.



*Black parrots feeding in a palmiste next to the visitor centre © SIF*

Some bad news turned into a highlight of the month for the Vallée de Mai team. An injured black parrot chick was picked up by the Seychelles National Parks Authority (SNPA) staff at Glacis Noir, near the Vallée de Mai. The chick was brought to SIF staff and later ringed to be released near its nest, when it was discovered to have a small but serious wound at the base of



*The injured chick being well looked after © SIF*

its tail. It is thought to have fledged from one of the monitored nests at Glacis Noir. The chick is now at the Vallée de Mai being cared for by the black parrot team until it is recovered enough to be returned to the wild.

The black parrot team will continue to monitor the nests very closely; following all nests to their conclusion and monitoring fledglings to get a full picture of the breeding season and impacts of the various factors affecting nest success.

## Herpetofauna survey conducted in the Vallée de Mai

After a short, incredibly sweaty and sometimes rainy month the Vallée de Mai team have completed a full herpetofauna (reptiles and amphibians) survey of the Vallée de Mai! An understudied group with a high proportion of endemic species, herpetofauna are also some of the most threatened species, particularly in light of invasive alien species threats, such as yellow crazy ants



The team set up transects in the palm forest © SIF

The survey was done with transects, which were started at the beginning of February, and the team hit the ground running to get it done by the end of the month. The surveying was led by Louise McLaughlin, Vallée de Mai herpetofauna officer, and supported by members of the research team. Fifty 50m transects were done, and both sides of the transect were surveyed for six species of gecko, two chameleons and a tree frog. All five endemic gecko species were seen during the survey; the dwarf bronze gecko, Seychelles bronze gecko, the giant bronze gecko, Sundburgi's day gecko and the Seychelles day gecko. These are all arboreal gecko species, meaning that they live in the trees and not on the ground.



A day gecko © SIF

All five geckos are very good at camouflaging themselves and being very very still so it could be tricky to spot them! The most frequently seen gecko species in the survey was Sundburgi's day gecko, which was often spotted on coco de mer catkins. Watching these large geckos through binoculars revealed just how long their tongues are and how impervious they seem to the honey bees swarming around them, wanting their own share of the pollen. The only gecko they defer to is the giant bronze gecko, who appears to be king of the Vallée de Mai canopy! Few giant bronze geckos were seen on the transects, but seeing them is always unforgettable – Louise described seeing the first one “It was resting on an unripe catkin and looking at me with as much curiosity as I was looking at it. Such big feet! Such

*a large body! Such big eyes! And then it flicked its tongue out of its mouth to clean its face... What a big tongue!*" Emmanuel Morel, Vallée de Mai field research assistant commented that the giant bronze gecko "looks like a mini dinosaur, its gigantic! Just look at the size of its feet from a distance, absolutely incredible!" The team is now surveying in Fond Pepper followed by Fond Ferdinand to compare sites.



*A giant bronze gecko shows off its huge feet © SIF*

## **World Wetlands Day celebrated with planting activity**

The 2nd February marks one of the most important environmental theme days in the year; World Wetlands Day. This day is celebrated across the world to mark the date of the adoption of the convention on wetlands, called the Ramsar Convention.

To celebrate World Wetlands Day this year the Aldabra Clean-Up Project team initiated a tree planting activity in collaboration with the Terrestrial Restoration Action Society of Seychelles (TRASS), Ivan Capricieuse, one of the project volunteers is also a TRASS member. The Friends of Vallée de Mai members and the

Vallée de Mai staff were invited to participate in the planting. A large group of volunteers gathered on Saturday 2nd February at the marsh at Nouvelle Decouverte on Praslin.



*Friends of Vallée de Mai members on World Wetlands Day © SIF*

The planting activity at Nouvelle Decouverte was the first official activity for this year with the Friends of Vallée de Mai members and they were very pleased to be together participating in this activity after a long holiday break.

## **The Friends of Vallée de Mai club featured in an exhibition**



*Minister Telemaque visited the Friends of Vallée de Mai stand © SIF*

The Friends of Vallée de Mai club was founded in 2009 by SIF and Jeanette Larue, current director general for public education and community outreach at the Ministry of Environment and a former SIF board member.

It is a group comprising school children from all the schools on Praslin. The club started with only nine members and has now increased to over 150 people, excluding former members that have now left school but are still interested and affiliated to the Friends of Vallée de Mai. This year the Friends of Vallée de Mai will celebrate its tenth anniversary.

The Friends of Vallée de Mai is very active group on Praslin participating in a variety of environmental activities such as tree planting, cleaning of rivers, beaches and marshes, snorkelling, marches to raise awareness about protecting the endangered species and many more.



*Maria Brioche, SIF's education and outreach officer was interviewed by SBC © SIF*

The Friends of Vallée de Mai was invited by the Citizens Engagement Platform Seychelles (CEPS) to participate in an exhibition on the 22nd February. The exhibition was held at the Grand Anse Praslin football field. This was a huge opportunity for the club to show all the work that they have been doing during their first ten years.

The members were very honoured to welcome the Minister for Employment, Immigration and Civil Status, Minister Myriam Telemaque to their stand. Very proudly they showed her around and explained the important work the Friends of Vallée de Mai does to help promote the Seychelles environment on Praslin. Thank you to CEPS for inviting us!



# aldabra atoll

## The in-field phase of the Aldabra Clean-Up Project begins!

The field phase of the Aldabra Clean-Up Project started on the 22nd February, and the month was a whirlwind of exciting activities and developments. On the 18th February, a few days before departure, President Danny Faure, SIF's patron, invited the Aldabra Clean-Up Project volunteers to State House for a sending off ceremony. SIF's CEO, Dr Frauke Fleischer-Dogley, thanked the President for his personal interest and tremendous support for this project since its launch. Following her short address the project co-leaders April Burt and Jeremy Raguain gave a presentation to update everyone on the efforts to get the project off the ground. The President played the Aldabra song by



*President Faure has been a staunch supporter of the Aldabra Clean-Up Project © State House*

Patrick Victor, and explained how much it meant to him and inspired him when he visited Aldabra in 2017. The President said that he believed the experience that the volunteers would have on Aldabra, both seeing the incredible wildlife and the destructive impact of the plastic, would mean they would all come back changed and be true ambassadors in the fight against plastic pollution.



*President Faure, Minister Loustau-Lalanne and Dr Fleischer-Dogley with the Aldabra Clean-Up Project team © State House*

In the days before departure the project was featured in Seychelles and international media. April and Jeremy gave presentation to Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) in the UK and interviews to Sky Ocean Rescue, and to Seychelles' K-radio. Following that also Kalsey Belle and Craig Francourt, as well as Josie Mahony and Becca Goldberg gave interviews to K-radio and Radio Pure FM. The project had a double page spread in the Seychelles Nation and was broadcast by SBC.



*Rubbish is sorted and weighed on Aldabra © SIF*

The 12-person team travelled to Aldabra on Friday 22nd February and spent the weekend at the Aldabra station on Picard Island finalising logistics and arrangements for camp. On Monday the 25th they split into two teams, led by Jeremy and April, and travelled to the remote field camps of Dune d'Messe and Dune Jean-Louis. In that first week, from Monday to Friday, the Dune d'Messe team collected 5.3 tonnes of marine debris and the Dune Jean-Louis group collected 4.5 tonnes! That is 9.8 tonnes total, an incredible amount when you consider how light much of the waste is. The number of flip flops has been staggering, and the most challenging items to remove so far have been ropes, nets and other fishing gear that get buried in the sand and tangled on the rough limestone.



*Flip flops are some of the most common items of marine debris © SIF*

The staff on Aldabra have also been working very hard for the project. In addition to all of the preparations to the camps and boat, they have also been transporting volunteers to the camps, joining in on the clean-up for several days at a time, and very importantly delivering treats like ice-cold water, chocolate and fish! Stay tuned for updates next month when we'll know exactly how many tonnes of rubbish this ambitious project has collected...

## **Tropicbird and shearwater research**

Seabirds are highly threatened, but the ecology of many tropical seabird species is poorly

understood, which makes it difficult to implement effective conservation measures. Tropicbirds, key seabird species in the Indian Ocean, have been particularly understudied. To fill some of these gaps and learn more about their ecology, Dr Annette Fayet from the University of Oxford (UK) visited Aldabra in December 2017 to start a research project on their feeding ecology (see [January 2018 newsletter](#)), and returned from January to February this year to complete it.



*Red-tailed tropicbird on its nest © Janske van de Crommenacker*

Both white-tailed and red-tailed tropicbirds breed on Aldabra, but their breeding success is low, and red-tailed tropicbirds may be declining. The aim of the project is to discover where the two species feed at sea, what they eat, and why their nests are failing at such high rates. To do this, miniature (<6g) GPS loggers were temporarily attached to the birds' tails for about a week to record their locations at sea while they feed, and regurgitated food and faecal samples were collected to investigate their diet. To find out what is causing the low breeding success Annette set up cameras near tropicbird nests to monitor their activity.



*Annette and SIF volunteer Elysia deploying a GPS tag on a red-tailed tropicbird © Cheryl Sanchez*

The six-week expedition was very successful. Over 30 tropicbird feeding trips were recorded with GPS loggers, and the initial data show very interesting patterns. For example, both red-tailed and white-tailed tropicbirds feed very far from Aldabra, with all birds flying several hundred kilometres away. Some of the cameras are still on Aldabra collecting data, but preliminary results suggest that heavy rain, rats and herons are responsible for some nest failures, rather than there being a single cause.



*Shearwater researchers in the lagoon at night © Jake Letori*

Annette also tagged 18 tropical shearwaters with tiny (1g) loggers called geolocators which will record the birds' location and activity for up to 2 years. Tropical shearwaters are poorly known, elusive seabirds, which only come to land after dark. The tracking data will help us find out more about their breeding patterns and long-distance movements at sea.



*A pair of tropical shearwaters in their burrow © Annette Fayet*

Overall this project will provide much more detailed information about the ecology of these three important seabird species on Aldabra, help us to understand why nest success is so poor and potentially develop appropriate

conservation measures to help protect these beautiful birds. This project is a collaboration between SIF and Annette Fayet, and is funded by the Seychelles Environment Trust Fund, the Africa Oxford Initiative, The John Fell Fund and The Queen's College, Oxford.

## Frigatebird census completed



*Sunrise over the lagoon as the team heads out © SIF*

February 2019 saw the completion of the 9th annual frigatebird census on Aldabra. It took seven people, 76 man hours and three boats to survey the four frigatebird breeding colonies around the atoll. The colonies are all accessed from the lagoon and the team were often up at the crack of dawn to make full use of the high tides. The yearly census aims to monitor the number of breeding frigatebirds on Aldabra. In 2019, 6791 nests were counted in total, compared to 7713 last year and 4453 in 2017. The long-term results indicate that the frigatebird population is stable but we see considerable fluctuations in numbers from year to year.

Aldabra has two species of frigatebird, the lesser frigatebird and the greater frigatebird, and the census counts both of these. Only birds sitting on nests are counted as this gives information about the breeding population; unaccompanied frigatebird chicks on nests are also counted but these are not possible to distinguish to species.

The two species show different breeding patterns and timings. In general there are more lesser frigatebirds on Aldabra than greater frigatebirds. In some colonies only one species of frigatebird occurs, and in other colonies both species nest next to each other.



*Frigatebirds with distinctive gular sacs on display © SIF*

Aldabra's frigatebird population is the largest in the Indian Ocean and is therefore very important for the conservation of these species. Seabirds are among the most threatened groups of birds and numbers are declining globally. The stable population of frigatebirds on Aldabra is therefore very positive news. The changes in breeding population size seen from year to year on Aldabra are likely to be natural fluctuations related to the fact that frigatebirds do not have an annual breeding cycle like many other species. Other factors, such as food availability, may also affect the breeding population size. It is likely thanks to the strong protection in place for the frigatebirds on Aldabra that the population remains stable.



*Jessica and Elysia counting frigatebirds © SIF*

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