



SIF Newsletter November 2019



Aldabra Clean-Up Project documentary screenings well-received in Seychelles

SIF proudly presented two free screenings of 'Island under Siege', the documentary film about the Aldabra Clean-Up Project, on Friday 29th November at Deepam Cinema in Victoria and at Baie Ste Anne Community Centre in Praslin. 50 people attended the screening at Deepam cinema and 18 attended



Island under Siege screening © SIF

the screening on Praslin. The 24-minute documentary goes behind the scenes of the five-week expedition which took place from 22nd February to 29th March 2019 and removed over 25 metric tonnes of plastic pollution from the remote UNESCO World Heritage site Aldabra Atoll.

Island under Siege reveals the scale of the global issue of plastic pollution as well as the realities of living and working on a remote island. The film was produced by Seychelles Islands Foundation and Queen's College of the University of Oxford to educate the public about plastic consumption and the impact it has on cherished natural sites such as Aldabra.

The screening was well-received, with positive feedback given by the audience in a survey and in the Q&A after the screening. The film has been broadcast by SBC and it will be freely available online by mid-March 2020.

SIF attends 'From Ocean to Health' Conference

The 'From Ocean to Health' conference took place at Avani Hotel on Mahé, Seychelles, on 12-13 November 2019. The event featured two days of lectures and discussions focused on our marine environment, the world's 'underwater forest'. The conference also presented the Seychelles Child Development Study, an international research collaboration of more than thirty years which examined the effects of prenatal and postnatal mercury exposure.



'From Ocean to Health' conference © SIF

Presentation at the conference © SIF

A range of stakeholders consisting of professors, scientists and NGOs from several different countries joined together to learn and explore different aspects of ocean health, especially in relation to small tropical island states such as Seychelles.

The major threats to our diverse marine ecosystem were presented, with most of the issues caused by us - humans. The threats presented and discussed at the conference included overfishing, unregulated fishing, bycatch, algal blooms, coral bleaching, littering, and lack of research, funding and technology. However, the most pressing issue persistently highlighted as the greatest risk to ocean health was the global climate crisis.

Research presented at the conference highlighted the clear links between ocean health and human health. We learned that in today's society, consumption of meat is much higher than fish compared

to the past, which may be contributing to increased health issues in our societies. In some areas, fish carry high percentages of toxins, which accumulate in larger long-lived fish when consumed. Fish are also being caught on a huge scale for consumer markets in regions where local people need them the most.

In general, there is a lack of knowledge of fish and their important nutritional benefits among the public, especially in young people. Education should be prioritised to protect the future of our oceans,



especially considering that Seychellois culture, diet and economy is so heavily dependent on the it.

The Seychelles Child Development Study had positive results however, which found no clear evidence of abnormal or delayed development in children as a result of their mother's consumption of fish during pregnancy. This may be because there

Overview of seafood health benefits slide © SIF

are no adverse effects to methyl mercury exposure or it may be that effects become apparent later on, or that other aspects of the Seychellois diet protect against mercury.

The ocean health emergency will become more critical. There is no one solution to address this global issue but rather, a combination of projects and activities such as coral restoration and policy implementation that will encourage change. Potential funding opportunities from trust funds such as SeyCCAT were proposed to encourage projects to be established. Stakeholders also emphasised that further support is available from different local entities including the Blue Economy. Organisations such as SIF and the research and conservation projects we run are extremely important. Any form of involvement and partnership can lead us all in the right direction to achieving a sustainable future

SIF takes part in Raft Race 2019

SIF had a fantastic day participating at the Seychelles National Parks Authority (SNPA) and Global Vision International (GVI) Raft Race on Saturday 23rd November.



The SIF Raft Race team preparing to set off © SIF

The SIF raft race team was made up of representatives from each of SIF's bases – Marvin from Aldabra, Monica from the Vallée de Mai, and Ronny and Jeremy from Head Office. A group from Head Office worked hard to build the raft from discarded materials. We used yellow buoys and rope which had been collected from Aldabra during the Aldabra Clean-Up Project, wooden pallets from the shop on Aldabra and reusable water cooler tanks from Head Office. We also had a team costume that was based on the yellow crazy ant control project in the Vallée de Mai. We made ant antennas from newspaper, hairbands, wire and spray paint.

The race was tough and extremely competitive and, despite our best efforts, the SIF team didn't manage to paddle to victory, but came a proud 15th and had a lot of fun in the process. It was a great team bonding experience for everyone and we are determined to participate in the race every year. It was also a fun opportunity for SIF staff, family and friends to have a small picnic at Cap Ternay to

socialise with each other and other organisations. We look forward to getting involved in next year's race!



The Raft Race team mid-way through the race © SIF



The SIF Raft Race team preparing to set off © SIF

SIF Vacancies

We have several vacancies in Head Office, the Vallée de Mai and Aldabra which need to be filled urgently. We are actively seeking Seychellois applicants for all of the positions. Details can be found on our website at www.sif.sc/jobs or contact HR on 432 17 35 if you are interested in any of the following positions:

Head Office:

Accounts technician
Storekeeper

Vallée de Mai:

Visitor Attendant
Property Maintenance Supervisor

Aldabra:

Skipper
Marine mechanic
Cook/Gardener



YCA taskforce achieves new milestone and welcomes new leader

The YCA (yellow crazy ant) taskforce proudly completed a second round of baiting to control this highly invasive species in the Vallée de Mai on 6th November. The main goal of using bait in the forest is to control YCA numbers and minimise their impacts on the important ecosystem of the Vallée de Mai palm forest.



The YCA taskforce preparing to set off for baiting © SIF

As bait should be cast at 5kg per hectare, all the baiters practiced their throwing technique before heading into the palm forest. Therefore, the day before baiting, everyone met at the football field on Eve Island and practiced walking in a straight 50m line, spaced 10 meters apart and using rice as a bait substitute.

Baiting commenced on 5th November and lasted for a full, long day with minimal break times. To cover the whole area of the Vallée de Mai, baiters were divided into three teams of 4-5 individuals and were given different sections of the forest. Each baiter had a small bag that contained five 500g

bags of bait, a compass, a GPS, and a pair of safety gloves. The compass enabled team members to navigate in a straight line and the GPS tracked their movements within the forest so a map of the coverage area could be created. The idea was for each group to start at the edge of each section and work their way down and continue until the whole section was covered in bait. A couple of runners were also available to provide baiters with water and snacks and to refill their bait supply.

The taskforce were happy to celebrate everyone's hard work and determination and they are confident that the baiting will curb YCA spread and reduce their abundance and impacts on native species. It is sobering to consider what almost certainly would have happened to the Vallée de Mai and its wildlife had action not been taken (impacts that had already begun with the spread of YCA through the site). Looking forwards, with record numbers of YCA found at the entrance to the site in November, it is as even more important to maintain the high control standards to protect the forest.

On 22nd November, our extremely hard-working YCA project lead and dear friend, Lorraine Cook, left SIF after more than two and a half years, to return home to New Zealand. She has been an excellent leader and instigator of the YCA taskforce and will be missed! She had a handover with our new Project Officer, Constance Tragett, who joined SIF on 18th November and enjoyed a very intense first week with Lorraine. Welcome to the team Constance, and let's keep up the fight against the YCA!

Vallée de Mai welcomes new Science Coordinator

Aurelie Hector joined the Vallée de Mai as Science Coordinator on 13th November. Aurelie brings with her a wealth of relevant regional experience, having previously worked on Round Island in Mauritius for the last four years, and as Round Island Senior Warden there for the last three years. Her work on Round Island included plant restoration and monitoring, seabird and reptile monitoring and work with invasive species, and she was a recent EDGE fellow championing an endangered species of endemic Mauritian snake, so she is well placed to take on the role of science coordinator for the Vallée de Mai.



Aurelie Hector, Vallée de Mai's new Science Coordinator © Yogishah Bunsy



Aurelie Hector at the Vallée de Mai © SIF

Aurelie said, “Starting this new role at SIF was like a dream coming true. It is incredible. Coming from Mauritius I am used to a degraded forest and not much wildlife, but I was amazed to see how Seychelles has so much greenery and native species.

“Previously I was working on a two-year project with a unique species of snake, endemic to Mauritius, the Round Island keel-scaled boa. I am excited for a new challenge and am thrilled to work for an organisation which not only protects nature but supports their staff.”

We are delighted to have Aurelie on board, and look forward to everything she has to bring to the team.



Marine monitoring underway at Aldabra

There is always a sense of anticipation and excitement on Aldabra at the end of the south-east season in October. The change of season means a change in the atmosphere; tourists, staff, researchers, and different monitoring programmes to tackle. One of these is marine monitoring. With the arrival of Aldabra's newly renovated boat, Manta, formerly LeeCat, the team had the green light to start diving and kick-start marine monitoring.



*Germano Soru, Field Research Officer, with photoquadrat
© SIF*



Diane Ernesta, Ranger, looking for coral recruits © SIF

Marine monitoring is no easy task, especially on Aldabra. The tides and water movements that make Aldabra so special also make it logistically complicated to complete the monitoring in a short timeframe. There are 12 marine monitoring sites in total: nine sites around the outside of the atoll, which each have 15-m and 5-m transects; and three sites in the lagoon with 5-m transects. For several of these sites, the tide is too strong to do the monitoring during spring tides, so the team can only monitor them during neap tides.

The team started studying fish and corals throughout the southeast season, to become confident in their field identification skills, and then practiced the procedures on land a few times. Once underwater, it's not easy to communicate, so we needed to ensure everyone understood the details and methods clearly before getting into the water. Two team members collect information on fish; and two collect information on coral and take photos of the sea floor.

This season, which is the seventh season in a row of this intensive data collection, has so far been a huge success! The team began monitoring in mid-November and were able to complete over half the sites in just over a week. The remaining sites will be completed in January. Although it is too early to make conclusions about the state of the reefs following the most recent bleaching in 2016, the team has had some incredible encounters, including sightings of silvertip and blacktip reef sharks, various grouper species, schools of snappers, and many other reef fish. The highlight, however, was when the team descended at a site on the south-east of the atoll. As the team was getting ready to start their transects, a manta ray appeared and slowly circled the team before cruising out of view!



Manta ray at Aldabra © SIF

Mangrove PhD fieldwork continues: 650 mangroves surveyed!

In November, Annabelle Constance and the SIF team started field research on Aldabra's mangroves on the islands of Picard and Grande Terre. This work is part of Annabelle's PhD research at the University of Zurich, the main aim of which is to investigate factors that influence the distribution of mangroves and their diversity on the atoll.



Annabelle and the SIF team doing field work in the mangroves © SIF

Annabelle's work combines a survey of the mangrove adults and seedlings, their environment (soil conditions and water exposure) and their distribution (done by drone). So far, a massive team effort has enabled the completion of 49 plots of 5m², with 650 adult mangroves and >350 seedlings surveyed. All adults are identified to species level, and their size and height measured. The biggest tree recorded was at Bras Cinq Cases on Grande Terre with a trunk circumference of 151cm!

The intensive mangrove field research will continue until mid-January and thereafter, SIF will monitor the mangrove environment and seedlings for six more months. Working and

navigating through knee-high prop roots on Aldabra, fondly known as "mangrove yoga", has been physically demanding, yet very rewarding. The mangrove areas on Aldabra, many previously unexplored, are teeming with terrestrial and marine life, an experience that is nothing short of amazing!

Annabelle is very thankful for all of the help she has received from SIF to plan and carry out the surveys, and looks forward to being able to share the knowledge generated from her work so it can be integrated into management.



Jessica Moumou and Mikael Esparon doing 'mangrove yoga' © SIF



Annabelle and Germano doing field work on a rainy day! © SIF

Strong start for Aldabra tourist season

The tourism season has kicked off on Aldabra, with the atoll receiving two visits already and two more to come before the New Year. The north-west monsoon season, when the wind and seas are relatively calm, brings tourists from all over the world who travel to the atoll aboard small yachts and expedition-style cruise ships.



MS Bremen's expedition leader with the SIF team © SIF

One of the first vessels to arrive was MS Bremen who visited in November, carrying 140 passengers from Germany. It was the first time this vessel had visited Aldabra, and guests and crew were extremely excited to arrive at the atoll.

All visitors and crew pay an impact fee which goes towards funding the operation of the Aldabra station, and the management and monitoring of Aldabra. Our staff arrange various activities for the tour groups such as land tours, lagoon cruises, snorkeling and diving, all of which are regulated within tourism designated zones to reduce human disturbance to wildlife. Visits often last for one or two days. There is much to show to the tourists within a very short time period and planning these visits can be complicated for the Tourism Coordinator, who manages large groups of people around the movements of the tides on the atoll.



MS Bremen's captain showing the SIF team the engine room © SIF

The SIF team being given a tour of the ship © SIF

Once a vessel has anchored, the SIF team board the vessel to meet the crew and guests. Guests are given an introductory presentation. To prevent the introduction of potentially invasive alien species people coming ashore then undergo mandatory biosecurity checks. SIF staff inspect everyone's footwear, backpacks and clothing for seeds, soil, sand, insects or any other fauna and flora that may be hitchhiking a ride. Once ashore, guests are guided by SIF rangers throughout their stay, learning about the wildlife of the atoll and the research and conservation work happening there.

The Aldabra team put a huge amount of time and effort into ensuring the best possible experience for the guests. They have built strong relationships with expedition teams and captains on returning vessels, and it is a pleasure to welcome them back. The Aldabra staff are also grateful for the treatment they receive whilst being accommodated on the vessels. We were delighted to receive glowing feedback from MS Bremen who were full of praise for the Aldabra team and their guests' experience at the atoll.

SIF staff are extremely careful to ensure that environmental impacts are lessened, especially in undertaking biosecurity procedures, ensuring tours and cruises adhere to specific routes and that visitors do not disturb Aldabra's wildlife. Aldabra is a life-long dream for guests and it is a top destination when visiting the Seychelles and one of the main reasons why passengers book an expedition or charter a vessel. The message SIF communicates during their stay is vital for the protection and conservation of the environment, not only on Aldabra but throughout the Seychelles and the rest of the world.



aldabra atoll

SIF

seychelles islands foundation



vallée de mai

