



Twenty years of island conservation

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Twenty years ago, a small group of committed individuals came together to form a new conservation organisation dedicated to protecting the outer islands of Seychelles. This group had little or no funds but huge ambitions to create a network of conservation centres across the islands. This was the beginning of Island Conservation Society.

In 2001, apart from the World Heritage Site of Aldabra, there had never been any sustained conservation endeavours on the more remote islands of Seychelles. Many were heavily degraded after nearly two centuries of human settlement. Now the new industry of tourism was replacing the old agricultural way of life. There was an opportunity to rate the environment not as an asset to be exploited to exhaustion, but one with a greater economic value when cherished and protected.

On 10 April 2001, Island Conservation Society (ICS) was created. An MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) was signed with Islands Development Company (IDC), the Seychelles government parastatal managers of the outer islands. This established a long-term basis for cooperation and assistance between the parties to conserve, restore and enhance island ecosystems and their associated marine environment.

ICS developed a partnership model, registering 12 foundations with representatives on their boards from all sides, including ICS, investors in the islands, IDC and the Ministry of Environment. The driving force

of the foundations is conservation funded by responsible ecotourism. Endowment funds have been established to pay for environmental work on each island, with money coming from a conservation levy on guests, landing fees from visitors, environmental tours and donations. Under this model businessmen, scientists and government representatives are brought together to contribute their expertise towards achieving common goals. In 2012, at an international forum convened in South Africa, this ICS model for the outer islands with focus on conservation was described as 'exemplary'.

One year after the birth of ICS, as Founding Chairman, I met with representatives of Royal Society for Wildlife Trusts (RSWT) of UK, owners of Aride Island, the largest nature reserve of the granitic islands of Seychelles. We proposed that ICS should take over management of Aride. Despite being such a young organisation, RSWT were persuaded that ICS had the expertise to manage and safeguard the island. A trial management by ICS was agreed with a long list of conservation and



foraging areas for immature turtles in the western Indian Ocean, and a world-class fly-fishing site. Offshore waters provide rich seabird and cetacean feeding grounds and support good populations of pelagic and reef wall predators such as tuna, marlin and sailfish.

In 2008, a centre was opened at Desroches, the largest island in the Amirantes, 230 kilometres southwest of Victoria. The eastern end is being restored by removing alien species and replanting with native broadleaf trees. This will help restore the biodiversity of the island and create habitats for species to be introduced elsewhere on the island. Since the establishment of a Conservation Centre, turtle populations have shown signs of increase. The Tortoise Sanctuary hosts Aldabra Giant Tortoises and there is a Discovery Centre featuring information on Seychelles history and natural history.

In 2011, Silhouette Island Conservation Centre was opened. Silhouette is the third largest island of the granitic group and the fifth largest in Seychelles as a whole, yet the human impact is much less significant than elsewhere. Mount Dauban rises to 740 metres and is the second highest summit in Seychelles. About 93 percent of the island has been declared as a National Park. About one-third of the almost 200 species of plants recorded at Silhouette are Seychelles endemics including several



endemic plants to the island. Particularly noteworthy are two endemic and Critically Endangered plants, *Bwakoulev Silwet* and *Bouskiya*. One of the world's most endangered animals, the Sheath-tailed Bat has its last stronghold on Silhouette. The Seychelles Fruit Bat is also present in large numbers and there is a significant Hawksbill nesting population. There are two endangered amphibians: Seychelles Palm frog (unique to Silhouette) and Thomasset's frog (restricted to Silhouette and Mahé).

A native plants trail has been created by ICS and forest restoration is expected to benefit native fauna including land birds, invertebrates, and bats. ICS conducts monitoring programmes and turtle patrols, in which guests of Labriz Resort participate. Mountain hikes, bat observation nights and nature talks are also conducted.

Farquhar Island Conservation Centre opened in 2014 at Farquhar Atoll, 770 kilometres south of Victoria, the largest true atoll of Seychelles. Today, commercial copra production on the island has ceased and tourism, especially fly-fishing, has been identified as a replacement source of income for the atoll. The uninhabited islands of Farquhar and surrounding waters form an Important Bird Area. Goëlettes is the most notable island, with a huge seasonal colony of about 200,000 – 400,000 pairs of Sooty Tern, about 10,000 pairs of Brown Noddy and smaller

