



Aride Special Reserve



Conducting underwater surveys



Tortoises on Desroches Island



Some inquisitive juvenile red-footed booby and one of our conservationists on Farquhar Atoll



Beach clean-up

# Lessons learned, excellent achievements, and more to come from ICS



Monitoring of specific fauna such as the adult Giant Tortoises and their younglings

It is not an easy task to get involved in the conservation and restoration of island ecosystems as well as their sustainable development. 2020 has been a year filled with challenges but also a year of achievements. The Island Conservation Society (ICS) has remained resilient and agile, planning and taking strategic action to support its staff across the islands but above all ensuring that its conservation programmes and associated projects are maintained. Herewith are some highlights worth sharing to all.

### Strengthening biodiversity conservation

Although the global pandemic caused a lot of uncertainties and led to an unexpected decline in tourism revenues, ICS remained focus to its core strategic goals. Conservation comes at a cost and ICS has always done its very best to raise funds and mobilise essential resources to continue with its conservation efforts across islands. It has a team of dynamic, hard-working, and highly competent staff who received all the support they required to sustain the implementation of conservation programmes for biodiversity monitoring, conservation, and rehabilitation of island ecosystems. Unexpectedly, visitors across islands even volunteered to assist our staff with simple tasks such as cleaning beaches and removing invasive alien species. Several students from Seychelles Maritime Academy and international universities/colleges were also of great help while completing work-based attachment or internship on the islands of Aride and Silhouette. It is worth mentioning that IDC staff, hotels and other businesses operating on the islands have also provided their assistance to ICS personnel.

### Conservation-oriented projects

ICS has a proven track record of delivering conservation-oriented projects within scope, time, and budget. It currently has a portfolio of thirteen projects funded by various organisations and businesses. The projects vary in scope and outcomes but contribute new or additional scientific data on various fragile ecosystems and vulnerable species. Some projects require a more hands-on approach to tackle some threats to life on land and below water, such as the FAD Watch Project aimed at intercepting and removing floating fishing devices that can be harmful to marine life and coastal habitats around the islands of Aride, Alphonse, Desroches, Farquhar, and Silhouette. Besides, due to the risk of resurgence in poaching events on Aride Island, the Anti-Poaching Project was developed to counter the illegal harvesting of protected wildlife on the island. For more information on the projects, please visit <http://www.islandconservationseychelles.com/projects.html>

### Embracing technology

Similar to past projects, scientific publications for some of the ongoing projects have been produced and submitted for review or already published. Most of the projects implemented across the islands promote the use of various technologies to collect and generate data. These are procured based on technical advice received from some of our local and international partners as well as some of our competent staff. Drones are used to aid in conducting seabird census but in accordance with protocols adapted

from other scientific researchers. Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tags are safely implanted into Giant Trevally's caught by recreational anglers around Alphonse Island; these provide essential information on movement patterns, growth rates, and population size. Besides, accelerometer loggers are used to evaluate the short-term physiological effects of catch-and-release fishing and eventually produce recommendations in relation to the health and survival of released fish. On Aride Island, mobile-based application is being piloted to collect geographic data and analysing mapped information. ICS is receptive to innovation and will continue to adopt the most appropriate technologies based on available literature and expert advice.

### Local businesses commit to projects on Aride Island

The organisation has benefited from CSR donations in the past and continues to receive contributions from businesses locally. Abhaye Valabhji Pty Ltd, Bodco Ltd, Island Roofing Pty Ltd, and Penlac Company Limited are some examples of businesses that have agreed to donate resources needed for some projects on Aride Island. Some of the projects include renovation work on the Lodge to be used as accommodation for interested visitors, as well as refurbishment of buildings. Moreover, Aride Island has been producing its own electricity from a solar PV system installed since 2013, funded by Australian High Commission, WHL Energy Ltd and GOS-UNDP-GEF SGP. There is a need to upgrade the system and meet current energy demand on the island.

### Aride Island Special Reserve – one of our special jewels

In line with the guidelines from the Public Health Authority and Department of Tourism, standard operating procedures to prevent and control the spread of Covid-19 were developed, and the Aride Island was certified Covid Safe in November 2020. After closure for some time, the island was re-opened on the November 16 to visitors, resuming its long-awaited ecotourism activities.

As a Special Reserve since 1975, Aride Island hosts one of the most important seabird populations in the Indian Ocean with more breeding species than any other islands in Seychelles. These include the world's largest populations of Tropical Shearwater and Lesser Noddy and Seychelles largest population of Roseate Tern. Its unspoiled natural beauty and rich biodiversity leave all breathless with a keen interest to explore deeper into its five habitats. The majority of visitors during the last quarter of the year 2020 has provided excellent feedback on the conservation work undertaken in the wildlife-rich reserve, with one particular tourist from Israel joyfully stating that "This is truly paradise! What you have here is worth protecting".

A remarkable improvement in breeding success of some popular seabirds was recorded in 2020. However, there has been a decline in Shearwater burrows most likely caused by increased poaching events in 2020. ICS has strengthened partnerships with the Seychelles Coast Guard and the Ministry of Agriculture, Climate Change and Environment to address illegal exploitation of seabirds in the reserve, which is contributing to the decline in the Shearwater population.

Due to emphasis placed on monitoring and data collection, new databases for several species of birds were developed and the Monitoring

Protocols for the majority of fauna and flora found in the reserve were further improved. In addition, Aride has sustained its volunteer programme throughout the year 2020 and benefited from the outcomes of several research projects undertaken by young graduates who wish to pursue a career in conservation.

To learn more about Aride Island visit [www.arideisland.com](http://www.arideisland.com)

### The other islands

**Alphonse Island** – Following the constant habitat management and maintenance of 53 bait stations, the Conservation team on the island recorded an exceptional increase in Wedge-tailed Shearwater burrows, from 17 in 2017 to 71 in December 2020. Since 2007 to date, the Conservation team has been monitoring vagrant and migrant birds and recorded a total of 30 sightings in 2020; the same was reported to the Seychelles Bird Records Committee. Hitherto around 110 different species were identified in the Alphonse Group which suggests that outer islands like Alphonse are important stop-over locations for migratory birds. Some of them such as the Madagascar Cuckoo was seen for the first time in Seychelles. Considering the importance of native plants in land ecosystem, a vegetation restoration workshop was facilitated by the Conservation team to all island staff. Thereafter, a total of 60 native trees were planted to restore a designated area on the island.

Alphonse also provides the ideal habitat for sea turtles to nest, compared to the previous year [2019] more turtles (of both species) were tagged. All targets for the SeyCCAT Giant Trevally (GT) Project were achieved with a total of more than 450 GTs tagged and closely monitored. The first scientific paper on recreational fishery was submitted to the Journal of Ocean & Coastal Science and is currently under review.

The ongoing Manta Ray Photo-Identification Citizen Science Project has recorded a further 5 reef manta rays around the Alphonse Group, contributing to a total population of 61 rays recorded to date. Two scientific papers were published for this project.

**Desroches Island** – Terrestrial and coastal life continues to thrive in significant numbers namely the Giant Tortoises and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters. More visitors have shown interest in the Tortoise Sanctuary which hosts a large number of Giant Tortoises by offering their assistance in the general upkeep of the park.

**Farquhar Atoll** – The ongoing Red-footed Booby Project funded by SeyCCAT has reached most of its targets for year 2020 aimed at studying the population of this seabird, its habitat preferences, and movements at sea using GPS devices and drones. In December, a breeding census of the Red-footed Booby was conducted by the Conservation team and over 7000 breeding pairs were identified. Alike to Alphonse, several first sightings of migrant and vagrant birds were reported such as the Senegal lapwings. Marine pollution is a constant challenge for many outer islands such as Farquhar. In collaboration with The Ocean Project and IDC, around 674 kg of litter were collected along specific shores of the atoll. This helped to improve the coastal and marine ecosystem around the atoll.

**Silhouette Island** – The Conservation team propagated around 5 Wright's Gardenia seedlings (endemic to Seychelles and only found growing in its natural state on Aride) in one of the gardens of Seychelles Hilton Labriz Re-

sort and Spa. The ongoing project of maintaining a nursery for native plants has been quite successful with over 250 native plants grown so far. The monitoring programme of the Sheath-tailed bat roosts at La Passe continues and a maximum of 37 individuals were recorded. Sheath-tailed bats are considered to be critically endangered species found only in Seychelles but also breeding on granitic islands such as Mahé. On a regular basis, traps are being set near roosts so as to protect this vulnerable species from predators such as rats and cats.

Comparable to the other islands, weekly beach clean-ups were conducted in 2020. Some of the solid waste collected were recycled to create different artwork and crafts. These will be used to raise awareness on plastic pollution among island inhabitants and Hilton Labriz guests in the hotel's gallery. One of our young conservationists, Said Harryba, participated in a short video for the BBC StoryWorks Programme in partnership with the Seychelles Tourism Board. The Media Programme promotes stories on various themes so as to inspire curious minds across the globe, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Said had the opportunity to share his experience of working for ICS and his journey in developing a deep interest and appreciation for nature.

### Upcoming events

ICS will celebrate its 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary on April 10 this year after it was officially registered in 2001. To mark its anniversary, ICS will organise a series of activities from April 5 to 10.

Zoom webinar initiated by SIF to commemorate Protected Area Day on the January 29.

Zoom webinars on some scientific projects and to commemorate theme days such as International Migratory Bird Day and World Habitat Day.

Inter-school public debate on various environmental themes to commemorate World Environment Day.

Ongoing implementation of the Education for Sustainability programme in schools on Praslin and other islands.

### The magnitude of gratitude

ICS extends its sincere gratitude to all its partners locally and from other parts of the world. Partnerships are essential in the work undertaken across islands and the organisation is grateful to all for their generous donations, grants, expertise, and resources provided throughout the year 2020.

ICS is also grateful to the government of Seychelles for financial support given so as to maintain the organisation's current workforce through tough economic times caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

As a not-for-profit environmental NGO, ICS counts on the much-needed aid from anyone who is keen to assist the organisation with its conservation programmes across the islands of Aride, Alphonse, Desroches, Silhouette, and Farquhar, including future conservation centres on other outer islands.

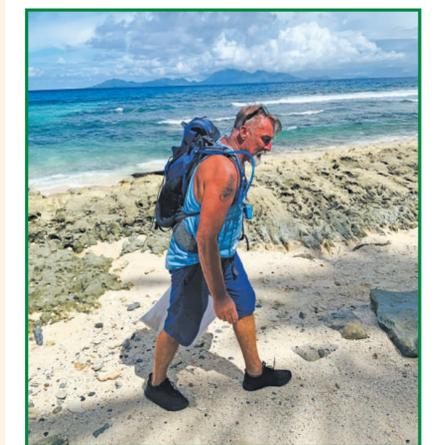
ICS reiterates its commitment to promoting and protecting the fragile island ecosystems that belong to every Seychellois with the support of organisations and the wider community.

Visit us on Facebook: ICS Seychelles  
To learn more about ICS visit [www.islandconservationseychelles.com](http://www.islandconservationseychelles.com)  
Follow us on Instagram: [ics\\_seychelles](https://www.instagram.com/ics_seychelles) and tweet us [@ICS\\_Seychelles](https://twitter.com/ICS_Seychelles)

Contributed by Island Conservation Society



Seychelles Maritime Academy students involved in bird ringing on Aride Island



Tourist volunteering for beach patrol and clean-up



Surgically implanting a transmitter into a Giant Trevally



Intercepting FAD before it causes serious damage to coastal habitat



Interns (left) preparing for field work



Turtle nests demarcated by biodegradable materials



Educating school children on conservation work undertaken on islands