

MCSS cetaceans training

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02-March-2015



There are 27 species of marine mammals that have been recorded in the Seychelles. Whales and dolphins account for 26 of these with the other being the dugong found at Aldabra. These creatures have legal protection in Seychelles waters but a number of threats exists including: entanglement in fishing gear, poaching, noise pollution and habitat loss. Improved understanding of numbers and distribution of marine mammals is vital for their future protection.

Four Island Conservation Society (ICS) staff members (Sam Balderson, Lucy Martin, Aurelie Duhec and Richard Jeanne) recently attended a four-day training course in Marine Mammal Observation (MMO) and Passive Acoustic Monitoring (PAM) conducted by Peter Holden and Jo Bluemel at the Marine Conservation Society Seychelles (MCSS) office in Glacis.

The course involved lectures on: marine mammal identification, MMO techniques as well as the physics of sound and sound recording techniques. These were followed up by short exams in which the four participants all scored very highly.

The third day was more practical, with an introduction to the underwater acoustic recording devices and the methods involved in their deployment. The afternoon involved all participants going out on a boat with The Underwater Centre at Beau Vallon. Unfortunately sea conditions were not great for spotting marine mammals along the coast from Beau Vallon to Baie Ternay, but all involved gained a better understanding of the skills that had been learned in the lectures.



At BaieTernay, the boat stopped so that everyone could get in the water with SCUBA gear and practice deploying the PAM devices. The deployment involves good team work as heavy mooring stations have to be lowered to the sea bed, with divers in the water to prevent any damage to coral and other marine life. Again this was a great practical session where everyone got to practice the skills that had been taught in the classroom. On the return trip to Beau Vallon, there was again time to practice the MMO techniques.

On the final day of the course the participants learned how to analyse the data recorded by the acoustic equipment. This involved listening to the incredible sounds produced by a

range of whales and dolphins, and looking at the unique signatures that these sounds form when displayed on a graph on a computer.

This training was undertaken as part of a UNEP funded collaborative project between MCSS and ICS designed to expand the collection of marine mammal data across a wider area of the Seychelles EEZ. The ICS teams stationed on Alphonse, Farquhar



and Desroches will over the coming months deploy PAM devices around the islands which will complement the work already being carried out by MCSS around the inner islands. There are still big gaps in our knowledge of the distribution and numbers of whale and dolphin species throughout Seychelles waters. It is hoped that through the use of these modern monitoring techniques, that utilise sophisticated technologies, a greater understanding will be achieved thus enabling for better protection of these important enigmatic species.

The accompanying photographs show the participants during the practical session of the training.

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ICS conservation officer on Alphonse