

Island Conservation Society (ICS) proposal for Assomption Island:

05-March-2018

“A multi-purpose solution including security, ecotourism, conservation and environmental rehabilitation for the benefit of Seychelles”

The Island Conservation Society (ICS) recognises the value of having a security and surveillance facility at Assomption Island that will enable Seychelles to better protect its territory against illegal exploitation of natural resources, international piracy, illegal entry into Seychelles and to provide a platform to attend to any potential marine-related incidents impacting the environment, especially near Aldabra (which is situated adjacent to a major shipping lane). However, ICS advises that if such a facility is constructed, care must be taken to minimise and mitigate negative environmental impacts on the remarkable natural features and biodiversity of Assomption Island, which include:

- The 5.8 km-long settlement beach on the west coast of Assomption which is considered by many to be the most beautiful beach in Seychelles, complemented by 1.9km of smaller, ruggedly beautiful windswept beaches along the east coast. Together, these beaches comprise 45% of the coastline of Assomption.
- 7.7km of prime Green Turtle nesting beach (compared to 5.2km at Aldabra). In the early 1900s, Aldabra and Assomption hosted relatively equal (and enormous) Green Turtle nesting populations. Both populations were severely reduced by over-exploitation, especially at Assomption where most of the turtles nested on the beach immediately adjacent to where hundreds of guano workers lived over a period of the decades of guano exploitation. Both turtle populations are in recovery; and today Aldabra hosts the largest population of nesting Green Turtles remaining in the Western Indian Ocean. Given time and continued protection of turtles and their habitat, the Green Turtle population at Assomption can be expected to once again rival that at Aldabra.
- Coral reefs of dazzling beauty, where much of Jacques Cousteau’s famous underwater film *The Silent World* was filmed.
- The potential to rehabilitate the island to enable the translocation of species surviving on Aldabra that used to occur on Assomption and to encourage the return of nesting seabirds also now extinct there. Former breeding seabirds included Abbott’s Booby, Masked Booby and Red-tailed Tropicbird. Land birds included an endemic race of White-throated Rail, Madagascar Turtle Dove, Madagascar Coucal, Aldabra Fody and probably others. Dimorphic Egrets also formerly bred (now confined to Cosmoledo and Aldabra in Seychelles). All were destroyed by guano mining. An endemic species Souimanga Sunbird remains. The status of Pied Crow is unknown.
- The number of bird species recorded at Assomption is significantly higher than any other island south of the Amirantes with the exception of Aldabra (Assomption 76, Cosmoledo 59, Astove 48, Farquhar 53, Providence 42, St Pierre 40). This suggests Assomption is an important flyway for some migratory species.

- Several high sand dunes (up to 30 m in elevation) on the southeast rim of the island host communities of native and endemic plants including “tortoise turf” and a Giant Tortoise population.
- Plant and insect species of restricted range occur at Assomption, especially near the sand dunes. Assomption can be considered “the Butterfly Island” with a greater variety of butterflies than can be seen anywhere else in Seychelles.

Assomption is slightly larger than La Digue. If possible, ICS would like to see the island developed for multiple use including some combination of: a conservation centre implementing research, monitoring and rehabilitation programmes, security facilities; tourism (perhaps a small hotel or guesthouse that can serve to facilitate visits to Aldabra as well as host tourists interested in the beautiful beaches, exquisite diving, and natural features of Assomption); and a Nature Reserve for marine life, nesting turtles, and the unique terrestrial flora and fauna especially that associated with the dunes.

ICS realises that many factors need to be considered before a final decision is made concerning the future of Assomption – i.e. economic, sociological, geopolitical, as well as environmental. We consider it the responsibility of ICS to inform decision-makers about the ecological importance of Assomption so they can take necessary action to minimise negative environmental impacts, insofar as possible and perhaps even seize an opportunity to restore the island’s natural ecosystems.