

The life of an island-hopping conservationist

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Melinda Curran of the Island Conservation Society discusses the diverse conservation efforts occurring on a trio of Seychelles islands.

Having spent over one year volunteering as a ranger for the Island Conservation Society on Aride, Desroches and Silhouette, I am always amazed at how distinctive each island is.

My first experience of island life came on Aride. As the morning bird chorus awakened me, I would pinch myself to check that I wasn't still dreaming, and bounce out of bed eager to see what the day would bring.

I would share my breakfast with endangered magpie robins, endemic tok-toks and many big lizards. All day I learned so much from the very knowledgeable rangers -- Juan Michel, Clifford Bresson and Anselm Barra -- about all the birds and forest during our daily monitoring or tours.

The conservation officer, Licia Calabrese, is the driving force for the island and would take us at night to monitor the Shearwaters in the forest that would be alive with their eerie calls; they would often visit us in our rooms at night, wanting us to remove sticky 'bwa mapou' seeds.

Catching and ringing birds, trapping invertebrates, taking a machete to invasive trees, and counting the many birds were just some of the daily tasks. I also had some very scary boat-launching experiences, but always felt safe with Jim the boatman. I ate fantastic Creole BBQs and made some good friends while living a simple yet very happy life.

Afterwards, I worked on Desroches, which was peaceful yet challenging as it's a bit cut off from the world and understandably strict with exhausting but satisfying work. It would take 5-6 hours to walk all around the beach recording and tagging turtles and counting the migrant birds. I learned so much about turtles from Tony Jupiter who has tagged around 5000 of them.

Sadly he recently passed away and will be a huge loss. We were also restoring the island by replacing the palms of the old coconut plantation with endemic plants, and cared for around 40 baby giant Aldabra tortoises.

I now find myself on Silhouette - an amazing mountain forest with some very rare animals and plants. Here, we also monitor turtles, birds and bats, and lead tours into the forest. We are also implementing a solar power and rainwater purification project at the local school - a project funded by the British high commission. We have further projects pending, for example: to put a CCTV camera into the 'sousouri bannann' roost, translocate a sub-population of the Black Parrot from Praslin, and to breed some of Seychelles' critically endangered terrapins.

I have also visited several other Seychelles islands and am always surprised how each island possesses unique species, many of which are among the world's most endangered. I realise how privileged I am to be doing such an interesting and enjoyable job in such wonderful surroundings.



