

# Our first time trip to Desroches island

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This article has been written by two secondary 5 students -- Sebastien Contoret from Independent school and Priya Didon from Anse Boileau school -- who were acting as young journalists during the Eco-Schools trip on Desroches island. The article has also considered the experiences of other students who were present on the trip.

## Day one



It all started at the IDC (Islands Development Company) terminal at the Seychelles international airport at Pointe Larue as we were dropped off by our parents. After bidding us farewell they left us in the capable hands of Sir Shane and Miss Marie-Chantale, entrusting our well-being to them.

Soon enough, as time went by, we found ourselves flying over Desroches Island and we got even more excited as we caught our first few glimpses of the island in every angle possible.

The pilot postponed our descent only to give us an aerial view of the breathtaking structure of the island and its atoll.

Upon arrival we were greeted by the island manager and one of the ICS workers, Mathew. We were then taken to our guest houses by golf buggy and pick-up truck. Our first impressions of the guest houses promised a week of warmth, comfort and satisfaction.

The first animal we spotted was a carpenter bee (*Mous Brenzel*) and green gecko which was a lot greener and twice the size of those found on Mahé. Seeing how common they are on the island brought even more excitement as we realised how rich the island was. We even spotted different coconut palm trees differing in height, shapes and sizes. They also had dead leaves still piled up and hanging from the trunk.

After settling in our rooms we had lunch and had the chance to get to know one another by introducing ourselves as well as sharing our interests and dislikes. A majority of us got the chance to ride bicycles and the rest had more time to converse.

Afterwards, we contacted our parents followed by a short visit around the village whereby we got to talk to some of the islanders who were keen on sharing with us their experiences on the island. Our first encounter was with Mrs Merilliane Dubois who was an inhabitant of Silhouette Island in her youth. Later on she moved to Desroches Island and worked on the coconut plantations, gathering and removing copra for oil manufacturing whereby she could peel over a thousand coconuts within three hours! We were amazed by this talent and definitely realised that we could not compete with her. After that she started planting vegetables and sold them to IDC in order to earn a living. She is now retired and spends her time growing flowers in her own personal garden and watching cartoons.

Another villager we came across was Mr Ray Borne who had been living on the island for only three months. He's employed as a pest control officer and has caught over a thousand rats within the three months. He enjoys gardening but has been having some difficulties with the type of soil and tortoises that eat his plants and breaks his pipes.

On our way back 'home' we took a couple of pictures of the giant tortoises and the island itself. Then, we had dinner which was followed by an interesting little story about a sea turtle named Fee Bee on her incredible journey across the ocean and a small prayer thanking God for another day. We headed back to our houses and completed our night by writing our journals before wishing each other goodnight and falling asleep.



## Day 2

Awoken by our alarm clock, we got ready for the beginning of a new day. We started the day with a morning exercise at the beach followed by a clean-up whereby we were able to recycle a few items and use it in our Christmas tree.

Then we had breakfast and right after that we headed to the ICS office where we were greeted by Mathew and Annabelle. Both ICS staff were really generous as they spared some of their time to explain to us the conservation efforts and daily activities of ICS biologists.

Unfortunately, during the presentation it started to rain and we were unable to carry on with our plans for the day. At the end of the presentation we had lunch at the guest house in the pleasant company of Mathew and Annabelle. As it kept on raining we had to stay inside.

However, we were unable to resist the urge of going outside much longer. Therefore, we went to visit the Aldabra Giant tortoises as well as their babies and got the chance to hold, caress and feed them. It most certainly was worth it. After all, a little rain never did hurt anyone, right?

Then we went on a quest to find the perfect Casuarina tree which would be suitable for us. We had to cut it down ourselves and carry it all the way back to the house. We even began manufacturing our own Christmas tree decorations out of the recycled materials we had found along the beach during our morning clean-ups. The amount of rubbish amazed us as we didn't expect that amount of litter would be present on an outer island. It was really heart breaking as the island is well known for the number of sea turtles that nest on its beaches throughout the year including other crustaceans and birds. We actually lost count of the number of slippers and plastic bottles found around the beach. There were bottles originating from Mauritius as well as Madagascar as their labels were still visible. We even found bulbs and televisions that came from ships or boats. Who would have thought that we would find such objects that would cause harm to nature around such an amazing island? Our night concluded with dinner followed by a small mimicking game.



### Day 3

The day began with a morning clean-up whereby we found other washed up waste on the beach which we used as decorations for our Christmas tree. We had a quick breakfast followed by a short briefing about the role of IDC on Desroches by the island manager. He clarified all our doubts by answering our questions without any hesitation. After that he took us on a tour around the village where we got to see the furnace where they used to make copra. We then visited the 'Gran Kaz' where the island administrator used to live during the colonial years followed by a visit to the garden where they grow vegetables and fruits that they use on Desroches. Our visit resumed at the farm where we found three playful kids (baby goats) with their mothers and then some of us had a bit of fun peeling coconuts at an area close to the cemetery where we concluded our tour.



Before lunch we went on a treasure hunt whereby we had to reveal a hidden message written in hieroglyphics. However, we misread the message and realised that we were going round in circles so we retreated and went back home for lunch.

After lunch we were attached to a few employees occupying different jobs around the island. Four students worked with ICS where we planted and watered the native plants of the island and each of them were advised to choose a sapling to plant close to the tortoise pen.

A student was attached to the pest controller where they checked traps around the villas to check for rodents caught. Coconuts were used as baits. He stated that the rodents were very feisty and he learned that their weak spot is their noses. They are caught because they are a nuisance to the island as they eat bird's eggs.

Another one of our colleagues prepared our dinner as she worked alongside the chef. She was more than thrilled to have been attached by the chef as she wants to be a chef as well. She explained to us how she marinated the fish and chicken resulting in the mouth-watering dinner we shared.

Attached to the island manager was a girl whose excitement was visible in her voice as she explained to us how exciting the life of an island manager can be as she got the chance to ride on a motor cycle with the manager. She got the chance to sign paper works about shipping materials on cargo ships heading to Mahé, printing other paper works as well as conducting site visits. She enjoyed the experience as the island manager, Alain Commettant, has worked for over fifteen years on the island and knew the island by heart. He was also a teacher at the Beau Vallon secondary school therefore knowing how to make her experience enjoyable. Mr Commettant acknowledges the fact that he likes his job but requires a lot of time and commitment to attend to all duties.



“Farming was quite fun and ploughing was a lot easier than I thought,” said a boy who was working with Mr Michel Marie. He is the island farmer and has occupied this job for over fifteen years. His reason for liking his job is because it is “proper” -- that was Mr Marie’s exact words. The student learned how to water plants and build proper fencing using wood.

After the attachment we went back home and resumed our treasure hunting and we were finally able to understand the riddle and find the treasure. Then we decided to set up a badminton court but weren’t able to even begin a match as the buggy came and took us to visit the southern part of the island. We visited their power station, desalination plant, their villas and the site where the hotel is being built.

After that we went back home for dinner and then went to the shearwater burrow sites on the north eastern part of the island by pick-up truck. After we were dropped off we used torches to light up the way as we had to be careful as to where we walked because there were hermit crabs everywhere. We used a recorder to play back sounds of wedge tail shearwaters so that we could see if there were any present in the burrows. Some students even imitated their calls in order to get the shearwaters to answer and they were successful at it.

Our night continued with a night walk on the beach from the north eastern part to the eastern part of the island which took up to approximately 45 minutes. On our way home we faced many obstacles such as ghost crabs, hermit crabs and other species scattered all over the beach. We also had to climb over, go under and break branches of fallen casuarina trees in order to get to the other side and continue on our path along the beach.

We finally got home and were all exhausted. We decided to call it a night and get some rest.



#### Day 4

On Thursday morning we woke up at six to accompany the two ICS conservationists for a beach patrol including turtle and sea bird monitoring. We walked across the southern coast towards the northern tip of the island. We discovered a variety of seabirds, namely ruddy turnstone and grey heron. We also managed to encounter three hawksbill nesting sites, but only two of them had eggs. The two biologists measured the tracks and shared some important scientific knowledge on monitoring of turtles. We came across several white tailed sting rays and juvenile sharks patrolling close to the shore for food.

From a distance we saw a sea turtle stranded on the beach. We quickly ran to it to check if it was in a good state and we were so disappointed once we approached it. Drastic decisions had to be taken to save the green turtle, which appeared to have been severely dehydrated and had no sense of our presence around it. Two sticks were used to support the turtle from below while carrying it to the shallow water to cool it down. It appeared to be still alive as she was still breathing. After cooling it down, the flippers started to spread out and it gave us hope that it might survive. The IDC truck was already parked waiting for us all, and we quickly placed the turtle in the back and rushed to ICS station and using sea water to cool it on the way. Moana was the name given to the turtle, because of the patterns on its shell. A few minutes later, the ICS staff sadly expressed the terrible news that the green turtle did not make it. An autopsy was conducted and the cause of death was excess water in the turtle's lungs. Everyone grieved Moana's death and we gave her a proper burial.



Students then went on work attachment with several ICS and IDC staff, followed by a tree-planting activity to contribute towards the vegetation restoration project by ICS. Time was spent to finalise our presentations before the cultural evening show hosted by the students themselves. We had some time to later go for a dip and swim along the shoreline of the lagoon.

In the evening, we had a lovely dinner with the island manager and ICS staff. The night ended with a mix of performance from students such as role play, songs, poems and mimes. The staff had a good laugh when the students tried to imitate them. We then danced the night away and concluded by the staff expressing their gratitude to the students.

Here is an extract of the poem written by Priya Didon from Anse Boileau secondary school, presented during the cultural evening:



*A couple of days left for Christmas*

*And she finds herself seated at the front porch of a guest house*

*Her mind drifting off as she stares at the crashing waves*

*She knows that home lies over the horizon*

*But she has no regrets as she knows that this truly is paradise*

*The captivating blue sea, the winds bustling through the greens of the island as well as the sun shining brightly in the clear blue sky*

*Dared she dream of leaving?*

*She preferred not to leave as she felt at peace here*

*She belonged here among nature*

*In this tropical paradise she felt complete*



## Day 5

Compared to previous days, this was the only one where we had the chance to wake up a little late. It was hard to accept that it was our last day before leaving the island in the afternoon. We remember one of our peers saying aloud in Creole: *'Be zot ozordi nou dernyen zour, pa normal, prezan ki i gou lo zil. 'Sir' napa en fason pour nou reste ankor plis zour? Zot be lavi lo zil elwannyen pa i gou!'*

With no time to waste, we woke up and started to get ready for snorkelling. We quickly had breakfast and walked from the western to the eastern side of the island, where the sea was calmer. Arriving at the snorkelling site, we wore our snorkelling gear and started to get acquainted with the sea temperature. From afar we could see turtles coming to the surface of the water for air. For some of us, it would be our first time swimming with the turtles and also other juvenile sharks and rays who were scared to swim closer to where we were. The snorkelling experience was just perfect, it was a sunny morning and it wasn't too difficult for

us to spot marine animals as they sought refuge among the sea grass meadows and the corals. The underwater habitat was clean and unspoilt – this comforted our hearts and evidently confirms why most young turtles would remain here for food and shelter. After nearly 3 hours of snorkelling we walked back to the camp and started to get ready for the afternoon flight.



Snorkelling



Saying goodbye to a team of hard-working people on the island was not easy. We hugged and expressed our interest to come back in future. Once the aeroplane took off, we started to think of the bustling sounds of cars and other noise pollution on Mahé island. Once the plane landed on Mahé, it was hard to accept that we are home, since all of us wanted to stay for another week. We were comforted by our parents and teachers and tried to adjust. The Eco-Schools trip to Desroches was simply an amazing experience, which will not be forgotten but cherished for many years to come.

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