

Farquhar atoll

ICS, IDC and FlyCastaway unite to clean Goëlettes Island from marine debris

By Aurélie Duhec | CONSERVATION OFFICER ON FARQUHAR



On our way to Goëlettes with Wesley and Matthieu from FlyCastaway, Narvin from IDC and Richard from ICS

On Farquhar Atoll, the Island Conservation Society (ICS) recently set up a Conservation Centre led by Richard Jeanne and myself, Aurélie Duhec. Since our arrival on the islands, we are working in unison with Island Development Company (IDC) and FlyCastaway to enforce environmental initiatives on Farquhar.

Farquhar is an amazingly beautiful

atoll, and in spite of being isolated from civilization, its beaches are sadly spoiled by tons of marine debris - solid man-made waste that has been transported by currents and washed up along the coastline. Marine debris is not only tarnishing the beauty of our beach scenery. Unfortunately, it is much worse than this! Marine debris has become one of the most pervasive pollution problems affecting

all of the world's oceans. It is known to be the cause of injuries and deaths of numerous marine animals and seabirds, either because they become entangled in it or they mistake it for prey and eat it.

This was the sad reality that greeted the Island Manager, George Marie, and the fly-fishing guides on our arrival to Farquhar. All together we took the initiative to face the matter and on Saturday October 18 we organised the first beach clean-up ever done on Farquhar. We started by concentrating our efforts on Goëlettes Island, an almost treeless island only 4km in circumference. It is an important Bird Area because of its huge seasonal colony of between 200 000-400 000 pairs of Sooty Terns (*Sterna fuscata*) and 10 000 pairs of Brown Noddys (*Anous stolidus*). The people living on Farquhar are aware of the ecological importance of this island and we did not have any difficulties to find volunteers. We set off with an army of 18 willing helpers determined to remove the waste accumulated on island over the years. Richard and I organised the mission into four teams, one team per kilometre. The litter was classified into categories by the workers during the clearance (beach sandals, PET bottles, glass and fishing items). It was a very hard day. My team faced the worst impacted part of the island.



Garry, an IDC skipper, carrying a bin liner full of flip-flops.



Impressive concentration of marine debris on the SE beach. The clearance appeared endless in spite of the great manpower.

BRAVO!

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My team composed of Albertine, Narvin, Nigel and Johnny (all IDC).

We concentrated on the south-eastern side where the southeast trade winds blow strongly and bring every kind of marine debris, especially those of medium and high windage like flip-flops and plastic bottles. Our team of five worked solidly for hours, yet managed to clear only 300m of beach - while the other teams completed their missions. A highly polluted area spread on another 200m and I said in myself that we would not make it! And I looked for help. The last two hours there were ten of us working together on just a few metres, but even with this increase in manpower we did not manage to finish clearing the area as we ran out of collection bags. To give an idea of the scale of the task, we removed 200 cubic metres of marine debris per square metre! More than one hundred bin liners were filled during the clean, and a second trip to Goëlettes

is needed to finish the work.

Where does all this marine debris come from? From the marine debris study we completed on Alphonse last year, we deduced that most of the debris could have been transported by the major equatorial currents from as far away as Western Australia, Indonesia, India or Somalia. North Madagascar is potentially also a source of all kinds of debris, but is of less concern for Farquhar compared with Somalia. Objects entering the ocean from North Madagascar would initially move westward and subsequently into the East African Coastal Current where they will likely stay or enter another major current depending on the season.

Floating flip-flops are ubiquitous in the Indian Ocean. The popular use of flip-flops as simple warm climate beach or outdoor footwear has spread through much of the world.

They are the most common form of footwear in some developing countries in the Indian Ocean perimeter, and are extremely common in East Africa, Australia, tropical islands and especially Southeast Asia. In SE Asia approximately 70% of the human population is living in coastal areas and China is the largest manufacturer of flip-flops in the world. We hypothesized that most of the flip-flops and beach sandals we collected may have originated from public littering due to the absence of adequate waste disposal, services or landfill - or from hazardous natural events such as flooding.

For our ICS team, it has been a pleasure to work with people of such positive attitude at FlyCastaway and IDC. A big thank you to every participant for keeping going in spite of the difficulties. We look forward to our next clean up event!



A small selection of the waste collected and displayed by the hardworking team. From left to right: Karen, Brandon, Peter, Johnny, Narvin, Nigel, Albertine, Garry, Gerta, Merna, Aurélie, Lina, Abel, Flavia, Matthieu, Wesley, Tim and Freddy (seated in the middle).