

Community

Balloon ban taking flight

Government has unveiled plans to implement a total ban on the importation and use of all balloons in Seychelles in the near future.

by W. J. May

President Wavel Ramkalawan announced this on Saturday afternoon, 28 November, at the start of a public activity to clean up Victoria which saw the participation of roughly 150 volunteers.

"We will soon be taking a decision concerning balloons," Ramkalawan said, "and I believe we will be putting a total ban on their use and importation."

"We see the damage they are causing the environment, especially when they are left on beaches, after which they are taken out to sea by the tide and swallowed by marine wildlife," he added.

It is not yet clear whether the manufacturing of balloons within Seychelles will still be permitted. A complete ban on the manufacture, importation and use of plastic straws came into force in June 2019.

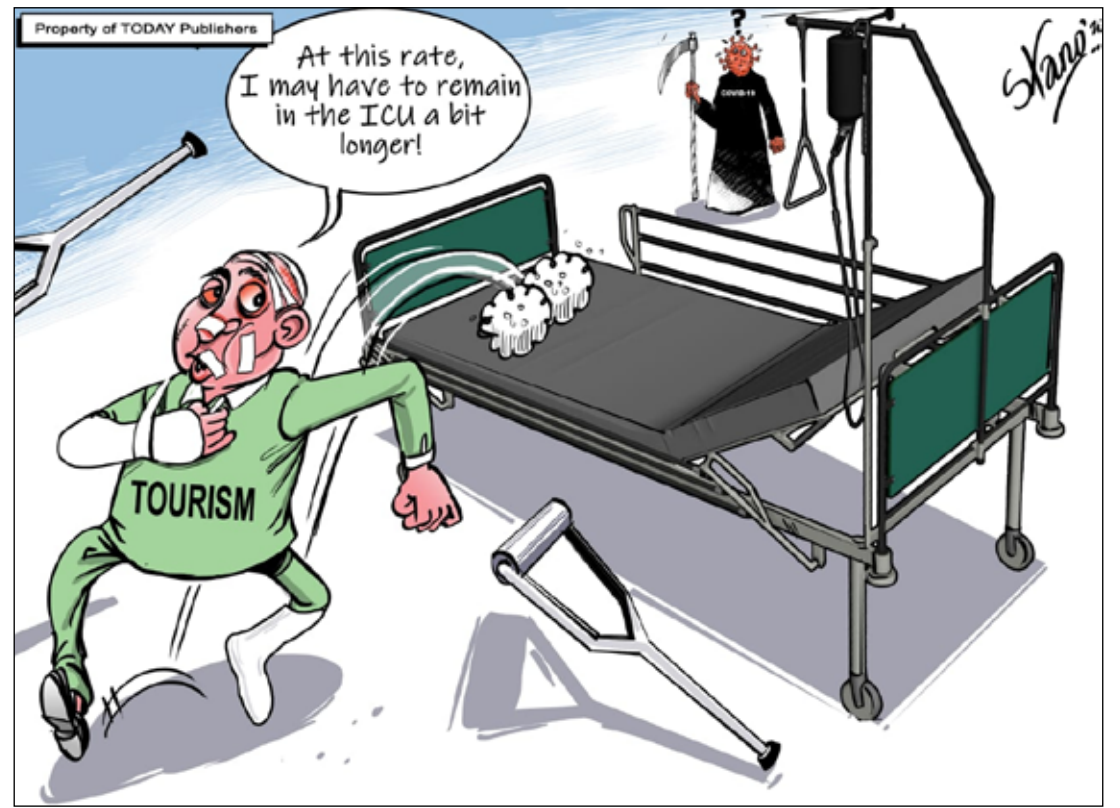
The proposed balloon ban came as somewhat of a surprise to those present, with even senior government officials saying they had not been briefed on the proposed ban.

"I wasn't aware of it! It's great news and a really big encouragement. Balloon pollution is one of these symbolic environmental problems people are concerned about and their ban is something government has been reflecting on for quite a while," said Alain Decomarmond, PS for Environment, noting they are also not "an import priority" given the current dearth of forex.

With private sector interests objecting about lack of consultation, the announcement comes off the back of communities complaining about the unsightly and dangerous littering of beachfronts and increasing pressure from environmental groups. The Ocean Project launched a #SeyNoToBalloons campaign in January 2020, which convinced several local businesses including Boardwalk, Maison Marengo and Gran Kaz to voluntarily give up the use of balloons on their premises.



Mayor of Victoria David André briefs volunteers on the cleaning up initiative



Back at Saturday's cleanup of Victoria, heavy rains did little to dampen the spirits of the volunteers, which included SPDF personnel, emergency brigades from various districts, members of the public, and even a Danish tourist. The private sector also pitched in power cleaning facades of buildings including at Michel Building and staff of government departments such as Foreign Affairs also

cleaning up their work premises.

The cleanup was organised by the Office of the Mayor of Victoria. Mayor David André said "we all talk of Seychelles being a beautiful, clean and safe place and we want to live up to that reputation." Speaking of collective responsibility, civic duty and the return of voluntarism within the community, Mayor André said "it is not only government's responsibility to

keep our country clean, everyone needs to do their part and we need a return of voluntarism as well within our communities."

The clean-up of Victoria was set to continue on Sunday morning focusing on Market Street and similar community-based cleanup activities of Seychelles' remaining 25 districts have been scheduled to take place on 18, 19 and 20 December.

Seabird poaching Gruesome discovery on rocky outcrop near Praslin

The remains of thousands of illegally poached seabirds were recently discovered on a rocky outcrop near Praslin, in a massive blow to conservation efforts of the protected species.

by W. J. May

An anonymous informant found over 3,000 sooty terns (golet) and wedge-tailed shearwaters (fouke) on 15 November on a small island opposite Anse Matelot, a remote beach on Praslin's north coast. News of the gruesome find was then passed onto environmental authorities for further investigation.

One such body was the Island Conservation Society (ICS), an environmental NGO which runs conservation centres on five islands across Seychelles. Aride is one of these islands and the most northerly of Seychelles' granitic islands, located 9 kilometres north of Praslin and measuring 71 hectares in size.

Aride is also one of the most important seabird colonies in the Indian Ocean, home to around half a million birds and up to 10 species. ICS has said it is certain the poached seabirds in question were taken from Aride, which was designated as a protected nature reserve in 1979.

Poachers appear to have had begun preparing their catch for selling, with packets of salt found near the bird carcasses. The reasons they left them to rot has not been determined.

ICS suspects some of the poachers come from Praslin as that is where the seabirds are generally sold. According to information the NGO has received, once the poachers return from their trip, they load the seabirds in special

trucks hidden under catches of fish before delivering them to clients.

The location the seabirds were found also gives an insight into the tactics the poachers use to



ICS says over 3,000 sooty terns and wedge-tailed shearwaters were discovered (Photo credit - ICS)

transport their ill-gotten gains from natural habitat to the local market, where significant demand is driving the illegal harvesting of seabirds.

Poaching of seabirds in Seychelles is not uncommon. Back in May this year, for example, police opened investigations into 11 men after they were caught onboard a vessel between Silhouette and Mahé in possession of sizeable quantities of suspected sea turtle and seabird meat.

However, the sheer number of seabirds involved in this most recent find is rarely heard of. ICS Deputy CEO, Shane Emilie, told TODAY last week this is the first incident of its kind he has ever

come across.

"We feel disgusted, angry and sad because it goes so blatantly against all our conservation efforts to protect these beautiful species. It is disappointing because we see that culture is coming before conservation. People that eat seabirds say their ancestors did it so it is their right. I'm sorry, it's not. Under the regulations, the birds also have their rights, which is to be protected for the years ahead so this means no illegal harvesting," Emilie said.

The 15 November incident is the 11th time in 2020 that ICS has found direct evidence of poachers taking seabirds from Aride. "This year, we've noticed that, since the outbreak of the pandemic and a decline in tourist numbers, people are resorting to getting revenue elsewhere and so increasing their efforts to steal seabirds," Emilie noted.

ICS has increased its patrols around Aride, but with resources lacking and so much land mass to cover, sometimes it can feel like a losing battle.

Stella Snowdon, one of 12 ICS staff permanently based on Aride, said that poachers are becoming more and more brazen in their attempts.

"It is really tough when you have poachers coming onto the island so regularly. They are so brazen that even when we see them, and yell at them or shine lights in their direction, they often hide in the woods then resume their activities later," the conservation officer said.

In recent weeks, poachers have even snuck into ICS' camp on Aride and stolen goods from an onsite dive centre. "It's kind of scary that they're becoming that bold," Snowdon said.

Asked for her thoughts on why such strong local demand still exists for poached seabirds, Snowdon pointed to cultural and status reasons.

"It's considered a delicacy but it is also status. When something is regulated, some people want it more purely because it's a kind of forbidden fruit. Some people are drawn to things they can't have. I think it is also difficult when there is a legal market for some birds as it makes it harder to explain why you can collect some but not others," she noted.

Under the Wild Animals and Birds Protection Regulations, anyone caught poaching protected seabirds is liable to pay a fine of up to SCR500,000 and serve two years in prison.



President Wavel Ramkalawan as the country's national anthem marks his arrival in Mauritius

President Ramkalawan on three-day state visit to Mauritius

Continued from page 1

when the two island states were administered as a British colony collectively, before Seychelles became a separate Crown colony in 1903. Earlier this week, the President said that he had selected Mauritius for this first State Visit from the several invitations received, to focus on home and regional relationships.

Speaking to journalists prior to leaving the president mentioned the profound ties which exist between the two Indian Ocean states, eluci-

dating his decision to visit the neighboring Mauritius in his first official overseas.

He said he sees the visit as an opportunity to further build on the good relations that exist between the two countries and to reinforce on initiatives already underway.

Clarifying further he said the visit will also present him with the opportunity to make an official stop at the headquarters of the Indian Ocean Commission (COI), based in

Mauritius, to put forward ideas how to further promote cooperation between the island states of the region.

"It (the visit) will also provide us with the opportunity to meet with certain ambassadors, such as the ambassador of the United States (US), who have not been able to visit (Seychelles) recently because of the pandemic," he added.

Asked if there plan to open a new embassy in Mauritius, President Ramkalawan said no such idea is be-

ing contemplated, and that the plan rather is to cut back on the number of embassies Seychelles currently holds overseas.

During his absence, Vice-President Affif will assume the role of Commander-In-Chief and he told journalists after seeing off the president at the international airport on Sunday, that he will be communicating with President Ramkalawan throughout the three days he is in Mauritius.



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