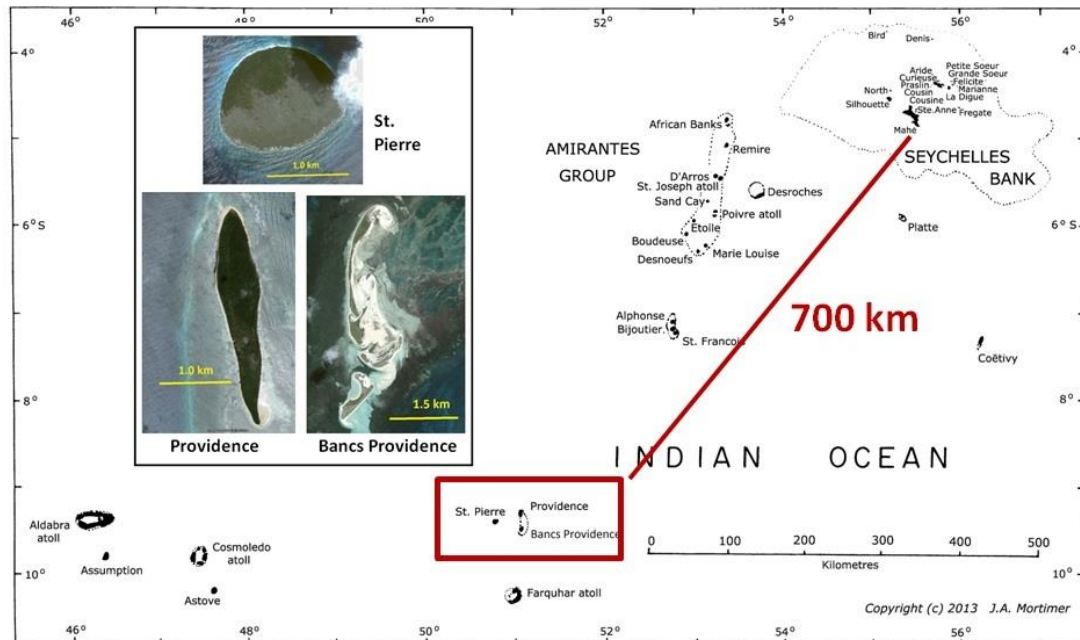


ICS-Pangaea scientific expedition to remote and mysterious Providence

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The Providence islands group, comprising Providence, Bancs Providence (also known as Cerf) and St. Pierre, is located approximately 700 km southwest of Mahé Island (see map). These are among the most inaccessible and least visited islands of Seychelles.

There are no human settlements and no airstrips to aid access; but they are of considerable scientific and historic interest. So members of the Island Conservation Society (ICS) expedition were thrilled by the opportunity to visit and explore these remote islands from March 18-26, 2016 aboard the *MV Pangaea* (see photo).



We are grateful to the owner and crew of *MV Pangaea* and to the Islands Development Company (IDC) for making it possible.

St. Pierre is a raised reef island, nearly circular in shape with a jagged coral surface. The island is very difficult to access except during low tide and calm seas. St. Pierre once hosted enormous numbers of nesting seabirds and native forest. The seabirds produced guano which was intensely mined between 1906 and 1972, leaving behind the ruins of a settlement and jetty, and a barren, pitted, landscape without birds and humans, and devoid of its original vegetation.

Providence Island and Bancs Providence (Cerf Island) are located at either end of an extensive seagrass bank measuring approximately 45km long and 15km wide (see map). The shallow banks provide a highly productive marine environment important to foraging turtles and fish populations. Providence Island in the north hosted a long history of copra production until December 21, 2006 when Cyclone Bondo struck. Bancs Providence, a low lying vegetated sand bank comprising several small islands, offers excellent habitat for populations of seabirds and shorebirds.

Cyclone Bondo was a category 4 intense tropical cyclone with winds in excess of 222km per hour –the worst to hit Seychelles since 1956. The accompanying photo was taken at Providence by Adrian Skerrett shortly after the cyclone struck in December 2006 and illustrates the damage to the facilities and surrounding vegetation. Adrian compared the bird populations that he recorded at Providence in 1996 with those present shortly after Bondo, and found that the numbers of birds had declined to less than 1% of 1996 levels.



Environment, Climate Change and Energy Minister Didier Dogley, during the same visit, estimated that 65% of the trees on the island were snapped, uprooted or dead.

We were intrigued to visit these remote islands ten years after the cyclone to learn more about the current state of their natural environment. Each of us had our fields of expertise, including: coral reefs (Pierre-Andre Adam and Pep Nogués); terrestrial invertebrates and vegetation (Pat Matyot); sea turtles, nesting beaches and seagrass habitats (Dr Jeanne Mortimer); fishes (Christopher Narty); and birds (Adrian Skerrett).

This article is the first of several in a series that will describe some of the highlights of the 4th *ICS/Pangaea Expedition* to the Providence islands group.

Submitted by Dr Jeanne A. Mortimer, Expedition leader