

Educational visit to Aride Island Special Nature Reserve | 31 October 2019



Local students learn about importance of seabirds

Seven students accompanied by the Eco-School leader of Praslin secondary school took part in a one-day educational field visit to Aride Island Special Nature Reserve earlier this month.

Organised under the GOS-UNDP-GEF Expansion and Strengthening of the Protected Areas Subsystem of the outer islands of Seychelles and its integration into the broader land and seascape project, the activity aimed to raise awareness on the importance of seabirds in Seychelles.

Aride Island – which is managed by the Island Conservation Society Seychelles (ICS) – is the northernmost island of the granitic Seychelles, covering an area of roughly 68 hectares.

Aride hosts one of the most important seabird populations in the Indian Ocean, with more breeding species than any other island in Seychelles.

Participants learned about the different characteristics of seabirds – and why Seychelles is a very important country for their conservation – while visiting the island during the nesting season.

They were given a guided tour around the plateau – the only flat area of Aride Island – by outgoing Aride Island Conservation Officer, Nasreen Khan, before being given an interactive presentation by ICS staff member, Marc Schruoffeneger, on the different seabirds inhabiting the island, as well as the threats that they face as a result of human activity.

ICS intern, Ilana Engelbrecht, then demonstrated to the students how to assess the body condition and injuries obtained by seabirds, as well as how to stabilise and release birds that are sick or injured.

Students were then treated to a picnic at Aux Cabris – one of the island’s special viewpoints – where thousands of frigatebirds can be observed during the nesting season.

Asked what he enjoyed the most about his visit to the Aride Island Special Nature Reserve, thirteen-year-old Praslin secondary school student, Sebastien Gappy, said:

“[I enjoyed the] hike that we did and all the birds [that] we saw. Now, I know how to differentiate between a male, a female, and a juvenile frigatebird.”

Commenting on the work undertaken by the ICS team on Aride Island, sixteen-year-old Praslin secondary school student, Agnes Cedras, said:

“I think that the work that is being done is great. [They] make sure that the birds are safe by protecting their habitats. They also make sure that no other dangerous species that may endanger the birds are brought to the island when tourists come to visit. The visit was so amazing. We learned new things about marine birds [and] I hope to come again soon.”

Seabirds are the most abundant birds in the Seychelles, representing an important part of the country’s natural heritage. Their importance to the environment is vital and they are considered a key animal group within the ecosystem that they inhabit. Traditionally, seabirds provided food for hunters, guided fishermen to fishing stocks far out at sea and have led sailors to land ashore. However, many species now face huge threats as a result of human activities. 38% of seabirds are endangered, due to the expansion of the human population. Combined with the added pressures imposed by the tourism sector, key nesting areas, such as coastal habitats, are being increasingly impacted. Other threats to seabirds include: the threat of invasive species, such as rats and cats, plastics pollution and the over-exploitation of fish stocks in the fisheries sector. Each year, thousands of seabirds land up as bycatch as a result of their entanglement in fishing equipment.

Poaching also remains a considerable cause for concern, in spite of the continuous efforts undertaken by the ICS team to protect the island’s seabirds. Reports of some poachers illegally visiting the island – often at night – to pursue seabirds and their eggs continue to rise. This year alone, over one thousand sooty tern eggs were destroyed on Aride Island as a result of illegal poaching activities, sabotaging the efforts of the ICS team based there to conserve Seychelles’ biodiversity.

ICS chief executive, Michelle Murray, said: “ICS continues to support the Marine Spatial Plan process with important data that identify the key foraging areas of several seabird species in Seychelles. The aim is to assist government with solid scientific information that supports decisions taken to protect marine areas crucial for seabirds. We hope that such combined efforts would contribute towards reducing the increasing threats affecting our

seabird populations. In the same vein, we must stress the need for government to elaborate once and for all a comprehensive enforcement strategy to protect special reserves like Aride, which continue to be severely affected every year by poaching.”

Under the GOS-UNDP-GEF project, ICS has received consultancy support for the development of protocol for monitoring and a conservation management plan for seabirds in the four protected sites of the Alphonse group, Desroches, Poivre and Farquhar atoll. Deliverables have included: a) the development of a monitoring protocol that clearly provides guidelines and methods of best practice for the assessment and monitoring of seabirds, b) training of ICS Protected Area personnel to conduct seabird censuses, based on standardised methodologies produced, c) the collation of data with ICS staff on estimated population sizes of main seabird concentrations and identifying their geographical distribution, and d) the development of a seabird conservation management plan for each of the aforementioned outer islands.

The accompanying photos show some highlights of the visit.

Photo credits: Nasreen Khan / Ilana Engelbrecht



