

Nature

Tortoises Released!

On the 2 August 2018, 10:30 am, at Aride Island Nature Reserve, all members of the reserve, the ministry of environment and the Seychelles Broadcasting Cooperation (SBC) were present to attend a highly anticipated event: the release of the first six Aldabra giant tortoises from a contained fence into the wild of Aride Island.

by Laure Nardin

Two months earlier, ten giant tortoises donated and transported by Frégate Island Private, arrived at their new home: Aride Island. Following expert advice from Frégate Island conservation management, the tortoises were first quarantined in a large enclosure to avoid any colonisation of non-native or invasive plant species on Aride. The volunteers and staff of the reserve took care of their well-being by ensuring the cleanliness of the enclosure, access to water and bringing them daily vegetation and fruits of the island. Some tortoises have increased up to eight kilograms since their arrival.

These tortoises are charged with a particular mission: helping the Seychelles Magpie Rob-

in (SMR) to find and feed on ground invertebrates. The Robins are one of Aride's most valuable bird species and they have been endangered since the 19th century. These birds are now given special attention as their numbers have decreased drastically on Aride.

These endemic birds curiously have a tendency to trail nearby tortoises as they lumber through the dense forest, a behaviour often seen on Frégate Island. The tortoises disturb the top leaf-cover in their path, exposing invertebrates under the leaves and soil which are much sought after by the robins. The presence of the tortoises thus helps facilitate the search for food by these precious birds and therefore the idea was adopted

by Aride to help boost the Robin's population

In order to control and anticipate their insertion in this new environment, the release has been well prepared for in advance by the entire Aride team and especially by the Conservation Officers on Aride and Frégate Island. To monitor and check their activities more easily, the team installed GPS devices on the tortoise carapace. It is thus possible to track on a computer the position of each tortoise as well as their journeys made during the day. Interactions between the robins and the tortoises are of particular interest, so the conservation team will collect data on the behaviour and foraging activities of both species, along with

monitoring the entire Aride ecosystem to fully understand the influence of the tortoises on the environment post-translocation.

Island Conservation Society are all looking forward to the release of the next four tortoises and hopefully to observe positive effects as they roam around their new home.

The Island Conservation Society and Aride Island Nature Reserve teams deeply thank Frégate Island for the donation and transportation of the tortoises, as well as the UniSey Island Biodiversity & Conservation centre and CEPF (Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund) for also helping with the translocation and the monitoring of birds and tortoises on Aride.



Giant tortoises donated and transported by Frégate Island Private



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As tortoises meander the undergrowth reveals invertebrates which the Magpie robin feeds on



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