

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON ISLANDS

INTERIM REPORT ON ARIDE ISLAND

I Introduction

1. This is a second interim report of the Committee. It follows a visit made on 14 December 2017 by the Committee to Aride Island at the invitation of the owners of the island, the Islands Conservation Society.
2. The Committee has felt that it is important and necessary to make this report immediately following the visit on account of the many issues which the visit raised. The Committee was impressed by the importance of Aride Island to the environment of Seychelles on the one hand, and concerned at the gaps in legislation and enforcement of the existing conservation laws on the other hand.
3. The lessons learned at Aride (and earlier in the year at Aldabra, D'Arros and St Joseph) will assist the Committee in making proposals for the protection of the islands of Seychelles still facing that need.

II General Information About Aride

4. Aride is the northernmost granitic island of Seychelles, the last solid terrestrial rock before the Indian Subcontinent. Aride has survived to the modern era relatively intact because of its isolation. This isolation is both a blessing and a curse – a blessing because it is the largest Seychelles island that has never had rats and a curse because the distance from Praslin and the fact that the only landing beach faces south meansthat it cannot be easily accessed by visitors during the southeast monsoon. As a result, tourism barely covers half the cost of running the island.
5. Aride was purchased and donated to the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts (RSWT) of UK with funds from Christopher Cadbury (of the chocolate fame) in 1973. To this day the Cadbury family continues to be generous donors to Aride but, today, management responsibility for the island has been passed by RSWT to the Island Conservation Society of Seychelles (ICS), a non-profit charitable organisation.
6. The island was transformed from a coconut plantation and vegetable producer into a habitat for wildlife.

III Aride'sConservation Importance

7. Aride hosts one of the most important seabird populations in the Indian Ocean, including:

- More breeding species than any other island in Seychelles (only Aldabra is comparable with one more species in total, but spread over many islands), and more than the other 40 granitic islands combined.
 - The world's largest populations of two species: Lesser Noddy (*Kordonnyen*) and Tropical Shearwater (*Riga*).
 - The largest population of the western Indian Ocean race of Roseate Tern which has the scientific name *aridensis* (after the island).
 - The largest frigatebird roost of the granitic islands.
 - The only breeding site east of the Aldabra group for Red-tailed Tropicbird (Payanke Lake Rouz).
8. In addition there are five endemic landbirds: Seychelles Magpie-robin (*Pisantez*), Seychelles Warbler (*Timerl-de-Zil*), Seychelles Fody (*Toktok*), Seychelles Blue Pigeon (*PizonOlande*) and Seychelles Sunbird (*Kolibri*). There were none in 1973. Three were introduced to the island and two arrived by natural means. Aride has the largest roost of frigate birds (*Fregat*) of the inner islands. The flowering shrub Wright's Gardenia (*BwaSitron*) has its only natural home on Aride, there is a huge concentration of endemic lizards and there is a thriving population of turtles, thanks to effective protection.
9. Scientists on Aride have gathered data on weather, seabird and other populations stretching over several decades. This is a treasure trove of science, one of the longest continuous scientific monitoring for any tropical island in the world. The information gathered can be of global importance, indicating trends that tell us what is happening in our oceans.
10. The data gathered on Aride shows that populations of several seabird species are declining despite protection. This may be due to climate change, over-fishing, natural causes or a combination of factors. It is important for society that what is happening is understood, as inevitably in the long run, this will impact upon not just seabirds but human life too.

IV Challenges Faced

11. Conservation law in Seychelles is excellent. Enforcement is not.

Poaching and Collection of Eggs

12. The conservation staff on Aride report that during the seabird breeding season they sometimes feel under siege from poachers. Many of the poachers are known on Praslin including to the police. Yet there has not been one successful prosecution of a poacher in the history of Aride.
13. To some extent, conservation law appears to have been designed to look impressive but there has not been the commitment to enforce it. For example, the Birds' Eggs

(Collection) Regulations sets quota for the legal collection of eggs at just 3 islands, Desnoeufts, Bird Island and L'IlotFregat. Everywhere else it is illegal.

14. Meanwhile at islands such as Aride where there is no quota and in theory there should be total protection. However, poaching continues unchecked. There is no point in protection in name only. What is needed is a system that is sustainable and where nature reserves are declared, they are respected.

Defensive Protection

15. On Aride, the staff do their best to defend the law on their island. They watch as nearby *Ile aux Fous* (also protected in theory as a nature reserve) is swept clean of eggs by poachers each year. In recent years, security guards have been employed on Aride to help defend the laws of Seychelles but poaching remains a serious issue and the cost of security is an additional financial burden on an island that only breaks even due to the generosity of donors notably the Cadburys.
16. If an island has protected status it should be protected. Aride is a jewel in the crown of Seychelles that needs the support of all arms of Government, not just law makers but law enforcers, too.

V Proposals

The Committee proposes that:

1. Aride Island markets its achievements and status more proactively with a view to attracting more visitors, especially from Seychelles
2. As a means of raising more funds towards its work, that ICS (Island Conservation Society) considers offering overnight accommodation (perhaps in the renovated grannkaz) for interested visitors at a fee
3. All environment and conservation laws nationally are reviewed systematically, with a focus on their effective enforcement.
4. Government steps up efforts to protect designated areas from poaching
5. Rangers on protected status islands be given the power of arrest
6. Government supports financially, protected areas such as Aride in order to ensure their sustainable future in the national interest.

VI Acknowledgments

The Committee acknowledges:

1. The work being done by the ICS and the rangers on Aride, and encourages them in their endeavours aimed at keeping this island as a conservation jewel.
2. The assistance of ICS towards organising the visit of the Committee to the island.

3. The support of ICS personnel and National Assembly staff during the visit.
4. The past and ongoing support of the Cadbury family towards purchasing and donating the island to conservation, and upkeeping its vocation as a key conservation area.