

Leader in environmental protection

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FRAUKE FLEISCHER-DOGLEY is a trained conservation biologist who holds a PhD in the sustainable management of the Coco de Mer, from the University of Reading and a diploma in plant conservation techniques from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. She settled in the Seychelles over 20 years ago and has 15 years of experience in protected area management. She has been responsible for the management and protection of the Seychelles' UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the Vallée de Mai and Aldabra for over six years.

In 1976, when the Seychelles achieved independence, it had little upon which to build an economy. Declaring much of its territory nature reserves and national parks may have seemed an unusual decision at the time, but this young nation was already aware that its pristine ocean environment was its greatest natural resource.

Recognition of the global importance of the islands earned the Seychelles two UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Aldabra Atoll, and the Vallée de Mai, on the island of Praslin.

Aldabra, a vast and largely inaccessible raised coral atoll, is almost untouched by modern human activities. Aldabra's enormous lagoon is fed and drained by four narrow channels, which together provide the tidal heartbeat of the atoll. Giant tortoises were once found all over the world, but there are now only two species left, of which Aldabra's 100,000 make up the world's largest remaining population, which is three times larger than that found on the Galapagos.

Aldabra is home to large colonies of birds, fast-growing turtle populations, and a stunning coral reef ecosystem populated by an abundance of marine predators. Dugongs, a large marine mammal, are to be found, as well as one of the largest populations of the world's biggest terrestrial arthropod, the coconut crab. There are also important mangrove and sea grass areas, along with unusual species such as oceanic breeding colonies of flamingos and Caspian terns.

The magnificent Vallée de Mai palm forest is a rare



Aldabra's residents welcome visitors

relic of a habitat that dominated tropical areas of the planet tens of millions of years ago. Very little palm forest still exists across the world, and much less intact. The Vallée de Mai is dominated by the stately Coco de Mer palm, and is the only place where all six of Seychelles' endemic palm species can be found together. A huge variety of animals live in the forest. One of the largest gecko species in the world, found only in this palm forest, was undiscovered until a decade ago, and is one of the world's rarest reptiles. Other intriguing species include a recently discovered tiny frog, as well as endemic palm snails that are thought to 'clean' the giant palm leaves of algae.

Both these sites, which are endangered by invasive species and poaching, are now under the management and protection of the Seychelles Islands Foundation (SIF), a public trust established in 1979.

The Vallée de Mai, now the most popular visitor attraction in Seychelles, supplies the finance to keep both sites operating. This double management and financial arrangement has worked for nearly 25 years and continues to provide the foundation for all of SIF's operational work at the two sites. Aldabra, also a major attraction, is increasingly in a position to contribute towards its own operational costs, although the problem of piracy in the last few years has compromised boat-based tourism in the region, with the resulting fall in income.

To provide an additional source of financing for SIF's management of Aldabra and to raise awareness of its importance without imposing more visitors on its fragile ecosystem, there are now plans to establish a state-of-the-art centre on Mahé using innovative interactive displays and virtual experiences to give a true sense of Aldabra's natural wonders. A visitor centre on Mahé – with low environmental impact, will diversify and increase SIF's revenue and also enlarge the potential customer pool, ultimately, it is hoped, providing a source of direct sustainable financing for Aldabra.

Over the last 30 years the Seychelles has directly invested more than US\$15 million in protecting its unique environment, setting an example for other nations around the world with delicate ecosystems. Equally importantly, this has proved an investment that is paying dividends, showing that it is not the size of a country or its wealth that determines success, but instead the philosophy that guides the management of its natural heritage.