

NATURE CONSERVATION IN THE SEYCHELLES ISLANDS*

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ABSTRACT

The Seychelles were discovered by the French in 1742. The first settlement took place in 1770. Since that time unrestricted and indiscriminate exploitation of all its natural resources has taken place. It is estimated that 75% of the endemic species of plants and insects have disappeared. Many species of Tortoises, Turtles and Birds are no more represented in the Seychelles. Real interest in conservation started in 1874 when Charles Darwin took a strong stand for the preservation of the Mascarene Tortoises. The laws enacted and the measures taken by the Government to save the fauna and flora of the Seychelles are briefly outlined here.

THE Seychelles archipelago scattered over an area of 150,000 square miles of the western Indian Ocean between 4° and 10°S and 46° and 56°E consisted of some ninety islands and islets covering an area of 156 sq. miles.

With the transference of the Aldabra group, Farquar group, and Deroches to the British Indian Ocean Territory, there are about 83 islands left within the jurisdiction of the Seychelles Government. These islands are mainly divided into two distinct groups, the high rugged mountainous islands lying on the Seychelles Bank and the coralline ones spread over a large area of the ocean. The granitic islands, rated to be over 600 million years old, the oldest oceanic islands in the world, with sharp slopes and ravines rising to a height of 3000 ft. (Morne Seychellois) were once covered in primeval forests harbouring a fabulously rich endemic flora and fauna. Very large numbers of plants, birds, insects, etc. were evolving for millions of years undisturbed till man set his foot on these islands. The other group, the coralline ones are low lying islands elevated reefs in fact and sandy cays many still in the process of formation.

The rainfall averages 100" per year, and in the higher mountains it is considerably more. Early explorers described the islands as clothed with virgin dense forests from seashore to the high mountain tops. The islands were discovered in 1742, but since the first settlement in 1770, men have exploited all the natural resources so indiscriminately and ruthlessly that a great number of species have disappeared. It is estimated that perhaps as many as 75% of the endemic plants and insects have perished during the early days of colonisation due to the axe, bush and forest fires and the invasion of exotic species. The caiman (Crocodiles) and the dugong are extinct.

The giant tortoise, the turtle, the hawksbill and the forests suffered through lack of control. As far back as 1786 only a decade and a half since settlement and with only a handful of settlers there was so much destruction that an enlightened French administrator, M. de Malavois was alarmed and advised the Government on very strict control measures. By the turn of the 18th century the tortoises and turtles which formed the bulk of the cargoes exported from the Seychelles disappeared from ships manifests. In 1797 M. de Malavois wrote, 'Formerly the islands were

* Presented at the 'Symposium on Indian Ocean and Adjacent Seas — Their Origin, Science and Resources' held by the Marine Biological Association of India at Cochin from January 12 to 18, 1971.

covered with a prodigious number of tortoises—now it would be difficult to pick up more than 6 to 9,000. On the last 4 years 13,000 tortoises were exported from Mahe, while one boat alone in 2 voyages took 4,000.'

Today there are no tortoises left on any of the islands except Aldabra. The few on Mahe kept as pets came from Aldabra.

By the turn of the 19th Century the forests also disappeared. The need for building woods and fuel for the new cinnamon distilleries denuded the forests completely except in small inaccessible pockets high up in the mountains. The damage done at this time was irreparable but fortunately in 1870 the Mauritius Forest Laws were extended to the Seychelles providing for the maintenance of mountain and river reserves; although these laws were not activated as far as the mountain reserves were concerned, effort was made regarding the river reserves. In the last 80 years, government has acquired several large estates and have instituted a reafforestation programme on the Crown lands. Amongst the most important Botanical treasures is the Cocodemer (*Lodea maldivica*) the famous double coconut so well known in India. The unique areas where this majestic palm grows are strict nature reserves especially the Valle de Maie in Praslin and these are well looked after by Government. The recent rediscovery (by John Proctor of the Nature Conservancy, U.K.) of the supposedly extinct '*Medusagyne oppositifolia*' the jelly fish plant has excited much attention.

Interest in fauna conservation started nearly a hundred years ago in 1874, when Charles Darwin took a strong stand for the protection of the Aldabra tortoises. He wrote a strong letter to the Governor of Mauritius against the exploitation of Aldabra.

Real Conservation in the Seychelles started with the creation of the Nature Conservation Board in 1961. Visiting forestry advisers and zoologists and the Seychelles Society recommended to Government early and earnest action to save and protect the irreplaceable plant and bird species for future generations. Government acted quickly. A Nature Conservation Board was created under the able chairmanship of the Director of Agriculture. Since its creation the Board has been fighting relentlessly for various protective measures. Amongst its valuable work can be cited the following :

- (1) Protection of the Valle de Maie and other reserves in Praslin. The removal of fire hazards.
- (2) In April 1961 Government was advised that the statutory legislation to create a bird sanctuary on private land was not sufficient to protect the birds of Cousin Island and that this bird sanctuary should be acquired.
- (3) Controlled cropping of sea birds' eggs on Deneuf and other islands. Expert advice was sought from the Hon. Ridley and Lord Percy who had already done valuable work on the exploitation of the Sea Birds Eggs.
- (4) Bird Protection Legislation were passed and the catapult was banned on La Digue Island, the home of the Paradise Flycatcher.
- (5) Bounty placed on the introduced Barn Owl, the principal destroyer of bird life.
- (6) Took part in the 'Save Aldabra' fight.

- (7) In 1966 the threatened La Digue Pond Turtle was protected by legislation.
- (8) In 1966 recommended the creation of permanent undersea reserves made up of a band of sea bottom including the intertidal zones extending half a mile around the islands of St. Anne, Moyenne, Long, Cef, Round and Cache. Also the creation of temporary lagoon reserves for a 3-year cycle.
- (9) A total ban on the exploitation of the Green Turtle. This came into force under the Green Turtle Protection Ordinance.
- (10) Action under the Fisheries ordinance of 1942 for the protection of the crayfish and the fresh water shrimp during the spawning seasons.
- (11) Recommended that development for the Tourist Industry should not be allowed on Cousin Island since it constituted with the nearby Bird Sanctuary Cousin a unique ecological niche which should be preserved.
- (12) After the discovery of the Crown of Thorns, the giant starfish (*A. planci*) the killer of the reefs, the Triton shell (*C. tritonis*) a known predator of the starfish was protected.

The Government of the Seychelles have implemented all the recommendations of the Board. Today we have various legislations protecting the Green Turtle, tortoises, birds, marine areas including reefs and lagoons, and other nature reserves. The I.C.B.P. has acquired Cousin where research facilities are available. Aldabra under the Royal Society is progressing. There are also plans soon to create large areas of the granitic islands highlands into Nature Reserves. An aquarium and marine research station is envisaged on St. Anne island in the Marine Park area. Recently an official of the Nature Conservancy from England spent several months in the islands. His report and recommendations are awaited. A new National Parks and Conservation body is being appointed by the Government.

We in the Seychelles are very grateful to the many world scientists who have given us much encouragement and valuable advice. We are doing our best to attract world attention and the attention of the local population on the urgency of the problems. We, however, need much greater help from World Organisations to protect the threatened species. As recently as last month, we discovered to our horror that the nests of the very rare Paradise Flycatcher, *Veuve of La digue* were destroyed; that in spite of educational and radio programmes. The only alternative is to acquire this unique area and for that we need funds. We also need international help for the creation of the Marine station of St. Anne.

The Seychelles are unique and of great scientific interest. We invite you to participate in our Conservation efforts to preserve the flora and fauna of the Seychelles for the World.