



Brief Report on Wakashio Recovery Plan



Photo: Oil spilled from the Wakashio at Ile aux Aigrettes (Sept 2020)

Background

On July 25, 2020, the MV Wakashio, a Japanese vessel registered in Panama, ran aground on the reefs of Pointe d'Esny, in the southeast of Mauritius, with more than 4,000 tons of fuel on board. 12 days after the impact, on August 6, 2020, the bulk carrier began to release oil into our waters. For days, nearly 1,000 tons of fuel and lubricants spread in the sea causing an unprecedented oil spill and gave rise to a wave of solidarity from Mauritians aggrieved by this ecological tragedy.

A year after the ecological disaster

July 25, 2021: a year after this tragic episode, the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation has been actively working alongside the authorities and relevant actors to mitigate the impact and consequences of the tragedy on our most threatened species. We have learned from the incident and are planning new procedures following this catastrophe. For the past year, consultations with the government have been underway. Discussions and meetings have taken place on a regular basis to come up with an

action plan to avoid similar disasters and to be prepared to react quickly should the country face another oil spill in the future.

Progress noticed at the level of decision makers

'The disaster gave rise to a lot of positive pressure and we recognize that there has been progress', declares Vikash Tatayah, Conservation Director at the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation. Dr Tatayah highlights that the government's decision to recruit an international consultant with the help of the United Nations Development Programme to review the National Oil Spill Contingency Plan (NOSCP). A report which should be made public according to the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation, as a manual to be used in case of an oil spill. In its recommendations to the government, the foundation has also requested that Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas are identified so that these areas are better protected.

'We made this request even before the Wakashio oil spill, since 2017. Nothing had been done but after the disaster, the authorities have proposed to declare some 'Areas to be Avoided'. It's probably not exactly the same thing, but we are satisfied with this step forward', states the Conservation Director. The other measure which has been welcomed by the organisation has to do with the 1996 Protocol that the Republic of Mauritius intends to sign. Had this convention already been ratified, the country would have been entitled to a better compensation - (exceeding the USD 18 million that Mauritius is entitled to) in the event of an ecological disaster of this scale. In this context, the Ministry of Environment, Solid Waste Management and Climate Change has launched a tender to find a team of consultants to amongst other things, prepare a claim to the insurers.

The impact of the heavy oil spill on the protected species of Ile aux Aigrettes and other islets

The shipwreck happened just two kilometres from Ile aux Aigrettes, the nature reserve managed by the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation which serves as home to populations of Pink Pigeons, Mauritius Olive White-eyes, Mauritius Fodies and other endemic reptiles and plants on the red list of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Despite rapid efforts to evacuate some species, some inevitable damage was observed.

Endemic cricket

One of the main concerns in the months ensuing the oil spill was the disappearance of an endemic cricket living on Ile aux Aigrettes. It has been found again in February 2021 by Souraj Dwarika, the warden of Ile aux Aigrettes but not as abundant as before.

In June 2021, the cricket, scientifically named, *Makalapobius aigrettensis* has been described as a species new to Science, with the most abundant population being from Ile aux Aigrettes. The accomplishment of a field work that has been carried out well before the shipwreck.

The foundation is awaiting the arrival of an expert to Mauritius to conduct the cricket survey, and confirm the extent of the decline. His arrival has been delayed due to the restrictions related to Covid-19.

Plants & nursery

The coastal trees on Ile aux Aigrettes were also contaminated by the black sludge. Martine Goder, Education and Flora Programme Manager at the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation confirmed that some of the trees next to the sea were covered in oil and had to be trimmed during the clean-up operations. These trees are recovering but they will take time to grow back to their original size.



Photo: MWF staff transferring plants from Ile aux Aigrettes to Forestry Services premises on mainland Mauritius

Martine Goder also explained that plants from the Ile aux Aigrettes nursery were transferred to mainland Mauritius for regular monitoring and care. During the first lockdown imposed by Covid 19 in March & April 2020, plants remained on the island. Although field staff could ensure some maintenance, ants and bugs severely impacted on the plants and over 300 plants were lost. This time, we anticipated the fact that an oil spill could restrict access to Ile aux Aigrettes and the plants were evacuated before the oil spill actually occurred. The plants were returned only when staff could safely resume work on Ile aux Aigrettes.

Reptiles on the South East Islets

Following the oil spill, reptiles were rescued from Ile de la Passe, Ilot Vacoas and Ile aux Fouquets (au Phare) and Ilot Marianne, to Jersey Zoo. Nik Cole, Island Restoration Manager for Durrell/Mauritian Wildlife Foundation managed the translocation process and reported that the animals are doing fantastically well with a high level of reproductive output for the Bojer's skinks and lesser night geckos, although the Bouton's skinks have taken a little time to settle in but have recently started to produce eggs.

'The staff at Jersey Zoo have been so successful in breeding these rare reptiles, they have had to build and extend the biosecure rooms to house all of the hatchlings. A large captive assurance population under professional care at Jersey Zoo ensures that we have the buffer required to withstand any losses in the wild', reported Dr Cole.

Endemic birds

Sion Henshaw, Fauna Manager, remains sceptical, as although our worst fears have not been realised, we still cannot be sure what damage has been done at this stage.

'There has been no damage immediately visible to our birds on the island, but we do have concerns about bioaccumulation of hydrocarbons into the environment. This might take time, and if it does occur, effects might not be immediately detectable', says Sion Henshaw.



Photo: MWF staff en route to Ile aux Aigrettes to monitor bird populations during oil spill

A small number of birds were removed from the island immediately after the oil spill as a precaution if the Ile aux Aigrettes' population would have been lost. Once the lagoon and the coastline had been cleaned, and there were no detectable threats present, these birds were brought back to the island. This process caused a change in the distribution of territories.

'When the Olive White-eyes were released back on the island their territories had been taken over by other individuals. This caused a lot of fighting, and some individuals regained their territories while others lost theirs. In recent months the fighting has much decreased, and the population seems to have returned to normal. We continue to intensively monitor the population which will allow us to detect any potential secondary impacts of the oil spill in the future', mentioned Sion Henshaw in his reporting.

Sion Henshaw also noted an increase in the mortality of Mauritius Fodies from the intensive monitoring. There appears to have been an increase in the average number of birds 'assumed dead' per month in 2020 and 2021. The impact of the Wakashio oil spill, if any, will only be detectable in the number of birds 'assumed dead' as from August 2021, and will require continuous monitoring.

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For a video link on the subject: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZZxLJYCT3E>

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