

# ILE AUX AIGRETTES HABITAT RESTORATION PROJECT

By **Mauritian Wildlife Foundation** [NCSR Reg No: NCSR/2017/0158]



*Photo: Oil spilled by the Wakashio trailing alongside Ile aux Aigrettes – 6 August 2020*

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Ile aux Aigrettes is a 26 ha low coralline island and has been declared a Nature Reserve since 1965 due to its remnant Mauritian dry coastal forest. Ecological restoration started in 1985 with the aim of restoring the coastal vegetation community and to replace the missing components of the flora and fauna.

Through weeding of introduced species and planting of native species, including rare and critically endangered plants that have been propagated and reintroduced on the island, the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation is restoring the ecosystem. Around 30,000 to 40,000 plants per season/year were planted from 1998 to 2003, although the forest is now regenerating naturally. Specialised planting still continues to enhance the species diversity, to provide food and habitat for the native species reintroduced on the island (Pink Pigeons, Mauritius Fodies, Olive White-eyes, Telfair's Skink, Gunther's Geckos) and to provide habitat for seabirds. Aldabra Tortoises have been introduced as ecological replacements to the extinct Mauritian tortoises and are helping in habitat restoration.

The island is also used to safeguard suitable lowland species that are critically endangered in the wild. Maintenance weeding continues through employment of a team of labourers living in the vicinity. As a part of a sustainable conservation programme, the island is open to visitors through our ecotourism and environmental education programmes. Students, tourists and the general public learn about the habitat restoration project, in order to raise their awareness of the conservation of the threatened Mauritian flora and fauna.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> July 2020, MV *Wakashio*, a Panama flagged tanker carrying over 4000 tons of heavy oil, lubricants and diesel ran aground only 2 km away from Ile aux Aigrettes. Oil started leaking out of the tanker on Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> August. Around 1000 T of various petroleum products spilled into the ocean,

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affecting Ile aux Aigrettes, the fragile marine ecosystem and the turquoise blue lagoon. Within days the oil patch moved further north and reached the four islets fringing the Mahebourg bay, Ile de la Passe, Ilot Vacoas, Ile au Phare (aux Fouquets) and Ile Marianne, key habitats for endemic reptiles such as the Bojer's Skink and the Lesser Night-gecko which have gone extinct from mainland Mauritius, or barely present (Bouton's Skink on extreme rock outcrops).

The oil spill has badly impacted the pristine lagoons, coral reefs, mangrove forests and biodiversity with images showing shorelines covered with black sludge, in what has turned out to be an environmental disaster, prompting Mauritius to declare a 'state of environmental emergency' for the first time in its history. The economic impact is severe on local inhabitants who earn their living from fishing or tourism and this includes the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation, which is heavily reliant on ecotourism on Ile aux Aigrettes to generate funds for its projects., Tourism was already adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Wakashio wreck now further impacted on the national economy.

## PROJECT TECHNICAL SHEET

Project Type	Habitat Restoration
Start of Project	1985
Location	Ile aux Aigrettes, Mahebourg, Republic of Mauritius
Priority Area	Environmental & Sustainable development - Biodiversity
Status	Ongoing

## ACTIVITIES AND OBJECTIVES

- Undertake regular tests to monitor the level of Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons in the substrate, plants and water so as to assess level of contamination. If plants die, after identifying the cause and implementing any appropriate bioremediation, MWF may need to produce and replant a large number of them to restore the forest. We anticipate that this will also entail greater levels of control of invasive alien plants. **This action is not covered in this budget.**
- Bring back 3000 plants transferred to mainland Mauritius to Ile aux Aigrettes when the situation gets back to normal. Around 1,000 have been provided for a forest restoration project on the mainland. The 3,000 plants are currently being kept within Forestry Services Mahebourg premises. Before the plants can be returned to Ile aux Aigrettes, all insects, snails and foreign plants which, if introduced onto Ile aux Aigrettes, could harm the ecosystem, need to be removed. This will entail minute examination of each plant as well as a combination of manual removal, natural or chemical treatment. The observations will continue for months to come to try to ensure no alien species are introduced to Ile aux Aigrettes. Additional plants will be propagated once back on the island to follow the propagation and planting plan. The requirement for plants will be regularly reviewed as time goes on.
- Monitor the health of the adult Aldabra Tortoises on Ile aux Aigrettes, which remained exposed to the oil vapours. Tortoises have an important role in the native ecosystem as browsers, grazers and seed dispersers. Many native and endemic plants have evolved with and have adapted to its presence. All the functional roles in the ecosystem of Ile aux Aigrettes are fulfilled by Aldabra giant tortoises. Rescued juvenile tortoises will be kept safe on the mainland until we consider it safe to bring them back onto Ile aux Aigrettes. They may also serve as a 'control' group to compare the effects of the oil pollution on rescued and non-rescued tortoises.
- Carry out large scale, island wide weeding of invasive alien plant species on Ile aux Aigrettes. We will review our work model and increase weeding capacity by recruiting people impacted by the oil spill and residing in the neighboring areas. Our new model would need a supervisor and plant

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restoration assistants who will have adequate training before being employed over a period of 3 years.

- This combined set of actions described above helps us maintain an ecosystem to support populations of plants, birds, reptiles and insects. Pink Pigeons, Mauritius Olive White-eyes, Mauritius Fodies, Telfair Skinks and Guenther's geckos on Ile aux Aigrettes need this ecosystem to survive. Within separate recovery projects we will monitor their health status and reproduction during a minimum of three breeding seasons to ascertain that the oil fumes have not affected these animals. **This action is not covered in this budget.**

## PROJECT BENEFICIARIES

- Mauritian Ecosystems, Mauritian Biodiversity.
- Decision makers, scientific community including local and international university students, Mauritian population and its future generations, school children, tourists and the world at large.
- Republic of Mauritius, regarding meeting national biodiversity targets (e.g. the National Biodiversity and Strategy Action Plan 2017-25) and fulfilling obligations towards international biodiversity conventions (e.g. Rio Conventions, Aichi Targets, Millennium Development Goals).

## PROJECT DATES

The programme is continuous but the level of project activity is assessed yearly to adjust to the project aims and requirements. Annual report & other reports delivery is as per agreed timeframe with main funders.

## RESOURCES REQUIRED

- Human Resources: Manager oversight, one Horticulturist, one Tortoise Field Staff, one Nursery Helper, ten Labourers and one Supervisor.
- Infrastructure: Field station and plant nursery.
- Transport: Use of a vehicle and motorised boat.
- Equipment and Materials: Laptop, GPS, mobile phones, planting and weeding tools and materials and nursery equipment and materials.

## BUDGET for 3 years

Description	Project Budget (Rs)
Project Staff Cost	7,869,773
Transport and Travel	699,300
Equipment and Materials	1,367,100
Other Operation Costs	378,000
<b>Total Operational Cost</b>	<b>10,314,173</b>
Administration Cost	945,000
<b>TOTAL PROJECT COST</b>	<b>11,259,173</b>

- Any level of support is welcome
- MWF can extract a specific action that can receive exclusive support from your organisation provided your donation exceeds Rs 500,000

12<sup>th</sup> September 2020