

**TODAY NEWSPAPER; 6<sup>th</sup> October 2016; N. Tirant:**

**D'ARROS ISLAND: SEYCHELLOIS DEMAND ANSWERS!**

Two years after the announcement that it would be made a protected nature reserve under the Nature Parks and Conservancy Act, the island group of D'Arros, situated 250km from Mahé in Seychelles' outer islands, is back in the environmental limelight. And this time, the public wants to be heard on the second attempt to turn the group into a "special reserve" that could affect livelihoods.



*Photo Credit: saveourseas.com*

It was in July 2014 that the environment and energy ministry announced that the group of islands, which includes the privately-owned island of D'Arros and the St. Joseph atoll, two kilometres to the east, had officially been made a nature reserve. This was "in accordance to the wishes of the owner of the D'Arros Island Group and conditions of the government sanction over the sale of the property," the environment ministry said in a communiqué at the time. The new owners of the island group, a Swiss conservation lobby, Save Our Seas Foundation, had been given the Islands for marine conservation projects. (See inset - "D'Arros - Private Island")

**Ten-year plan**

According to the ministry's statement, the entire St. Joseph atoll had become "a special reserve in order to preserve its unique biodiversity," while a portion of D'Arros Island would be set aside for consideration as a RAMSAR Wetland Site.

"A ten year plan has been devised and implemented to reintroduce and rehabilitate endemic species in order to restore some of the original habitat," the statement read, adding that the rat-

free D'Arros Island, would remain the atoll's main settlement and host facilities for research and education.

The then environment minister, Rolph Payet, explained that the decision to turn the island into a special reserve would add another jewel to Seychelles' collection of conservation successes.

"Our outer islands remain part of our unique biodiversity heritage and together with Aldabra will lay the ground for a network of protected areas within the outer islands of the Seychelles. Protected areas will also benefit Seychelles economically in terms of providing important refuge for fish and other marine life," Payet said at the time.

### **"D'Arros "Special Reserve"**

The special reserve was created by regulation S.I. 50 of 2014 dated 10 July. But that regulation was repealed two months later on 8 September due to a "non-fulfillment of a requirement" not specified in the repeal legislation.

Two years after that first effort to make D'Arros and St. Joseph atoll a special reserve the environment ministry is trying again. This time, the official Gazette of 23 September 2016 has followed the procedure to the letter publishing notices by order of the president of the "intention to submit proposal for the designation of D'Arros and St. Joseph Atoll as a special reserve." According to the notice, the decision "has been felt necessary in the interest of the conservation and protection of the environment."

The notice is supported by a schedule providing 1,213 coordinates that should leave no doubt as to what is being cordoned off. A circle extending one kilometre from D'Arros and St Joseph measured from the furthest reef edge at lowest astronomical tide will effectively put the islands and a large expanse of Seychelles' territorial waters out of bounds to every citizen of Seychelles. Technically, this exclusion should also apply to the islands' owners but how this will work in practice is not clear.

Speaking back in 2014, the SOSF chief executive, Dr Michael Scholl, said at the time that with many sharks, manta ray and turtles in the area, they were "fortunate to be able to observe the life of several species close to our foundation."

"The extraordinary wild life of this unique piece of land, will also allow us to implement several research programmes," he said, adding that there was also a "unique density of birds coming back to breed on the islands since we started to reintroduce its original vegetation." He explained that this would "allow us to perform a detailed inventory of the flora and of the animals present of this exceptional natural site, not only for the Seychelles but also for the natural heritage of mankind.

### **Economic operators affected**

However, now that the procedure has been launched, economic operators, which include local yacht and fishing charters as well as the local artisanal fishing community who have been earning a livelihood from the fish-rich islands, are up in arms over the decision to make D'Arros and the St. Joseph atoll a special reserve and place them out of bounds to local fishing and charter boat excursions.



*Artisanal fishing boat in Seychelles by Glenn Jackaway*

The Managing Director of the charter business, Elegant Yachting, Sindu Cliff Parekh has raised concern over the notice. In a letter addressed to the principal secretary of the environment department, Mr. Parekh has drawn attention to the fact that the two islands are part of the major charter routes for over 120 charter days each year.

St. Joseph is the nearest fly fishing destination since Alphonse is now operated as a monopoly with local operators not able to access it, he said in the letter. He explained that his company was putting sustainable tourism into practice as it dedicated a lot of resources to promoting sustainable fishing techniques of "catch and release" with more and more supporters among the sport fishing community.

"With the proposed limitations, our community will be forced to implement unwanted pressure to other areas, followed by lesser variety in cruising routes, therefore major drops in number of visiting tourists," Mr. Parekh added.

### **Fly-fishing**

TODAY also spoke to seasoned skipper of charter yachts and fishing expeditions, Gilbert Victor, about the decision that will affect his livelihood. Mr. Victor is a regular on the cruise circuits and has for many years been taking charters down to the outlying islands for fly fishing on what he describes as "one of the last remaining flyfishing spots in the country."

"Saint Joseph is the last place left for us to take clients flyfishing. And there are many of us who do so. Already we've lost Alphonse and Farquhar where the IDC is in full charge. And now Assumption is a military base and Cosmoledo and Astove are both managed by South Africans.

With Desroches now going to another big hotel name, it too will soon be out of bounds," lamented Gilbert Victor.

"Our clients come to Seychelles only to go fishing. They spend all their holiday doing just that and there are so many visitors who come only for this leisure. They bring plenty of forex into the country and cause no harm to the environment because they fish ecologically without barbed hooks and release the fish after taking a photograph," he explained.

"I think that all the owners want is to have the island as their own playground and not allow us to come there so we can't see what goes on," he added.

Victor also wonders whether the local artisanal fishermen and their boats will be allowed to anchor in the safety of the islands during stormy weather.

"I was told once that I could not anchor in the shallows off D'Arros because the 'boss didn't want to see any boats in front of his house,' the island manager once told me."

"Besides, I'd like to know what is so special about D'Arros, which unlike Aldabra, Cousin or Aride is not home to any endemic species and which has all the same birds, including the frigates, that you find all over the outer islands," Victor told our reporter.



*The Seychelles fody was translocated to D'Arros Island in 1965 and is the only endemic bird on the island*

## **Demanding a voice**

The published notice of intention to designate the special reserve is also inviting anyone who has an interest in the area that will be affected by the designation to forward "their written representations to the principal secretary of the environment department before 4 November 2016."

Both Parekh and Victor urge people to object as they also call for a public meeting to discuss the decision and be heard.

"I will encourage people to send in written objections, but I think that the environment ministry should organise a public meeting like we did for the Cap Ternay and Grand Police projects so that the public can come and express their views and make known their objections. I suggest a very large room that can hold at least 100 people because I'm sure that many people will attend and that they will be very vociferous about their objection to this project," Victor told TODAY.

Parekh is also calling for a general meeting between the authorities and all stakeholders from the tourism sport fishing sector as well as representatives of the commercial fishing sector. He says an open discussion will provide a platform from which to look at the scientific data upon which the decision to turn the islands into a special reserve has been based.

Highlighting the importance of the tourism sector to the country's economic growth, Parekh notes that the Blue Economy concept suggests sustainable and responsible use of oceanic resources.

"The proposal to designate D'Arros and St. Joseph Atoll as a special reserve is surprisingly controversial to that concept," Parekh adds.

### **What is a "Special Reserve"?**

According to the Natural Parks and Nature Conservancy Act of 1969, which is still the applicable law, despite the adoption of the Seychelles Protected Areas Policy in October 2013, a "special reserve" is a designated area in which "characteristic wild life requires protection and in which all other interests and activities are subordinated to this end."

Some observers argue that with no special features or endemic species on the islands, the decision to make D'Arros and St. Joseph Atoll a special reserve is questionable and seen as a special favour to the island's current owners.

The act also provides that once an area is designated a special reserve, any person who starts or carries out development of any land within the reserve or is found wandering in a special reserve and is unable to give a satisfactory account for his presence in the reserve will be guilty of an offence and liable to a SCR 2,000 fine and one year imprisonment.

With D'Arros and St. Joseph over 250 kms from mainland Mahé, the question begs as to how the special reserve will be effectively policed.

### **Stakeholder involvement**

There is also the matter of commitments made in the national Protected Areas Policy adopted in October 2013 which undertook to “enhance key stakeholder involvement in protected areas planning and management.” To this end, the policy establishes a nomination process for new protected areas to be set out in new revised legislation which has not yet become law.

According to the policy, new sites can only be nominated if they have “distinct qualities such as the presence of rare and endangered species in such a combination that render it ecologically or aesthetically important,” if they fit the criteria set out for the category of protected area proposed and after a screening process initiated by government.

### **D'Arros 'Private island'**

The island of D'Arros, named in the late 18th century after a Mauritius-based French Marine Commandant has been privately owned since 1975 when it was purchased by Shahram Pahlavi Nia, a member of the family of the Iranian Shah. It was later sold to French billionaire and heiress of the L'Oréal cosmetics empire, Liliane Bettencourt, before being sold again for an undisclosed amount in 2012 and given over to the Swiss conservation lobby, Save Our Seas Foundation for marine conservation projects.

Until that sale, the island spent almost two years embroiled in a legal battle over ownership and taxes, marked by international media coverage of the legal woes of Bettencourt, who was battling a major tax evasion scandal in her native France.

In 2011 the heiress, who was suffering from dementia, was ordered by a French court to pay nearly US\$133 million in unpaid taxes after the revelation that she owned D'Arros and had undeclared accounts in Singapore and Switzerland. Her fortune was placed under the guardianship of her daughter Françoise Bettencourt-Meyers, who paid over US\$8 million in unpaid stamp duty to the Seychelles government arising out of the sale of the island.

### **'An ecologically-friendly future'**

After the sale of the island by Bettencourt in 2012, the identity of the island's new owner had been kept a secret until the world's press revealed the information in French magazine Paris Match, that identified the anonymous buyer as the founder of the Geneva-based Save our Seas Foundation (SOSF).

The take-over of the island by the SOSF is said to have been financed by Saudian Abdul Mohsen Abdulmalik Al-Sheikh, a regular visitor to Seychelles for many years. The Sheikh, is a powerful businessman in Saudi Arabia, head of a chain of luxury hotels, a 72 metre yacht and a stable of race horses. "It's all above board and transparent the foundation's Swiss lawyer told the French magazine Paris Match in 2012. The Sheikh, who is now dubbed a fully-fledged environmentalist, was reported to have paid up some 50 million euros to enable the foundation to buy the island and work towards its preservation.

"The foundation owns the island through a company based in the Virgin Islands with which it

manages its activities. D'Arros island will become a nature reserve. It will become totally focused on research and the protection of species," the lawyer told the Paris Match.

The SOSF, which is not a recognised research institute, lays claim to having funded and facilitated over 160 marine research and conservation projects around the world.

The islands, which have been under the management of SOSF in collaboration with the environment and energy ministry for several years, boast a wide range of conservation and education projects which they claim are currently underway, including the Implementation of a research programme approved by the government.

### **What the environmentalists say**

TODAY also sought the views of local environmentalist, Dr. Nirmal Shah, Chief Executive of Nature Seychelles, which manages Cousin Island Special Reserve, designated in 1974.

"Firstly, it's very important for the public, as well as environmental practitioners and organisations to understand the *raison d'être* of the proposed designation, i.e. a comprehensive biodiversity and social assessment justifying the Special Reserve status should be made publicly available and consultations undertaken with relevant stakeholders. Special Reserve is the highest legal designation for protected conservation areas (PAs) being used under current law (Strict Nature Reserve designation has never been utilized). Our existing Special Reserves are, iconic, high biodiversity sites such as Cousin, Aride and Aldabra, with strong conservation management by well-known national organizations - so I believe any proposed Special Reserve needs to match or exceed the status of these," Dr. Shah told our reporter.

"Secondly, despite Special Reserves being areas set aside in which characteristic wild life requires protection and in which all other interests and activities are subordinated to this end, public access, although controlled and managed as on Cousin, Aride and Aldbara, is possible and information as to visitations available. I think it is vital that the Seychellois public is informed of access and visitation rights otherwise there is a possibility of conflicts later," he added.

"Thirdly, the country is going through a key and widely-reported Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) exercise which will inform the government and public as to which areas are to be set aside for conservation. Government has been internationally lauded for this initiative and its related instrument, the Debt for Adaption Swap, a world's first. This is to ensure a planned approach with the involvement of all stakeholders. I would think that any proposal for new protected areas should go through this process rather than be stand-alone, otherwise it interrupts the entire planning and consultative policy and strategy described by government," Dr. Shah said in conclusion.