

BIRDS

A template for re-introductions in Seychelles: A Solution in Search of a Problem? - in reply

A globally threatened endemic species recovery program started in the Plan period, co-ordinated by an NGO, and implemented in partnership with the Government of Seychelles and private island owners, has rescued the critically endangered Seychelles magpie robin from immediate danger. This quote from the section on environmental successes of the last ten years in the national Environment Management Plan of Seychelles (EMPS) 2000 – 2010 is in contrast to the gloomy picture painted by Justin Gerlach in his article *Where Guidelines can Help: a history of re-introductions in Seychelles*, published in issue 22 of this newsletter. In fact, it is the only species conservation program cited as a success in the EMPS. We consider the article to be a complete misrepresentation of the actual situation and this present note is a response from the conservation managers' viewpoint.

Planned Interventions

The Gerlach article gives the impression that magpie robin re-introductions have been undertaken in a willy-nilly fashion. Nothing can be further from the truth. The Magpie Robin Recovery Program, initiated by BirdLife International, was the first conservation program in Seychelles to adopt a logical framework (LFA) work program with an overall goal, purpose and objectives, devised by stakeholders. There are set targets to be achieved over a determined time frame. The attainment of the objectives and targets are monitored, and assessed by the Royal Society for Protection of Birds (RSPB) on an annual basis (Parr & Shah, 1999). Resources, such through the GEF-funded Management of Avian Ecosystems

project, are sourced through intensive fund raising efforts and new

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technical partners are brought on board from any part of the world where they can be located. The Seychelles Magpie robin Recovery Team (SMART) meets regularly and decisions are minuted and acted on through a paid co-ordinator. A quarterly report is produced and circulated to stakeholders and an annual review of progress since 1998 published.

A case history in experimentation?

The author chastises the Recovery Program for what he calls experimentation. However, the text subtitled *Seychelles magpie robin – a case history in experimentation* contradicts previous statements and writings by the author. The Seychelles Red Data Book (Gerlach, 1997) proposes re-introduction to larger islands, namely Silhouette, in the presence of alien predators to *allow the effect of rats and cats to be tested*; this would appear to be a highly experimental approach.

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Adaptive management

In the rush to judge success against general guidelines, one of the most important concepts in real-world conservation, adaptive management, falls between the cracks. Conservation is not a machine whose buttons we can click every day and expect the same problems and the same responses. Adaptive management has been a key process in the Recovery Program in the last few years. *This evolution is characterized by the degree of flexibility in approach and management style through fine tuning pre-established work program objectives. This has enabled the Recovery Program to adapt to changing circumstances whilst remaining on track. As adaptive management is realized, we believe that genuine stakeholders should found the Recovery Program on participatory priority setting and action* (Parr et al., 2000).

Participatory management

Decisions to do with magpie robins are not taken by a single organization, as seems to be inferred in the article. SMART consists of a group of highly skilled technicians from all the organizations managing sites with magpie robin populations, as well as from the Seychelles government. Decisions are taken by consensus. Ideas are discussed with other parties, particularly scientists and technical experts assisting the Recovery Program (Parr & Shah, 1999). The actions criticized by the author were nonetheless agreed with all the relevant individuals and agencies including the management of the island providing the birds, management of the recipient island, the Seychelles government, scientists and technical experts outside SMART, the donor agencies and the executing agency (Millet & Shah, 2001). Memorandums of Understanding were in fact signed with Aride island management and with the Seychelles Government.

The recovery tool box

The article's focus on re-introductions obscures the fact that re-introduction is one tool, albeit an important one, in the Recovery Program's tool kit. This tool kit includes research on food availability and habitat quality, genetic studies, reforestation, alien predator eradication, mitigation measures on predator free islands, avian care and welfare, supplementary feeding of wild populations, provision of nest boxes, monitoring, database management and reporting, training, public education and so forth. The kit is being constantly enhanced with new purpose-made tools such as the Captive Management Handbook, the SMART Field Workers' Manual (in prep.) and the handbook entitled *Biodiversity Assessment of Small Islands: Methods developed in Seychelles to Assist in Restoration*. The article unfortunately misleads the reader into thinking that re-introduction is a stand-alone activity.

One size does not fit all

The main thrust of the argument is that somehow (the author does not really state how) the RSG/SSC guidelines were not adopted properly and therefore re-introduction success remains patchy. This argument does a great disservice to the RSG/SSC guidelines. Surely, these guidelines, like others, are not to be taken as holy writ engraved in stone. They must be recommendations, advocated for sensible practice and not as dogma. The NPTS re-introduction guidelines mentioned in the article were rejected by the Seychelles Bird Forum and never adopted as national policy because they were far too prescriptive and not part of an overall recovery program framework or tool kit.

The map is not the territory

The author's predilection to equate success with adoption of a set menu underlines his inability to understand the difference between what can be called the map and the territory. General guidelines such as the one developed by the SSC/RSG provide only a rough map to what is, in some cases, unknown territory. To become overly focused on guidelines is to miss the point – a flagship species which is still not secure and needs very urgent conservation action.

Contradictions in the promotion of Guidelines

The beneficial role of guidelines is presented in a contradictory manner. For instance, the Seychelles warbler re-introductions to Cousine and Aride are given as examples of planned re-introductions covering *all issues subsequently highlighted by the RSG guidelines*. However, as conducted prior to the production of said guidelines, these cannot be used as an example of their benefit. The article goes on to provide examples of re-introductions. The Seychelles white-eye in 2001, Seychelles fody and magpie robin in 2002, all were planned in detail, had unparalleled commitment of resources and all broadly followed the RSG guidelines, but despite this the latter two are subject to criticism, the former to praise. The argument simply does not hold together; re-introductions not following guidelines are commended, and some of those that did follow guidelines are criticized.

Risk aversion and fear of failure

The article concludes with the title "Return to Risk". This defines the author's position. He seems risk-averse, and perhaps has never worked with the concept of acceptable risk. Risk assessment and risk management are part of any successful conservation program. The notion of rescuing a critically endangered species, which at the start of the Recovery Program was also a data-deficient one, was always considered risky. It was risky to believe that adequate scientific information could be gathered in time to make the correct management decisions. Prior to re-introductions, it was risky to attempt to manage the entire world population, miles from anywhere on an island - Fregate - that hosted activities (agriculture, livestock development, and tourism) seemingly incompatible with conservation. It was risky to believe that the government and people of one of the smallest countries in the world and which has a micro-economy would have the resources, understanding and staying power to support the Recovery Program. In 2000, it was risky to try saving magpie robins from rats on Fregate island by holding the entire population on the island in captivity for months and using poison bait dropped by helicopter against the rodents. It was risky to translocate birds to Aride Island, where previous re-introductions had failed. However, decision-makers and conservation managers from BirdLife International, RSPB, Nature Seychelles, SMART, the Seychelles Government and other organizations accepted risk as axiomatic and put aside fear of failure. The net result is that risks were translated into challenges and faced successfully (Millet & Shah, 2001).

Hobson's Choice

Amidst all the heat raised in the article, what seems to be forgotten is that the magpie robin was probably the most endangered bird in the world in the 1970's when BirdLife International discovered the population was at a low of 16 individuals found only on one island. Today, because of the planned and successful use of methodologies and tools such as re-introductions and habitat management, the population is at an all time high of 110 birds on four islands. The options for the bird are extremely limited because there are very few predator-free islands with suitable habitats available. We must establish new populations to increase range and numbers. There are no other choices (Millet & Shah, 2001). The Recovery Program cannot therefore be compared to re-introductions mentioned in the article, such as that carried out for the Aldabra Rail, a sub-species which is not on the list of threatened birds of the world (BirdLife International, 2000). The magpie robin is still the most critically endangered bird in Seychelles and HAS to be downlisted in the IUCN Red List whilst there is still a window of opportunity to mobilize resources and to suitably restore islands.

Conclusions

We would like to make a plea for a more multi-dimensional and trans-disciplinary management approach to the complex problem of trying to save critically endangered species in Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Conservation is as much an art as it is a science and those who believe they can use boilerplate solutions and succeed are mistaken. In a dire case like the Seychelles magpie robin the answer must be the following: anything possible

Re-introduction *NEWS* No. 23: November 2003

must be done; anything impossible must be attempted.

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