

stories from the field
Conservation Boot Camp

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CONSERVATION BOOT CAMP™

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Reality Check!

Conservation is as much an art as it is a science

Dr Nirmal Jivan Shah, Chief Executive



Back in 1990 when I was the Director of the Conservation and National Parks Service of Seychelles and wrestling with people ranging from staff to poachers to politicians, I had a great “Aha Insight” – it was the first time I clearly understood that people were as important as biodiversity in the conservation of nature.

Understanding that conservation is as much an art as it is a science is the road to success. But few academic courses impart the mental and emotional tool kit needed to work in this multi-disciplinary arena. This is the reason why I created the Conservation Boot Camp (CBC) – to bridge the gap between what is learned in the classroom and what is absorbed (sometimes through a process akin to osmosis) by working with people and facing real-world situations in the field.

The program was purposefully designed to impart what business leaders call competencies and character qualities. What I didn't expect was the two-way learning that would take place.

Part of the CBC program is that I, a conservationist with over 3 decades of experience, would meet with each participant and discuss their experience in the program and perhaps their aspirations.

Well, I got some great project ideas and insights from participants as well. The meetings also reinforced the importance of being a “conservation mentor.” Many of the participants clearly said their interactions with me gave them confidence and catalyzed their determination and career choices, results I hadn't anticipated.

I think the best take-away from participating in the CBC is the proof that conservation as a discipline and as a career can be hugely successful. Cousin Island Special Reserve is what I call “Good News Conservation”. This is because conservation on Cousin benefits both biodiversity and people. Many people have had their careers jump-started here. I invite you to jump into this program and get your hands dirty and your feet wet.

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What is the Conservation Boot Camp program

The Conservation Boot Camp program is a great opportunity for recent graduates and those who wish to bolster their career in conservation or others who wish to take a break from their desk job and experience conservation of a tropical island paradise.

Participants will gain much coveted practical experience “learning by doing” with field staff and researchers on a world renowned and award-winning protected area.

This program is a well filled schedule with as main course the birds (seabirds, land birds and endemic birds) and reptiles (Skinks, tortoises and turtles) conservation programs.

Vegetation monitoring is an important part of the program too. Some side activities will help improve the island running, some will help to understand the environment in which this biodiversity exists and others will just bring more fun on the island.

*Cousin Island forest
by Ludivine Amman*

What participants gain from the program

- Be trained in monitoring techniques and gain field methodology skills.
- Gain exposure to, and be involved in, eco-guiding and other ecotourism activities and meet visitors from all over the world
- Interact with researchers and local conservation staff
- Meet the Nature Seychelles' Chief Executive, a renowned and award winning Seychellois environmentalist.
- Be involved in the activities of an award winning NGO
- Be immersed in the work of an award-winning land and sea Protected Area
- Live and experience a tropical paradise
- Be exposed to work with sea birds and/or sea turtles
- Live amongst other rare species and in restored indigenous woodlands
- Experience a new culture, meet new people and share a wonderful travel experience
- Contribute to some of the longest running data sets in the world
- Two limited edition Conservation Boot Camp T Shirts and 2 Nature Seychelles board shorts.
- Receive a Certificate of Participation in the Conservation Boot Camp. Nature Seychelles is a registered Private Education and Training Institution under the Seychelles' Education (Private Education Institutions) Regulations 2005 and as such can legally provide courses and issue certificates.

Bird Watching

on Cousin Island

by Ludivine Ammon





*The white/ fairy tern are usually seen in pairs ,
they breed year-round
(photo by Ludivine Ammon)*

Cousin Island is a paradise for birdwatchers. As a participant of the Conservation Boot Camp, I have the chance to spend four weeks in this special reserve. This means for me plenty of time to discover and observe the habits of the birds during planned activities as well as my spare time.

Several hours per week are dedicated to monitoring and observing the behavior of the Seychelles Magpie Robin (SMR). This is by far my favorite activity.

Even when the temperature is so high that every movement makes you sweat, even when the mosquitoes are more than ready to attack, I enjoy walking in the forest to meet these friendly birds.

Long sleeves, good shoes, mosquito repellent, data sheets, map of the island, and of course my camera. I am ready!

Charline (L) and Ludivine (R) learning how to collect data of a juvenile white tailed tropicbird from Kara (centre), Nature Seychelles' Science coordinator (photo by Yan Coquet)





Most of the SMR living on Cousin have four rings in order to recognize them easily and therefore understand their behaviour.

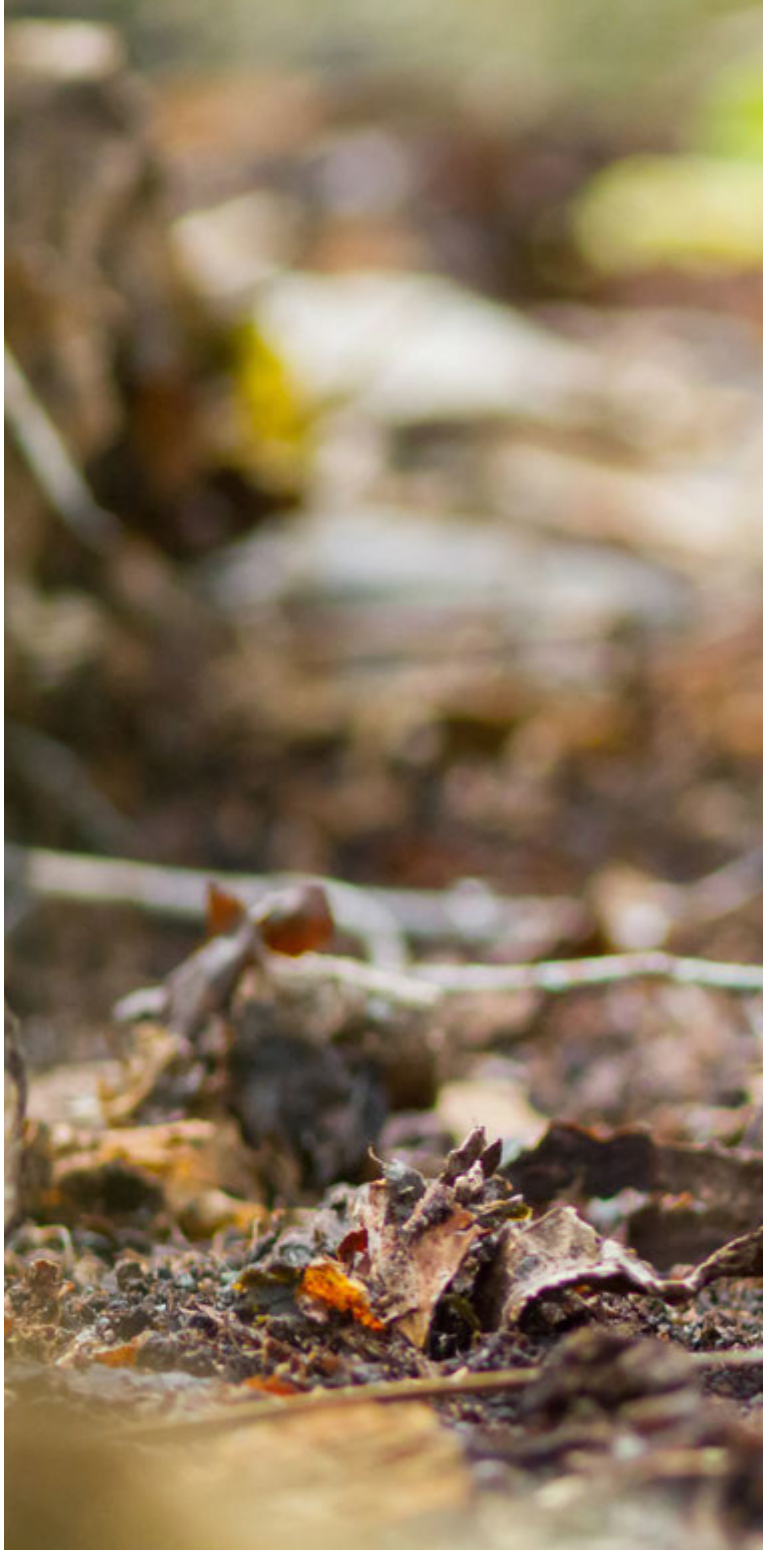
They are used to being monitored: start whistling, and if they are not too busy or far away, they will come on the branches right next to you.

Nevertheless, they don't come only because they are curious! They want to get help to find delicious insects. So, they will wait so that you flip a nearby stone revealing loads of hiding bugs.

SMR nest on Cousin Island and several nest boxes have been hanged on trees for them.

But it is always a pleasure to find out that they also use natural cavities. It means that Cousin's special reserve meets their needs.

*The Seychelles Magpie Robin, curious bird but also smart in following tortoises and humans in the hope they will disturb the earth and reveal some insects under the surface.
(photo by Ludivine Amman)*



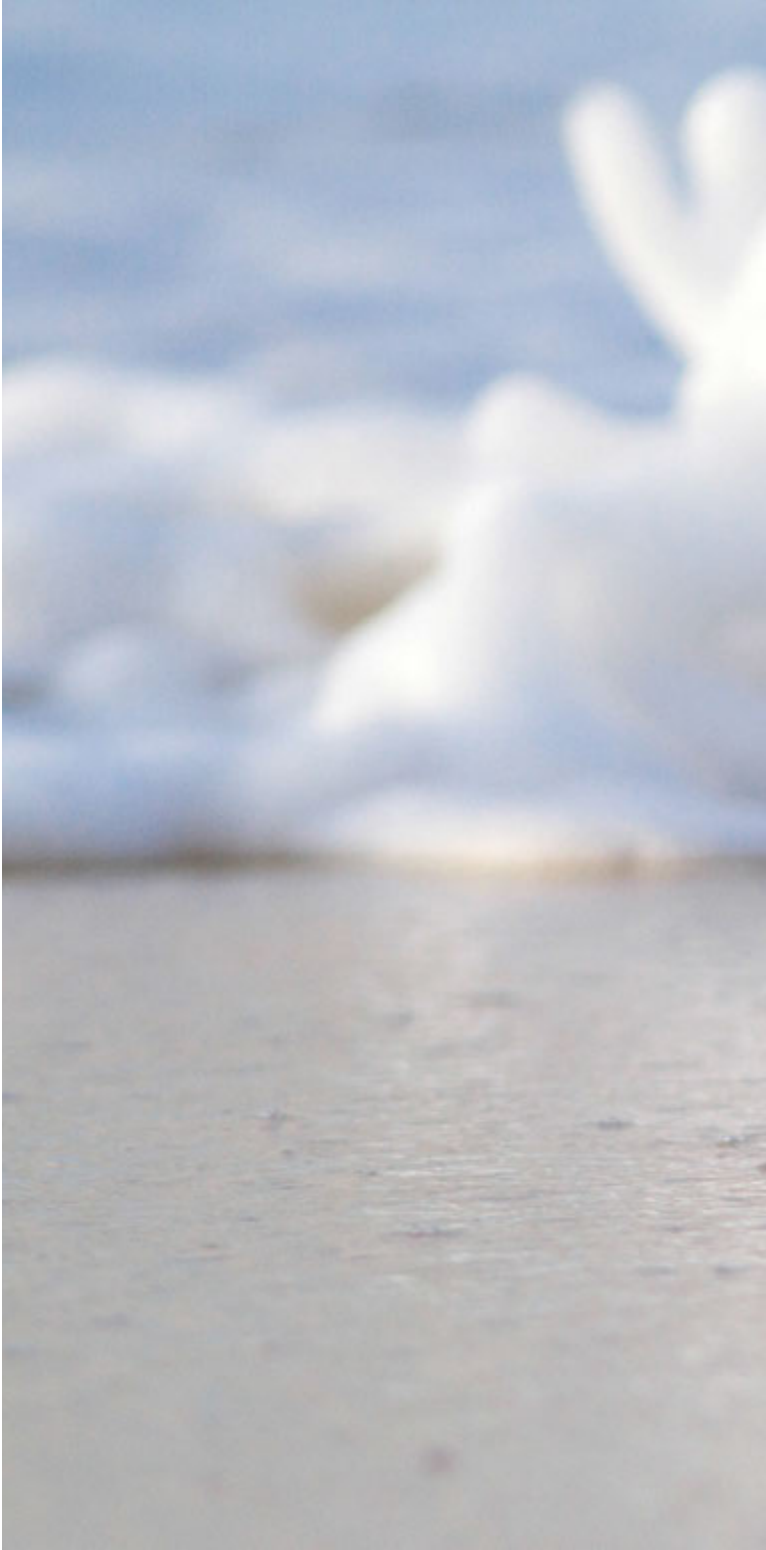


In order to identify which birds are breeding, the CBC participants spread on different possible nesting sites.

Solving these little riddles and taking pictures to prove my observations is like a game to me.

And all the pictures I collect will always remind me of this incredible experience of staying four weeks in this bird paradise.

*The Sanderling is an annual migrant bird commonly seen on sandy beaches, running frantically along the waterline searching for invertebrates exposed by backwash
(photo by Ludivine Amman)*





its work

...but not really work

by Julian Doster



*Sitting under a coconut tree
photo by Julian Doster*



I first heard about Nature Seychelles in a TV documentary and decided to look up the organization online to see if they offer something like a practical month. I was lucky and found the Conservation Boot Camp program.

My first thought when I arrived in the Seychelles was “huh! it is very warm and wet here” and then the second thought came “but it’s so beautiful”. This feeling never changed during the entire four weeks I spent here.

The first view of Cousin Island was incredible. I’ve never seen so many birds in one place, or all the little lizards, geckos and crabs, which were not annoying but instead became a part of our life on the island.

After the first week I knew nearly the whole island and also all the people who were living and working here with me. But work never really felt like work, even when you got pecked by some Brown Noddies because you were checking their nests, or if you were hunting for a Warbler.





through half of the forest - it all felt more like vacation.

Each time we went to Praslin for our food supply, I went feeling a bit sad but also happy. I was sad because I had to leave this wonderful little island but happy to get more foodstuff.

And then there was the journey back to Cousin when you had to take first the shower of the sea and then the real shower once back home. The water for this comes from a fountain in the middle of Cousin or from the rain water collection tank which stands in front of our house.

Life on Cousin is minimalistic but when you're here you don't miss anything from home and you realize how many things you actually don't need.

Photos: (i) The bronze-eyed gecko is endemic to the Seychelles which feeds on nectar, insects, carrion and seabirds' eggs (photo by Ludivine Ammon)(ii) Julian receiving visitors on Cousin Island which has the longest running ecotourism program in the Seychelles (photo by Jedida Oneka)





And life on Cousin is never boring. I always had something to do, for example the monthly project or searching for special birds, like the Seychelles Magpie Robins. And even when you had finished the plan for the day there are the wardens who I would sit and chat with and maybe went surfing or playing table tennis.

In the evenings, once a week we made a barbecue and all sat together grilling fresh fish, talking and laughing. Over the weekends we had free time and so we just walked through the forest and discovered new spots on the island.

In these four weeks I learned so much about nature and the animals which are living in this wonderful place. I even had the chance to guide a group of German tourists, in German!

I wish Yan, Jovani, Ricky, Ethan, Alex, Chris, Leroy, Dailus, Topher and all the Nature Seychelles staff who work to protect this little island all the best.

Hanging out with Rikki Adeline (pictured) during our free time, just one of the many fun activities we got into (photo by Julian Doster)



Stranded & Barefoot

on an island paradise

by Nikita Engineer

*Left to Right: Jovani (Chief Warden),
Dr. Shah and Nikita with one of the
resident Giant Aldabra Tortoises
after the one-one-one session
(photo by Yan Coquet)*



For someone who comes from densely populated India, the idea of living and working on a remote island on the Indian Ocean, being surrounded by more birds than people at all times, was rather amusing.

As I seated myself on the aircraft from Mahe to Praslin, my throat parched from anticipation which was building up to nervousness, I hadn't the faintest idea what I was diving into. Having graduated only twenty days prior, all I knew was that I wanted this experience.

My aircraft landed, and then I was ushered onto a boat - this was where my journey began. Completely drenched from the boat ride, I couldn't stop smiling because what lay ahead of me was a dense green island amidst the different shades of blue of the ocean. Cousin Island embraced me with its lush green, white sand and very noisy birds.

My first week passed by with yelps of shock, nervous giggles, and getting lost in the forest more times than I could count. I was all over the place, trying my best to absorb all the information I was receiving, and clicking pictures of everything.

*The 'sunset hammock' on Cousin
photo by Julian Doster*





I soon made my acquaintance with the many species of birds on the island. My introduction to the Brown Noddies did not go as smoothly as with the Lesser Noddies. The Brown Noddies who were only noise and bird poo, and days with breeding success of Brown Noddies on my time table meant that I had to prepare myself for pecks and bruises from some very angry birds. Nonetheless, they grew on me.

An excitable first week later, just as I was beginning to make peace with the long drop toilets, I lost my phone to the sea. I could not believe it. I was now actually stranded on an island, with no contact whatsoever to the outside world. Well, turns out you miss a lot when your face is constantly buried in a phone; so I decided to gracefully embrace this life by giving up on shoes as well.

The earth (mixed with bird and tortoise poo, of course) felt really nice under my feet. Dodging the thousands of skins on the forest floor became one of many minor amusements. I made it a point to observe the sunset every evening, and ended up falling asleep on the hammock, only to return home after dark every night. I was initially scared to venture out alone at night but after a few days on the island it hit me that the largest animal out there is a tortoise.

Another highlight of my experience were all the skills that I learned. I was lucky enough to make the acquaintance of Mark Brown, an orthinologist based in South Africa who came to Cousin for a one-day training in bird ringing. Despite having probably ringed just a handful of birds compared to everyone else's double digits - I was mostly just happy to be a part of it

Before I knew it, I was saying goodbye to the Seychelles fodies and skinks. Even the Seychelles Magpie Robins - we found a way to be friends despite my inability to whistle - instead I would sing really loud and they would find me, waiting for me to disturb the ground so they could get their share of cockroaches and other invertebrates. Quite sad to be leaving while the Noddy eggs hadn't hatched yet.

I came to Cousin looking for some answers, what I got in return was more than I had bargained for - I was introduced to a way of life. The island ecosystem is a tiny world of its own, its species flourishing amidst the natural forests, and beaches changing rapidly with the seasons. The Conservation Boot Camp does justice to its name.

*Nikita (far left) learning how to handle, ring and take measurements from Cousine Island staff who had recently been trained on the same
(photo by Mark Brown)*

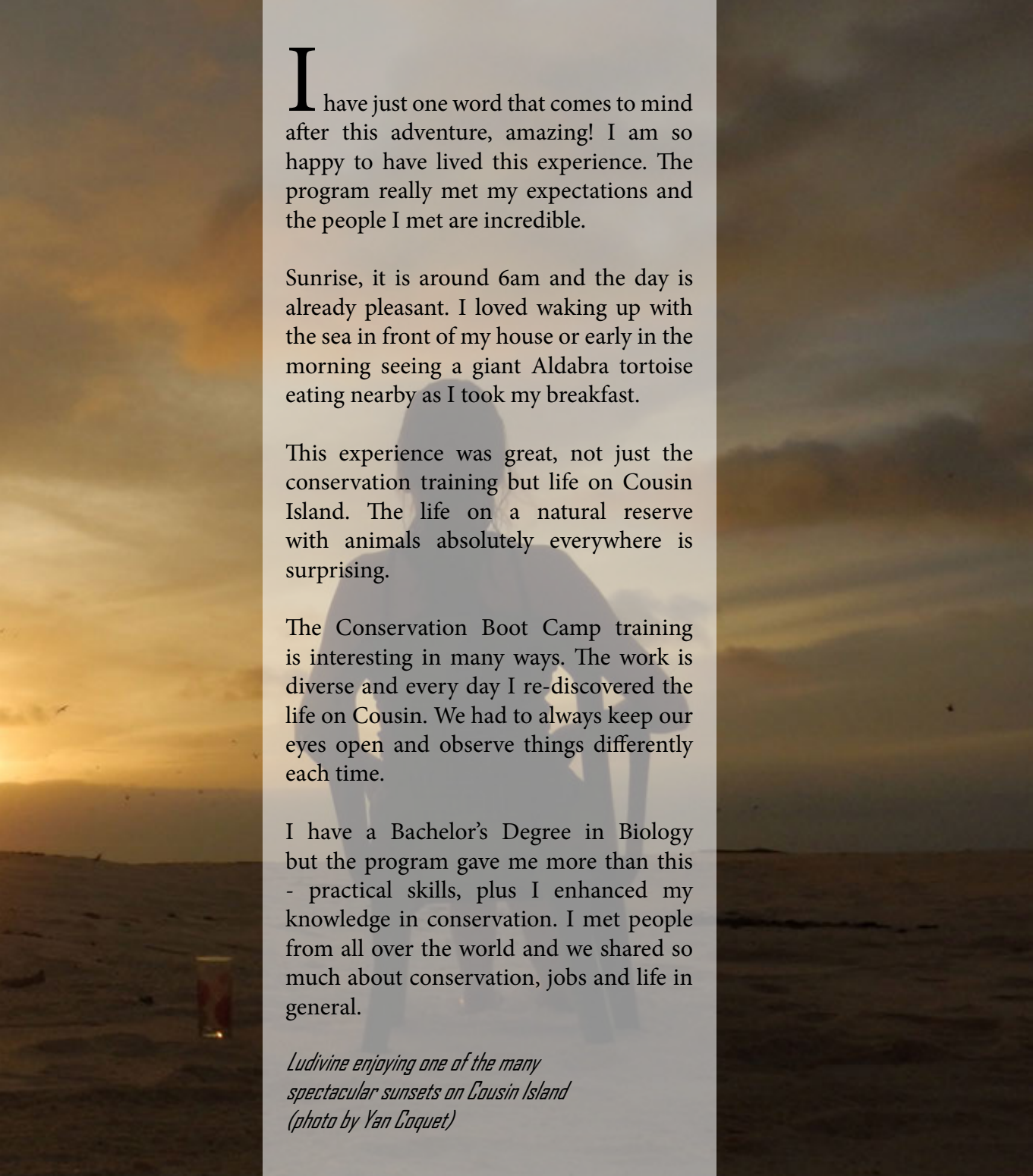




Conservation & Conversation

from sunrise to sunset

by Charline Leroy



I have just one word that comes to mind after this adventure, amazing! I am so happy to have lived this experience. The program really met my expectations and the people I met are incredible.

Sunrise, it is around 6am and the day is already pleasant. I loved waking up with the sea in front of my house or early in the morning seeing a giant Aldabra tortoise eating nearby as I took my breakfast.

This experience was great, not just the conservation training but life on Cousin Island. The life on a natural reserve with animals absolutely everywhere is surprising.

The Conservation Boot Camp training is interesting in many ways. The work is diverse and every day I re-discovered the life on Cousin. We had to always keep our eyes open and observe things differently each time.

I have a Bachelor's Degree in Biology but the program gave me more than this - practical skills, plus I enhanced my knowledge in conservation. I met people from all over the world and we shared so much about conservation, jobs and life in general.

*Ludivine enjoying one of the many
spectacular sunsets on Cousin Island
(photo by Yan Coquet)*

The meeting with Nature Seychelles' CEO was especially meaningful because I had the opportunity to ask him more about management, what is needed to have a job in conservation and he confirmed my ideas and gave me some advice to pursue my goals in the best possible way.

The picture of me marking Giant Aldabra tortoises during census is my favourite, not because I particularly like tortoises but because it summarizes this adventure perfectly:

Yan, the program coordinator, teaching us what we need to know about Cousin and the conservation work; perseverance in the work because we do not always find new tortoises; but also, the opportunity to work in the forest and to study animals in their environment. All of this gave me a lot of motivation for my future projects.





It is hard to explain exactly how my month on Cousin island was. In a way, I can just say: wow! and in another way I have so much to tell.

I will remember all I learned about the people, the natural reserve, fauna and flora and I hope to continue this work because nature is astonishing in many ways.

I would like to thank Nature Seychelles for giving me this opportunity. Applause for Yan for giving me his time and teaching me all he knows.

Thanks to the staff, to my colleagues and the wardens for their incredible help, for sharing with me and for the fun activities during our free time.

*One more tortoise counted and marked
Charline (L) and Yan (R)
(photo by Claude Lahausse)*

*I heard a tortoise
purr with pleasure,
well, almost*

by Jim Yule



Giant Aldabra Tortoise on Cousin
© Yule

I have a background in technology, for thirty years I have been involved in the telecommunications industry, as such I have no formal education in regards to conservation or the environment.

This lack of knowledge caused me some trepidation before arriving on Cousin Island, I imagined everybody else would be fully au fait with the wildlife and conservation methodology, fortunately this was not the case.

Upon arrival my fears were fully allayed by the Conservation Boot Camp coordinator Yan, his relaxed manner and his method of imparting knowledge works from the lowest common denominator upwards, whilst still getting across all the relevant information.

The first day we had terrible weather, the rain just didn't stop. This didn't dampen our enthusiasm, and once on the island, we had an orientation tour of some of the areas that we would be working, while also glimpsing some of the animals that we would be studying.

The program is well structured, the first week introduces you to the various animals and the method for recording the relevant data, all under Yan's watchful eye.





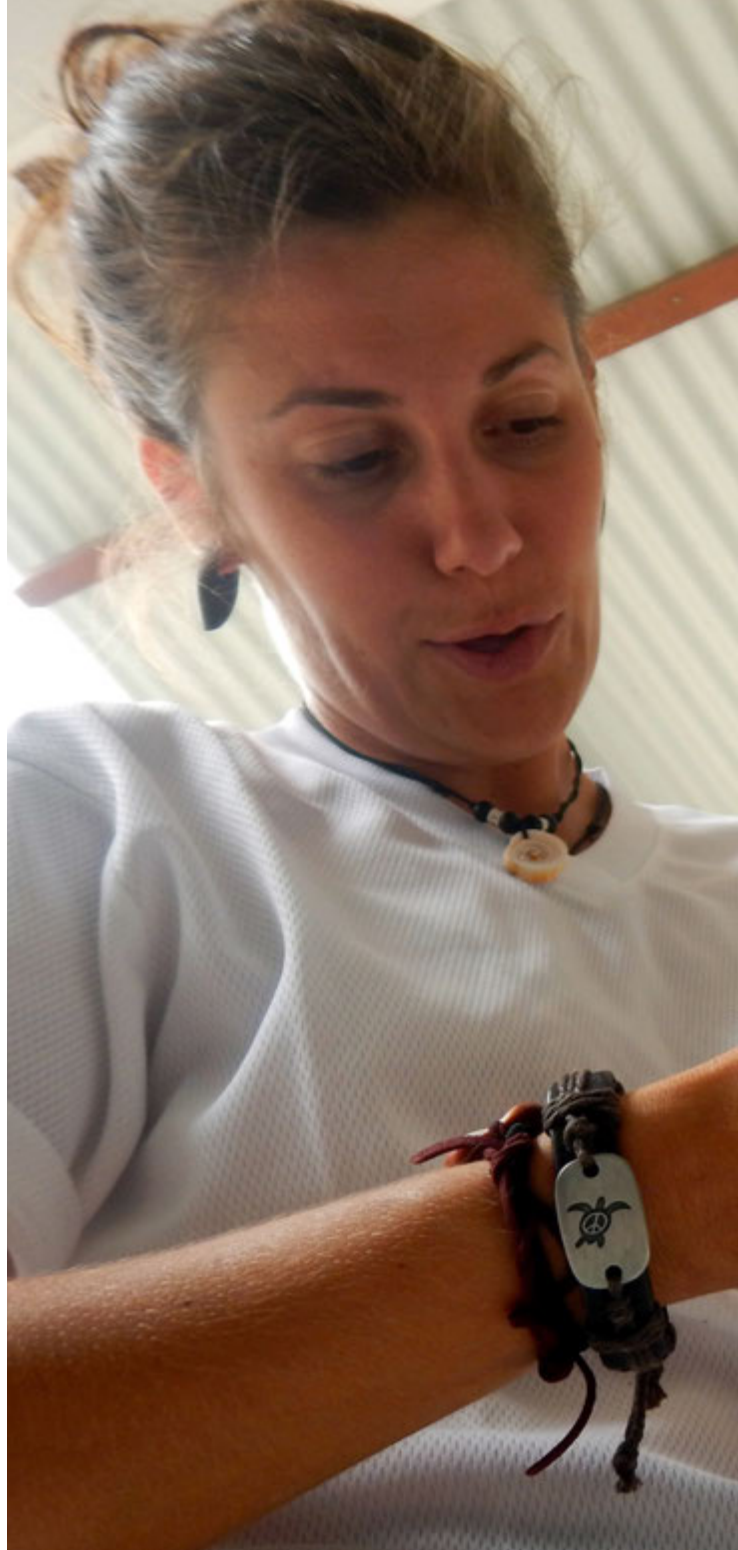
US Charges d'Affaires, Melanie Zimmerman (looking into whitetailed tropicbird's nest), toured Cousin's forest with CBC participants when she visited in August (photo by Jedida Oneko)

The next week more animals are added, whilst you continue to capture the data from the first week, with a little less supervision, but help always available if you need it.

The third and fourth weeks you are trusted to make the observations fully on your own, realising that the accuracy of your work is very important as wrong data can skew a whole study.

Even in the latter weeks further skills are being added such as beach profiling, where we survey the beaches around the island and ascertain the shape of the beach. This is due to the way the island is subjected to the waves and tidal erosion between the seasons. Whole beaches move around the island, even within my short time on Cousin I observed changes to the size and shapes of many beaches.

The experience has been very interesting for me, I now have a far more developed understanding of the perils it takes for a bird to get its egg to a fully-fledged chick ready for adulthood, I have seen how sometimes nature can be very cruel in blowing tiny chicks from the nest, but on a positive note I have discovered just how much giant tortoises like to have their necks and legs rubbed, you can almost hear them purr.





These baby Giant tortoise are not so easy to spot out and about on the island. (photo by Yan Coquet)




Egg, Fluff, Fledge

by Charmain Yule



Lesser noddy chick
© Yule





Over the last few weeks I have gone to sleep and woken up with the sound of the sea, and the lesser noddies chatting away in the forest. I have walked approximately 143 miles around, up-down and over an island that is about 1.3km wide and 1.7km long, but odd shaped. I have seen approximately 1400 tourists visit and wander about learning about this island and why it is important.

My morning routine first thing is to head to the toilet outside and on my way I say good morning to the birds (Seychelles Fody) trying to come inside, the skinks who like to sleep on our deck and the Moorhen and chicks running about. Tortoise number 6 and tortoise number 2 get a good morning scratch on their necks, and of course I say good morning to the Noddies and Fairy Terns in the trees.

Through the Conservation Boot Camp I have had a chance to experience conservation on a tropical island paradise. I've been reminded how important water and power are. We have water when there has been enough rain, and the island is run on solar power 95% of the time - no sun, no power.

Everyday was different and interesting. I helped in bird census, breeding success and watched eggs become fluffy chicks and then slowly transform into adults.

A whitetailed tropicbird must first conquer the sea before it reaches for the sky 🌊 Yule

*Don't count on staying dry if you're on beach profiling duty
photo by Yan Coquet*





It is hard when chicks fall out of the nests as we are not allowed to interfere but let nature take its course. So you always hope mum finds her chick, keeps feeding it and can raise it to adulthood.

I was very lucky to see a white-tailed tropicbird start its journey to being an adult. These birds are raised on nests on the ground and make their way to the sea by walking, this can take up to two days depending on how far they need to go. They don't fly until after they have started floating on the sea. With over 18 types of birds (seabirds, land birds and endemic birds) on the island there is a lot to take in and always something new to see.

To help raise awareness of the success of Cousin Island, tourists are allowed on the island for an eco-guided tour for two hours each day between Monday and Friday. We join the tours and get a chance to share what we have learned with the tourists.

The part no one enjoyed was when the mosquitoes in the forest decided we were a nice snack. My two favourite activities were beach profiling and the tortoise census.

I bet you didn't know little tortoises can move very fast and like to climb up the high rocky part of the island. During August the Giant Tortoises are counted, those that can be found, and these guys move about the island a lot.

I am sad I will miss seeing the Hawksbill Turtles come ashore to nest, they are beautiful to see whilst snorkelling. Maybe I will have to come back for another Conservation Boot Camp period.



all Wildlife & Vegetation

as if I stepped through a portal into the past

Kenna Valles



Apart from Conservation work, boat pushing is one of the many tasks CBC participants help with - its not just a job for the wardens (photo by Jedida Oneka)

From the moment my toes squished deep into the white powder sand, I was hooked. Arriving on Cousin Island was like stepping through a portal to the past, to a time when the world was all wildlife and vegetation. All I could see was a beautiful postcard beach, a thick forest, and more birds than I have ever seen in my entire life.

I participated in the Conservation Boot Camp program in the month of July, which is when this small island is home to over 300,000 birds. Cousin Island also has the largest population of skinks, and one of the most important nesting site for Hawksbill Turtles in the Western Indian Ocean Region, so no matter what time of the year, you will see animals everywhere.

I have learned more than I imagined I would in one month, and I am sure all this information will be useful for obtaining a great job in the future.

During my month on Cousin, I monitored the breeding success of Lesser and Brown Noddies, took invertebrate samples, monitored the Magpie-Robin population, performed beach profiling, took a census of seabirds, was shown how to properly hold and ring birds and take blood samples, and guided visitors on a tour through the forest.

Invertebrate pitfall sampling - are there enough birds for the birds on the island (photo by Yan Coquet)





It is a lot of work, but the way I see it, more work, more experience.

Another great career opportunity this program provides is creating connections with conservationists, marine biologists and environmentalists.

Meeting Nature Seychelles' Chief Executive was a really fantastic opportunity as not many CEO's take the time out of their busy schedules to meet with volunteers. It is great to have the chance to get career advice from someone high up in this field. He definitely gave me useful guidance on the direction to proceed in after I leave Cousin.

While conservationists may not live a very luxurious life and spend most of their time doing difficult, and often stressful, work, it is one of the most rewarding careers. This is how I felt while working on Cousin Island.

My favorite part about working on Cousin is how friendly the animals are. The wildlife on this island has been protected for many years, and it is clear to see they know they have little to fear from humans.

Every time I was in the forest doing field work, I would have at least one Seychelles Skink crawl on my legs or shoulders. All you have to do is whistle in the forest, and the Seychelles

*Watching what the warbler researchers do with the birds
(photo by Kenna Valles)*





Magpie Robins will fly closer; some will even come as close as less than a meter away from you. Many of the giant tortoises enjoy being scratched on their neck. Every day, there are even a few Seychelles Fodies that will fly in and around the house.

While not all the birds are comfortable being around people, most won't even fly away when you are directly next to their nest. Even though these are all still wild animals, I had the opportunity to have close contact with many of them.

The Conservation Boot Camp and living on Cousin Island for one month was an amazing and unique experience.

I am very sad to have to leave. Not only was the work fun and interesting, but I created numerous happy memories and spent time with some awesome people. I hope one day I might be able to come back to Cousin Island in the future, but during the sea turtle nesting season.

CBC participants get to work on a project useful to the island running or conservation work - Julian (L) and Kenna (R) took up where Nikita left off - signage of trees found in the forest (photo by Yan Coquet)





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