

A person with dark skin and curly hair, wearing a blue tank top, is kneeling on a sandy beach. They are using a blue measuring tape to measure the length of a large sea turtle's carapace. The turtle is lying on the sand, and its head is visible in the foreground. The background shows a sandy beach with some driftwood and a body of water in the distance.

Conservation

Boot Camp

stories from the field

issue 3

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CONSERVATION BOOT CAMP™

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cover photos by Yan Coquet

Chief Executive

Something New and Something Bright in 2018

Dr Nirmal Jivan Shah



Things are not falling apart in the world. If we step back from the gory headlines and the prophecies of gloom we see that there are bright spots of all kinds all over the world. The incredible Cousin Island Special Reserve and the remarkable conservation and education work of Nature Seychelles are such bright spots.

This year we are celebrating 20 years of existence of Nature Seychelles and 50 years of Cousin as a Nature Reserve. These are enormous events for us and to commemorate them we are rolling out several innovations for our Conservation Boot Camp program that will surely excite people.

Having had feedback from many interested parties who are working full time or otherwise engaged we are now offering a unique two week session, contrasting with the normal one month program. Whilst this may not provide the total conservation immersion experience on Cousin Island Special Reserve, we believe it would suit the busy person who just cannot spend one whole month away. You still spend quality time on an astonishingly restored and beautiful tropical island reserve undertaking a unique conservation experience with enthusiastic local and international conservationists.

The African Heritage package is another new product under the Conservation Boot Camp.

It offers the one month program at a wonderful 25% discount to a citizen of any African country.

We want to increase regional integration and collaboration and we think this may help. We would like our African brothers and sisters to experience a very successful African protected area and to leave with the strong belief that they can indeed save species and ecosystems in their lifetime.

Thirdly, we are offering an excellent Partnership package to staff of any Birdlife International Partner outside Africa. This is a super 25% discount on the 1 month program. Nature Seychelles is the Birdlife Partner in Seychelles and has advanced the Birdlife conservation agenda tremendously by saving the most critically endangered birds in Seychelles and by cascading this model to others. We want to introduce Cousin Island Special Reserve which Birdlife calls “one of the world’s great conservation success stories” to our colleagues working in the Birdlife Partnership.

We at Nature Seychelles are optimistic about conservation and environmental protection in general. Indeed, these are very exciting times for us and we want to share our enthusiasm with others. Please do take advantage of these phenomenal offerings and join us on the CBC adventure.

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What is the Conservation Boot Camp

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 on a tropical island paradise.

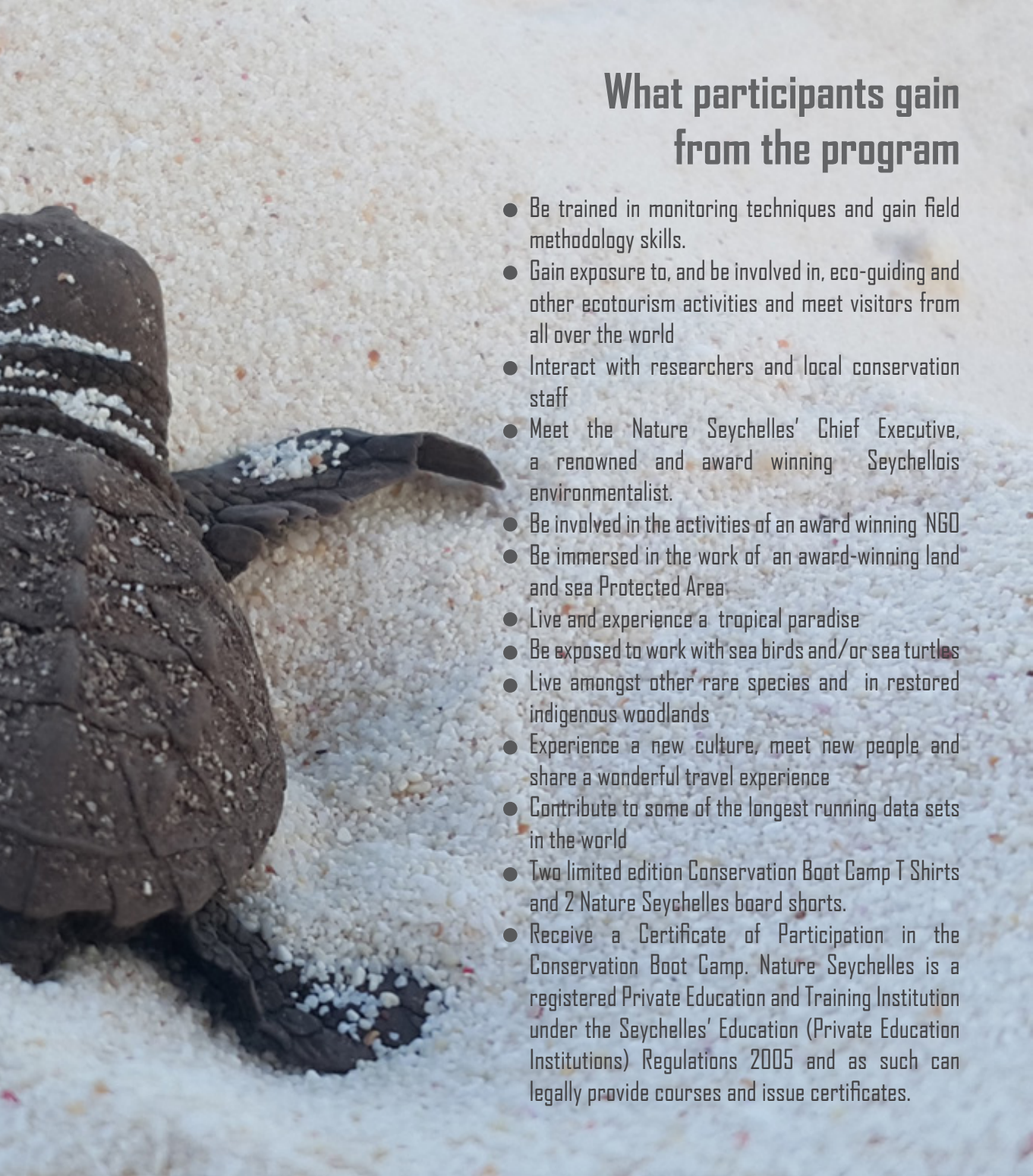
Participants will gain a much coveted practical experience “learning by doing” with field staff and researchers on a world renowned and award-winning protected area.

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.



*A Hawksbill Turtle hatchling heads out to sea.
photo by Alex*

A large tortoise, likely a Galapagos tortoise, is shown from the side, resting on a sandy beach. The tortoise's dark, scaly shell and limbs are visible. The sand is light-colored and covered with numerous small, white, oval-shaped eggs, some of which are scattered around the tortoise's feet and shell. The background is a bright, overexposed beach scene.

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.

A new dynamic in conservation

by Kara Beggs, Science Coordinator





Tortoise selfies are probably the most commonly taken on Cousin Island by both staff and tourists

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I have worked with many volunteer organizations in the past, as well as projects in the field yet the Conservation Boot Camp is a new dynamic for me to work with. This program seems to be that missing aspect of structured field work training, in biological research and conservation through wildlife and reserve management.

I brief participants on the conservation work giving them a good description through presentations of what we are going to do in the field; this is essentially a classroom like setting. This seems to be the smallest fraction of learning, as you cannot brief on exactly how the wildlife will 'cooperate' in the field. The understanding and knowledge gained from experience in the field is something you can only read so much about. You just need to be submerged right into it to really 'get it.'

Once we are out monitoring in the field, there is a feeling that our participants get when they walk through the forest observing something like a Seychelles magpie robin. This iconic bird will

*Emma jones working on the weekly schedule
photo by Kara Beggs*





	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	NEXT MEET #
06/15/20	Emma	Kara	Yan	Emma	Annam	Alex	Alex	24
06/22/20	Tagg	Brian	Kara	Kara	Yan	Tagg	Anna	Week Next
06/29/20	Annam	Darius	Annam	Toyer	Emma	Annam	Kara	#3
07/06/20	Tagg	Leras	Yan	Richie	Tagg	Alex	Alex	Female Meet
07/13/20	Annam	Annam	Annam	Annam	Annam	Alex	Alex	#3
07/20/20	Emma	Emma	Emma	Emma	Emma	Jovani?	Tagg	Photo
07/27/20	Annam	Tagg	Alex	Tagg	Emma	Anna		
08/03/20	Yan	Oriel	TAAG	Oriel	Alex	Eli		
08/10/20	Jovani	Tagg	Yan	Annam	Alex			
08/17/20	Richie	Emma	Chris	Jovani?	Jovani?	Tagg		

High Tide Centered around 3x patrols warning



fly to the closest tree branch and intricately observe our team, just as we observe it.

Questions begin to flow and discussions of say coloured rings, stress calls and courtship dances form the basis for learning. This is my favourite part of working with the participants.

Taking each new set of participants out into the field for the first time and being able to witness their understanding in research and conservation for the first time on a protected 'special reserve,' is truly something special.

You cannot read about mosquitos covering your hands while trying to look through binoculars for the colour bands on birds' legs which have sometimes started to fade, yet you need to identify each individual bird by their unique colour set.

How quickly tortoises of different ages actually move while you are trying to get the exact measurements of their carapace. Or the stubborn female hawksbill turtles that will spend hours digging and moving around looking for that perfect spot to lay, while you must sit perfectly still, monitoring their behaviour and prepare for those eggs to drop into a soil chamber.



photos: (opposite page) a clutch of turtle eggs ; (above) if a turtle comes to nest the tag number which is unique to each individual is noted and if she does not have one she is tagged (photos by Kara Beggs)

For me it is the tacit and sometimes frustrating and confusing experiences gained in the field, that you can never train for, that mould you as a successful conservationist. It also adds to science learning that you never get in a classroom setting. It is something you will only ever understand through a real-world sort of experience and not only text book learning, and which will help across all fields of conservation, anywhere in the world. You can witness a great variety of wildlife dynamics here that, it makes the whole program of 'work' unexpected, fun and exciting.

It is important to have an open mind going out into the field, knowing what you are meant to do, but be prepared for anything and learn from everything. One of the important things I try to stress is that even though we are a small protected ecosystem here on Cousin, we are still dealing with wildlife, key word being 'wild'.

The process that goes into ringing a white-tailed tropicbird, and experiencing seabird ringing, or applying a metal ring for future identification. photo by Yan Coquet







Third Time's a Charm

by Emma Jones



*Emma training turtle helpers on how to monitor and collect data on nesting Hawksbill turtles
photo by Yan Coquet*

I am very lucky to have called Cousin Island Special Reserve my home three times now. I first arrived here in June 2015, as a volunteer for the seabird breeding season. I had not long graduated with a degree in animal biology and wanted some hands-on experience in the conservation field.

During my first few months here I quickly learnt how to monitor breeding seabirds, collect data on the impressive Aldabra Giant Tortoise and assisted with the ringing of our beautiful Seychelles Magpie Robins.

As my first volunteer placement came to an end, the idea of leaving this paradise island was a genuinely sad prospect. I was offered the chance to return the following turtle season and thanks to some previous volunteer work during my university studies, I was given the role of Team Leader for the turtle nesting season of 2015-16. I couldn't say yes fast enough!

*Emma on White-tailed tropicbird monitoring
duty photo by Kara Beggs*







photos: (above) Clearing the forest of Ratstail, an invasive plant species which can become quite rampant if not done regularly. Photo by Kara Beggs; (opposite) beach profiling, a hot and wet job that must be done monthly photo by Yan Coquet

I returned in late 2015 to help in the training and organization of the volunteers during a very busy but incredibly enjoyable turtle season which saw me get in depth training on turtle biology and conservation, land/sea bird research and invasive plant control by the Science Coordinator on the island.

This was easily some of the most enjoyable months I've had and a very fast learning curve in conservation research and field work.

All too soon, late January of 2016 came around and it was time to say goodbye to Cousin Island for the second time. I was incredibly sad to be leaving as I had spent a large amount of 2015 living and working here and I had made some lovely friends in both the staff and locals. I hadn't made a plan to return yet and I wasn't sure if I'd ever get to see this tiny island again.

Fast forward almost 2 years and there's an email in my inbox from Cheryl Sanchez, the previous Science Coordinator. She told me that she had left the island and handed over to her replacement Kara Beggs, and that they were looking for an assistant to come out and lend a hand as we approached the turtle season of 2017.

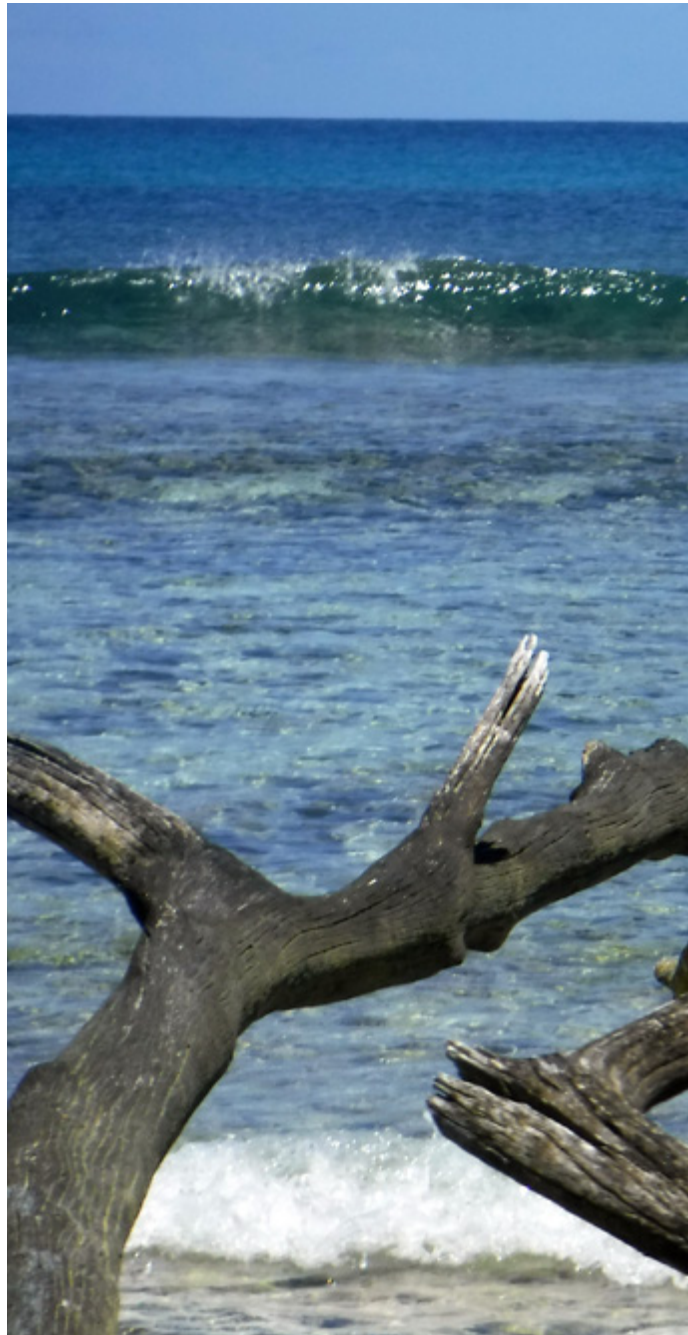


She had recommended me as the person for the job! I received a job description from Kara that I barely managed to read before I was firing off an email accepting the offer.

I was soon on a plane back to the Seychelles. This time as the Conservation Management assistant. I was to be working closely with Kara in all aspects of the conservation and scientific research on the island as well as with the rest of the management team to deliver training and assistance to a new and exciting program on the island; the Conservation Boot Camp.

So far this season I have assisted in turtle tag training, seabird ringing and census, invertebrate research and studying the seasonal changes to the beach topography to name just a few! Coming back to Cousin Island and seeing it from a new perspective has been incredible. To be pursuing a career in conservation and gaining experience in such a unique and important place really is a 'dream come true'.

Once my stay here ends for the third time, I will be leaving with even more special memories and a wealth of expert training. I don't think I've had enough of this little paradise yet and with any luck, I'll return again someday





Brown noddie on a branch. This seabird is known to be social when feeding but less so during breeding season which on Cousin (and other granitic and coralline islands) is between May and November. photo by Yan Coquet



strangely

by _____



magical

Annam Raza

The landscape on Cousin sometimes looks like something out of a fairy tale. photo by Annam Raza



On my very first day here, as Yan painstakingly explained how to recognize hawksbill turtle tracks on the sand, we ran into the real thing just as she was digging herself an egg chamber. I kicked off my shoes and dropped facedown on the sand: a couple of hours later, I had seen my very first turtle nesting. Not a bad way to start my month as a Conservation Boot Camp participant.

This place is strangely magical. It is crawling with biodiversity: skinks darting around underfoot as you walk through the dense forest, filled with birds flitting through treetop. Humans are vastly outnumbered, and sometimes on turtle patrol it felt like I was the only person around, with just my faithful little waterproof turtle bag for company.

Clambering over the rocks, it was easy to ignore the house behind me and choose instead to look at the trees in the distance, or the ghost crabs scuttling over the beach (always hurrying somewhere).

*Fieldwork is never boring on Cousin Island,
photo by Yan Coquet*





The island itself seems alive, with sands shifting and beaches changing shape even over the few short weeks that I've been here.

In an overwhelmingly bleak global climate, Cousin Island is a breath of fresh air. After all the news articles declaring coral reefs dead and our rainforests doomed, it is a relief to realize that conservation can succeed. Cousin is an incredible success story—the Seychelles warbler is thriving, and it isn't the only one. I've never seen so much wildlife in one place!

Brittle stars waved their arms under the rocks as we dashed across at low tide to scramble around on cannon rocks. A fairy tern chick peeked out from under its mother, delicately balanced on a branch. The smooth surface of the ocean was broken by leaping dolphins at almost the same time every day (and once, even by a breaching eagle ray). I'm still acutely aware of the problems our world faces but being here reminds me of why we need to solve them.

*White terns lay their eggs on branch crevices and once hatched the chicks also balance delicately on tree branches waiting patiently to be fed.
photo by Yan Coquet*





I've worked in labs, under fluorescent lights with a white coat on and dead specimens pickled in pure ethanol, as well as with crustaceans isolated into individual tanks, hand fed and cleaned every other day.

As much as I loved that work, I wanted to be able to interact with the real world, and started searching for actual field experience.

I had been to Seychelles on vacation and fallen in love (not a difficult process, considering the way this place looks). My search for local conservation work led me to Nature Seychelles, and I immediately applied to the Conservation Boot Camp program.

Before coming, I was scared. Even with an academic background in the field, I was still incredibly sheltered. So much of my education was limited to textbooks and microscopes.

I was convinced I wasn't going to be able to handle it: I wouldn't be physically fit enough, that I would twist my ankle on the third day and spend the rest of my

*One of the many Giant Aldabra Tortoises that call
Cousin Island home
photo by Malena Mogwitz*





time in bed, that I would somehow just fail at all the tasks.

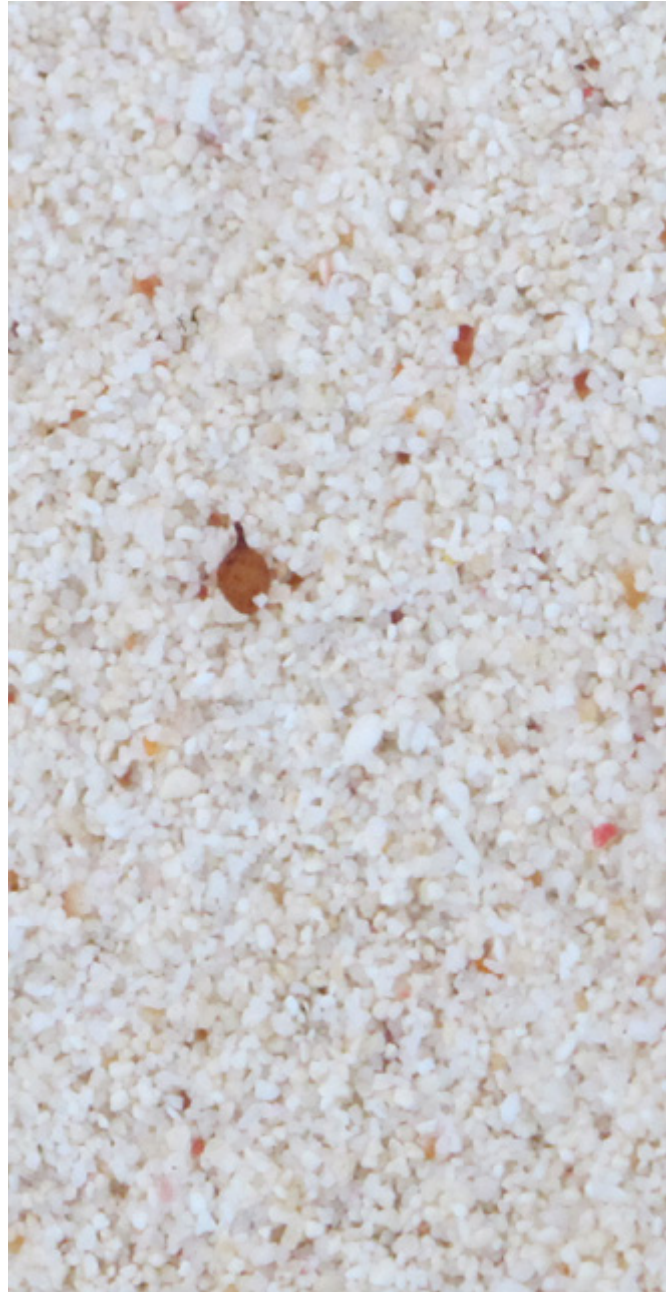
Thankfully, none of that turned out to be true. One of the more useful things I learned in recent weeks is that my skills are transferable. Although I didn't have any actual bird or reptile experience, my education had taught me to recognize patterns that enabled me to pick up on things quickly.

I'm going to miss this place and all the wildlife that live here. Once, I was lying facedown in the dirt watching a turtle dig its nest. Instead of staring at every flick of the turtle's flipper (which I did initially), I watched a sunbird dart around in front of me.

Slightly above us was a Seychelles warbler, well camouflaged against the green of the leaves. The turtle got up to dig another nest, and an opportunistic magpie-robin hopped down to feast on the insects she had uncovered.

Three endangered species within metres of each other- and it was just another day on Cousin.

*From beach to forest, in the sky or in the sea,
there's always an opportunity to learn about wildlife
behaviour photo by Annam Raza*







One of the many stunning views on Cousin Island. photo by Malena Mogwitz

postcard picture neighbourhood

by Malena Mogwitz



T

The first thing I hear when I wake up is the murmur of the sea and birds' singing in the forest. As soon as I step out I am immersed in nature.

Directly in front of me, the view is of a white sandy beach, the vast blue sea and some green hills further off. I watch the sun rise higher in the sky aware that the forest behind me has been awake for a long time.

Then I'm off to the 'neighbourhood' so I pick up my bag and clipboard. I picture how cold and grey it is back in Europe in contrast to the warmth of the sun here by 6.30 in the morning.

Soon afterwards, I spot some tracks on the beach and notice that there is only one pair of tracks which means she must still be here.

*'office work' on Cousin Island
photo by Malena Magwitz*





Now I have to pay attention because if she minds that I am around she could get scared and go straight back to sea without laying her eggs. And all her efforts would have been for nothing. So I approach her carefully and notice that she is still digging her nest.

This is a typical start to the day on Cousin Island for me as a participant of the Conservation Boot Camp program. It makes getting up so early well worth it. The conservation work is varied and there is a lot to discover - the views remind me of picturesque landscapes I have only seen in postcards.

Towards the end of my one month on Cousin, it was a really great experience to be allowed to take on the responsibility of giving a guided tour to a group of visitors.

It was interesting being able to talk to the tourists about the wildlife on Cousin and also satisfying to know I could coordinate a group of tourists.

On Cousin Island, surrounded by nothing but forest, sea and beach I am in my

element. I love to discover unique aspects of nature, far away from hotels, luxuries or cities

It is an incredible experience to be allowed to contribute to the protection of endemic species such as the Seychelles Magpie Robin while learning a lot about scientific field methods. I will never forget this experience.

And for those who are attentive, there will always be surprises on this island, like fluorescent plankton in the sea at night, a turtle coming out of the sea with the last light of the sun or a baby tortoise that is so small that it fits in the palm of your hands.

I will leave the island with a bagfull of really enriching experiences, adventures in nature, knowledge and facts, as well as practical experience - and of course the enjoyable moments with my colleagues.

Thank you Cousin!

*Some work is carried out at night - bridled tern
monitoring photo by Malena Magwitz*





playing detecti

by Charlotte C



ive in paradise

Courrière

Invertebrate pitfall sampling, photo by Charlotte Courrière.

The boat trip to the island puts you straight into Cousin Island's atmosphere. It was nothing like I have ever experienced before! The boat accelerates and then glides onto a pristine beach.

As soon as I arrived on Cousin Island Special Reserve I was ready to discover its inhabitants – mostly wildlife but people too - while contributing to the conservation work on the island.

The place is a real paradise on earth. Right from day one, I knew my stay would be too short.

After a week of training, I was on my own searching for hawksbill turtles coming to or from laying their eggs. I always felt as if I was doing some detective work.

When there are only turtle tracks and no turtle in sight, you have to play Sherlock Holmes. What track goes up the beach and which one goes back to the sea? What path did she use? Did she lay?

At the height of turtle nesting season on Cousin there are always turtle tracks on the beach photo by Kara Beggs





On the other hand, if you see only one track going towards the forest, the turtle is still there. And then it is time for a commando mission, the turtle must not see me. I progress slowly up the track, crawling in the sand or by hiding behind trees. That's it, I see her, she is laying. I quietly get closer and lie behind her, ready to count her eggs and take the necessary measurements.

Then I go back hiding while waiting for her to finish and watch her go back to her natural element, the sea. What a touching moment, I can't help but have a smile on my face.

Cousin Island is full of birds, which will constitute, together with the turtles, the other big part of the missions which I participated in during my time in the Conservation Boot Camp. Leaving early in the morning to observe the Seychelles Magpie-Robin or at the end of the day, when night falls, on the hill for Wedged-tail shearwaters and bridled terns censuses.

Being able to hold a bird in my hands, taking measurements and making sure that everything is ok, is just an experience that I will never forget.

*The iconic Seychelles Magpie-Robin enjoying a skink snack
photo by Charlotte Courrière*









wildlife and humans: who's watching who?

by David Malacan

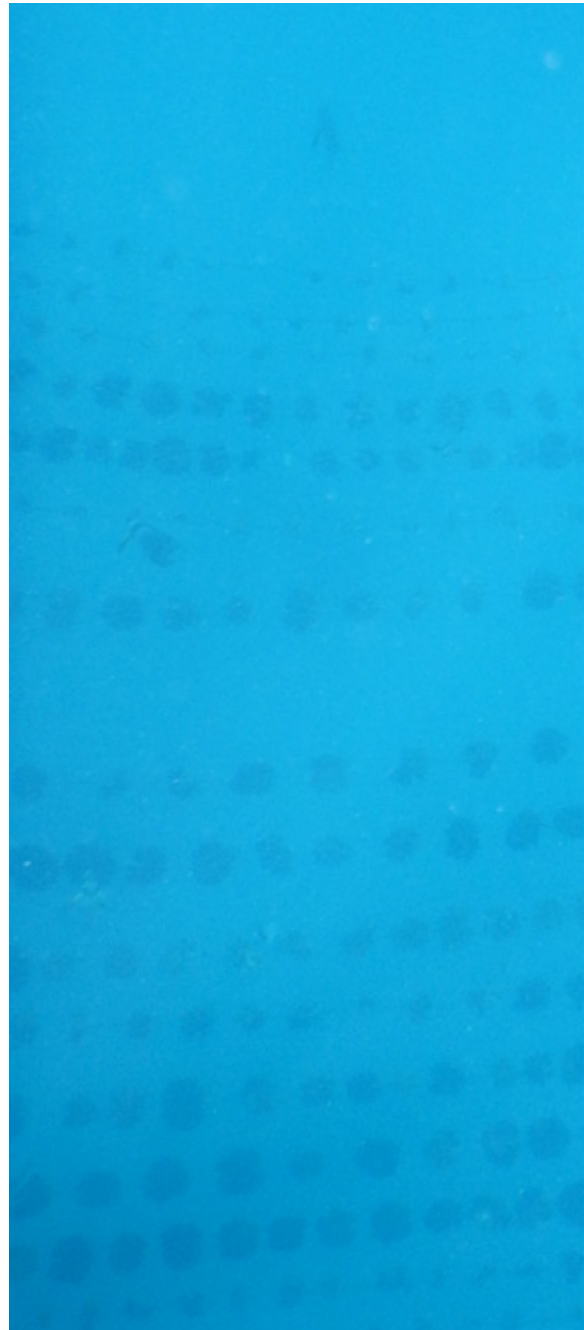
TI was laying on my comfortable couch in front of the television when I first heard about Nature Seychelles. The documentary I was watching was describing the daily work of the Reef Rescuers team, who are working to restore coral reefs in the Seychelles.

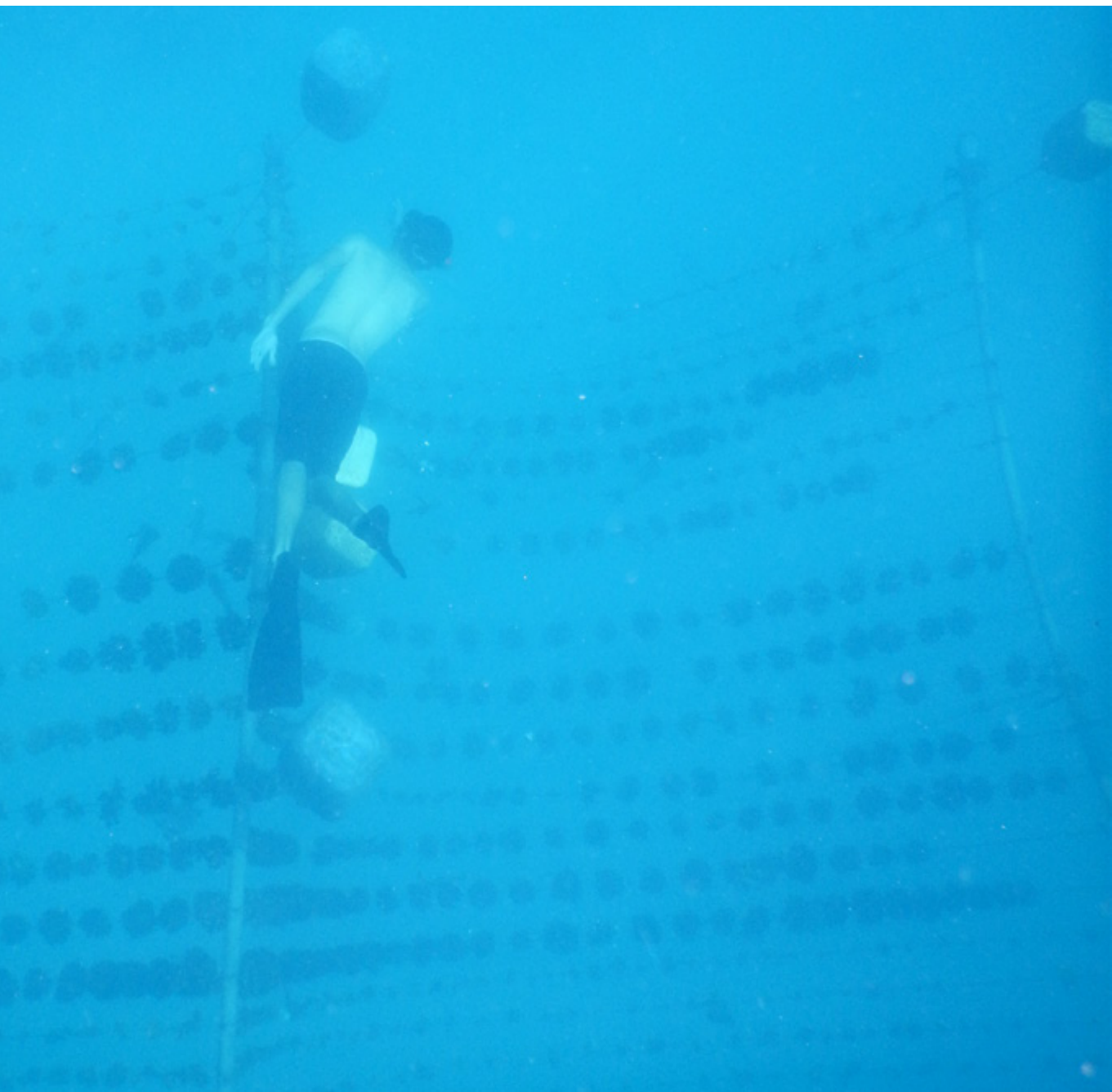
I thought to myself ‘this looks like heaven, and it’s about saving one of the most important species in the ocean! How can I get there and get involved?’ Six months later I arrived on Cousin Island to join the Conservation Boot Camp program.

My first impression was “Wow, Bird Land really exists”. Within a few minutes I discovered It was also giant tortoise land, lizard land and... mosquito land. But this did not matter, a good mosquito repellent will do the trick.

And what about the corals? Working with the Reef Rescuers team was only a fraction of my duties. In fact, those in the Conservation Boot Camp do not usually work with Nature Seychelles’ Reef Rescuers, but since this was my main interest and I had all the Scientific training and diving qualifications, an exception was made for me.

*Nature Seychelles Reef Rescuers project is the largest scale coral restoration program in the world
photo by Yan coquet*





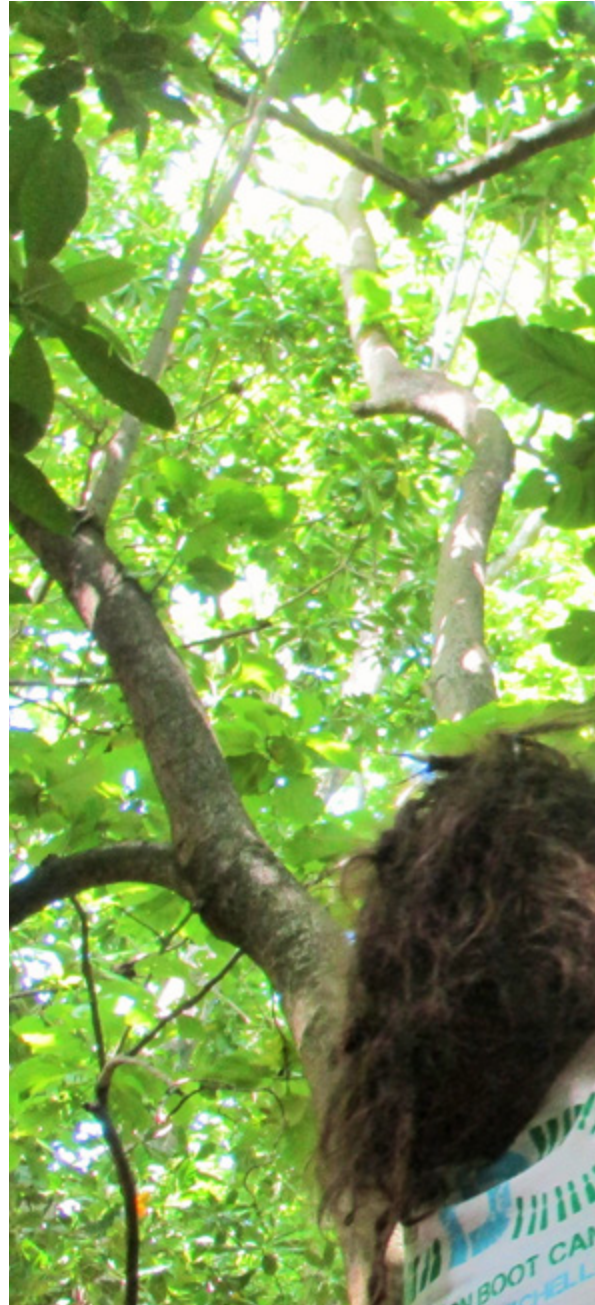
Under the guidance of the program coordinator, I learned the basics of the conservation work carried out on Cousin including bird census and ringing, wildlife monitoring, inveterbrate pit sampling and beach profiling.

My first experience, during the first two weeks, was the observation of the Magpie Robin which in the end became my favourite bird on this island. This smart bird is easy to observe and interact with. Actually now I'm not sure who was observing who, it sometimes felt like they were also closely watching my every move.

Then there was the skink census. I enjoyed this task because it was like some kind of treasure hunt, using a compass and a map. And the treasure was green geckos that are very difficult to find.

I also participated to the ringing of White-tailed tropic bird, where I learned how to hold and put the rings on the birds' legs. The beach profiling was done on the third week. It was a bit different from the other activities because it was not in the forest, so thankfully no mosquitos, plus, I also had the chance to improve my tan.

The Seychelles Magpie-Robin nests in natural tree cavities on Cousin Island but hanging some Nest boxes gives them more options. Photo by Chris Tagg





And finally the last week we began the invertebrate pit sampling which was divided in 2 parts: collecting a sample of earth and then sorting the insects by size.

All these activities were alternated with turtle patrol and coral nursery cleaning. The coral nursery cleaning consists of cleaning the string where the coral grows in order to remove seaweeds and barnacles between each piece of coral.

This activity is quite static and requires some focusing while you control your breathing - conditions suitable for meditation.

Now that I'm at the end of the fourth week, I realise that I've been living a wonderful experience that made me understand a little bit more how nature works and why it is important to protect her. Sea and land are intimately linked and the conservation of both is essential.

Even wildlife watch each other, for very different reasons photo by Malena Magwitz







human connections through wildlife conservation

by Yan Coquet,
Conservation Boot Camp program coordinator



*Everyone lends a hand in boat pushing when needed
photo by Yan Coquet*

After long days in the field monitoring the biodiversity along with the participants of the Conservation Boot Camp program, I fall asleep with the sound of the waves breaking on the beach along with either the Noddies or White Tern's squeaky and smooth calls. And I wake up with the same atmosphere.

I have had the opportunity to learn a lot about Cousin Wildlife and what I love most is to be able to share my knowledge and passion with the Conservation Boot Camp participants, who are always excited to learn.

Working on a tropical island can seem paradisiac and relaxing but we work hard to keep this heavenly place and its inhabitants safe and in 'good health'.

We patrol the beach under a dazzling sun, we climb up the granitic hill to count birds, we dig in the forest for samples and on top of this, when we have a free moment, and the energy of course, we go snorkelling, shoot photos or wander off for a mini adventure.

*Yan (centre) on beach profiling duty with Conservation
Boot Camp participants
photo by Chris Tagg*





During the program, I constantly keep contact with the participants to know how they feel about their day or about the program so far. It's such a pleasure to be able to experience conservation on this special nature reserve with people who appreciate the importance of these moments.

Most of the Conservation Boot Camp participants very quickly become hooked to this daily experience. They might be exhausted some days but one can see in their eyes the satisfaction of a day full of discoveries and encounters. Some also seem to love it so much that they do not want to leave the island.

The program has so far welcomed participants from all over the world including France, Germany, UK, USA, Pakistan, South Africa, New Zealand, India, Belgium and Switzerland. Each person comes with their ideas about conservation and nature superimposed on their unique cultural background and lifestyle. What we all share is our love for nature. When they leave the island, they take with them a bag full of knowledge, experience, consciousness, that is Cousin's speciality.

Cousin Island wardens in a souvenir photo after one of the regular management meetings with Eric Blais, Island coordinator (back row, far right); & Dr Nirmal Shah, Chief Executive (back row, 2nd right). Photo by Annam Raza





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