

## THE COASTAL WETLANDS & CLIMATE CHANGE PROJECT

### A Community Outreach Case Study



Seagrass bed in Seychelles' waters. © Matthew Morgan

Focus Area: **Coastal Wetlands; specifically, seagrass meadows**  
 Scale: **Nation-wide**  
 Public Engagement type: 1. **Mass communication** including print, digital media and the Internet, social media, radio, and television. 2. **Public outreach**

About Seychelles:  
 The Seychelles is an archipelago of 115 islands in the Indian Ocean, off East Africa.  
 Population: Just over 99,000

### BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Long-term conservation success for any species co-existing alongside human beings requires engagement with associated communities. Absolute protectionism, which perhaps was once an easier option, is no longer viable as global population figures continue to rise and territories, both terrestrial and marine, are increasingly depended on to provide more homes, jobs, and economic prospects. Engagement approaches combine elements that link conservation with the daily lives of communities, making their members both shareholders and caretakers of their natural resources. This was an important aspect of the **Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change project** spearheaded by the Seychelles Conservation and Climate Change Adaptation Trust (SeyCCAT) in the Indian Ocean's Seychelles archipelago. The project, which kicked off at the beginning of 2020, aimed to incorporate carbon language in the country's climate action plans, notably its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), which entailed developing a validated map of Seychelles' seagrass and estimating its blue carbon stocks. Alongside the science component of the project was the community outreach element, which was essential in mobilising the islands' inhabitants to have an appetite for understanding and appreciating the importance of seagrass habitats and why it was crucial to protect them.

### THE YOUTH: AN IMPORTANT TARGET GROUP

The last estimate of the Seychelles' population was at 99,202 (June 2021, National Statistics Bureau), with almost 22% of it aged 14 and under. The youth demographic in Seychelles is an important target group for conservation efforts since its members are the future custodians of the island's natural resources. It was important for the project to introduce seagrass in a way which would be relatable and would entice interest. 'Introduce' is a relevant word since very little was known about seagrass on the islands outside the fishing community and that of marine biologists and conservationists. The extent of 'little' is depicted by the fact that seagrass did not have a native Seychellois-Creole name and it was often confused with seaweed.

*Unrecognised – with no name; so where do we start?*

The key, as the project discovered, was to link it to elements which were familiar to young people and which also had the potential to evoke various sentiments, such as sea turtles, fish, dugongs, sea urchins, corals, and other forms of marine life which they knew personally or had come to love because of Disney classics like 'Little Mermaid' or 'Finding Nemo'. Age-appropriate activity books were developed and designed, filled with dots-to-dots, crosswords, puzzles and word searches – all with an underlying theme; they are all connected to seagrass. They books were used as educational materials in a **Wonders of Gomon Roadshow** school outreach programme which the project carried out. Unfortunately, due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic in the past couple of years, only two editions of the roadshow took place. The first one was with a group of **13** school children who attended the 2020 Natural Museum Summer Holiday Club and the second with **27** members of the Anse Royale School Wildlife Club. Both sessions included seagrass presentations, sorting out seagrass specimens previously collected on beaches and delving into some



of the pages of the activity books. A field outing was featured on the calendar of activities for the second session where the students had a chance to snorkel over seagrass beds in the shallow waters of Anse Aux Pins beach. Aside from learning to identify seagrass in their natural habitats, this also provided a good opportunity to re-enforce the importance of not trampling over seagrass beds; a lesson which they could also share with families and friends on future beach outings.



### AN EXHIBITION; A SOURCE OF LEARNING

In November 2020, SeyCCAT commemorated its 5th anniversary by organising a week-long exhibition in the National Museum in the centre of the capital city. It was a great opportunity for the Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change project to exhibit materials depicting the beauty of seagrass and its importance to our existence. A corner at the exhibition was taken up with seagrass posters, seagrass and related biodiversity props, an aquarium and a photobooth for social media promotion. Being in the centre of town, which is also the business district of mainland Mahé, made the venue accessible to many people, some of whom were also able to attend lunch time presentations; three of which were dedicated to seagrass and mangroves. At the end of the week, over **400** visitors were recorded, half of which were from various schools from Mahé and the neighbouring island Praslin.



### SENTIMENTS SHARED THROUGH ART

The exhibition was an opportune time and place to launch the **'Voice of Seagrass Meadows'** Art and Poem competition for secondary school students. It was also a chance to measure what the students were able to take away from the exhibition. The **44** submissions received from five secondary schools confirmed that seagrass had occupied a place in young minds, with an affection and understanding of a marine plant they had just come to know starting to take shape. An e-book containing all the artwork submitted, and bearing the same name as the competition theme, was designed and published on SeyCCAT's website as a memento of the first seagrass engagement in a competition in Seychelles.



## OFFICIAL WORDS FOR SEAGRASS IN SEYCHELLOIS CREOLE

Seychelles is not the only country or territory where seagrass has had to play catch up with other types of coastal wetlands and other marine ecosystems. Globally, seagrass meadows have borne the brunt of disregard for coastal wetlands.

Mostly submerged under coastal waters, their lack of visibility has delayed the interest of scientists and researchers, and in turn, climate advocates and policy makers. Far more progress world-wide has been made on their neighbouring mangroves and saltmarshes ecosystems. Despite being late to the party, they certainly joined it with a bang, with early research providing estimates and information which put them on par with their better-known counterparts.

To most Seychellois, up until recently, anything plant-like which is green and comes from the sea has been categorised as *gomon*; be it seaweed or seagrass. Formally, seagrass did not have a creole name or term to define it. Fishermen had a name or two for it and so did marine biologists and conservationists.

*How can you entice affection for a plant species when it doesn't even have a name in the native tongue?*

It was imperative that seagrass received its formal debut in the creole language to successfully have people be mindful of it when they go for a swim in shallow waters or anchor their boats and jet skis along coastlines. The process for introducing new words officially in the creole language entailed submitting the suggested official words to the Creole Language Academy (Lakademi Langaz Kreol, which was set up under the umbrella of the Department of Culture). The Academy was then tasked with the responsibility of validating the selection and giving its seal of approval on the chosen words and terms.

*But, where would the suggestions come from?*

The avenue which was explored to collect existing and new names for seagrass and its five lifeforms, was like an alarm on snooze. Seagrass had been in the news and on social media since mid-2020, when one can argue the first alarm went off; seagrass exists, it matters, and must be protected. Any new development in seagrass news, be it local or international, was like a follow-up snooze, reminding people of the initial message and adding more content and context to it. Launching the campaign to identify official Seychellois creole terms was an exceptionally loud snooze because the project reached out to the public to contribute their ideas and suggestions. The public got the chance to re-visit all the bits of information which had been shared with them and engage in something fun: naming a plant!

Social media, print media, the radio and emails were all used to reach out to the public to engage in a survey.

A very important segment of the public which had to be consulted was local fishermen who undisputedly have a closer connection with the

54 Fisherman took part in the exercise to identify creole names for seagrass



## OUT OF THE SEA, AND INTO A UNIVERSITY LECTURE

A **dozen** second-year students of the BSc (Honours) Environmental Science programme, at the University of Seychelles (UniSEY) attended a seagrass lecture, presented by Dr Jeanne A Mortimer, the scientific consultant of the project.

The undergraduate degree consists of a broad and generalised programme with a special emphasis on tropical environments and environmental issues relating to small island states.

The students had come to know of seagrass following a marine ecology module in their first year, but the lecture provided further clarity on the complexity of the marine gomon family and their contribution to sustaining a healthy marine environment.

Seagrass has since been additionally incorporated in the programme's third-year module; Introduction to Geoinformatics and Field-studies, where special lectures on The wonders of Gomon Lanmer in Seychelles and Creole Names for Seagrass in Seychelles feature.

## VARYETE ZERB LANMER/GOMON ZERB DAN SESEL



ocean and its residents compared to the rest of the population. Fishermen in Seychelles often come from fishing families and are familiar with terms used as reference to all forms of marine life. As it turned out, according to them, there were already existing names for seagrass; they simply had not been made official.

**54** fishermen on Mahé and Praslin took part in the survey through the assistance of local district administrators who helped the project team to identify and locate the fishermen. The project team's inability to go out on the field was again due to covid-19 pandemic restrictions. Those names along with others which were collected from an additional **60** members of the public were assessed by an Emerald Committee made up of linguists, scientists and conservationists specifically set up to prepare a short list for submission to the Academy. Zerb lanmer and Gomon zerb were the two new terms jointly selected to be added to the Seychellois language, respecting both the scientific sense of seagrass as well incorporating its cultural significance.

## A WIDER OUTREACH THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

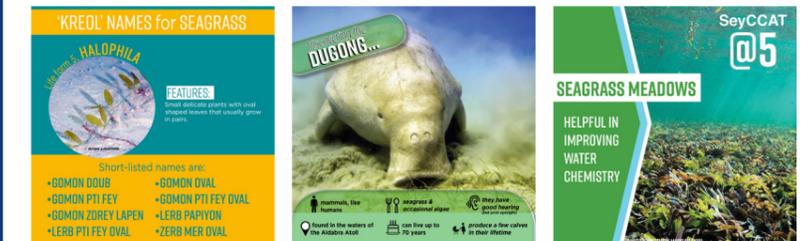


SeyCCAT's social media pages were the main platforms on which the Coastal Wetlands and Climate Change project reached out to the public.

Weekly posts amounting to over **200** new posts over the course of the project; some of which were lighthearted and others carrying important messages about the services rendered to us by seagrass meadows, entertained the Instagram 'followers', the Facebook 'friends' and the LinkedIn 'network'.

No attempt to reach the public or any targeted groups in communities with access to technology in the past decade or so has been made without the use of social media.

The project relied on the platforms' immediate and visible reach to various networks to raise awareness and entice engagement with the mass.



## THE PUBLIC IMPACT

Two years ago, very little was known about seagrass and its benefits to the country and the planet. The awareness raising campaign which also saw the production of videos and more recently, a United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries (UN-OHRLLS) podcast specific to Seychelles, has brought seagrass further up in the line of conservation topics with holiday school clubs requesting copies of the activity books to investors enquiring on carbon credit relating to coastal wetlands.

With the country's commitment to protect and manage 100% of its seagrass habitats by 2030 as outlined in its 2021 Nationally Determined Contribution submitted to the (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) UNFCCC, the full impact of the exercise will be better understood further down the line.

The assessment of this will include, but not limited to, the extent seagrass protection is integrated into local policies, a recorded decrease in damage due to human activities of seagrass closer to our coastlines and having local communities able to easily distinguish between seagrass and seaweed.

