
Seychelles News Agency (Victoria) »

6 APRIL 2015

Seychelles: A Move Towards Sustainable Tourism - Four Seasons Resort Seychelles Takes Ownership of Reef Restoration Project

By Sharon Meriton-Jean and Sharon Uranie

Baie Lazare — Almost seventeen years after the El Niño phenomenon caused massive coral bleaching across the globe, corals in Seychelles are said to be "healthy and recovering."

After a Seychelles-based study published in January this year indicated more than 90 percent of coral reefs in the Seychelles are slowly but surely recuperating, National Geographic expedition leader recently rated the Indian Ocean island nation's coral health among best in the world.

While corals have recuperated naturally across the Indian Ocean archipelago, several sites are yet to fully recover from the damaging effects of the natural phenomenon which caused the sea temperature to rise, causing corals to turn white and subsequently die.

The Petite Anse bay in the southern district of Baie Lazare on the main island of Mahe is one example where the marine ecosystem is striving to achieve a full recovery.

"It is difficult to know the effect of coral bleaching at Petite Anse, as there was no monitoring here before the El Niño in 1997 to 1998. We do know that the coral is in recovery, but it could be doing better," Caroline O'Grady, the Public Relations Manager of the Four Seasons Resort Seychelles, told SNA in an email.

O'Grady's comment followed the launching of the 'Petite Anse Reef Restoration Project' by the luxury hotel which is located adjacent to the small 'horseshoe' bay.

To increase the rate of coral growth in the area which covers over 10,000 square meters, the project is aiming to transplant an ambitious number of 16,000 coral fragments in the next two years.

"Small pieces of broken coral, often damaged by natural events like waves, will be collected from the ocean bed and bought on-land to the Coral Cabana [a specially designed building where the corals will be cleaned, doctored and assembled on the metal strips, ready to be taken to the underwater nursery]," explained the team working on the project.

"Following this, they will be returned to the sea, to the coral nursery, which comprised of coated iron frames that have been established in the bay to allow the corals to grow safely to a more robust size over 9 to 12 months."

The reef restoration project is a collaboration effort between the Four Seasons Resort Seychelles and WiseOceans an organisation specialising in Marine Education and Conservation.

O'Grady told SNA that the resort's staff and guests will also be invited to help transplant the grown corals back to the bay.

"All our guests will be invited to take part in coral propagation activities, and we hope that as many as possible will join in. We will have workshops twice a week, where they can get involved in preparing coral for the nursery and learning about the process," she added.

The project in its entirety is said to be costing some 50,000 euro (almost US \$55,000)

Coral-growing or coral-nursery projects are not new to the 115 islands archipelago. Through various partnership and funding, several non-governmental and private companies have pitched in to help coral growth.

One notable example is a coral replanting exercise at Amitie on the Seychelles second most populated island of Praslin, spearheaded by a local non-governmental organisation, Nature Seychelles, which is said to be yielding encouraging results

Tania Militello a reef restoration project officer working with WiseOceans on the latest project says the technique has been 'designed specifically' for the reef of Petite Anse.

"... This area is not protected by an outer reef barrier and the resulting wave action means that all components of a coral-growing project here must be secured down. Coral fragments grow successfully when they are kept very still, so being extremely secure was a key aspiration when developing this methodology. The transplanted coral fragments will enhance the natural reef, increase the existing coral cover, and continue to thrive without intervention in the coming years," explained Militello.

According to a press statement from the Four Seasons Resort, this is not the first conservation project undertaken in collaboration with WiseOceans which also partners with other locally-based non-governmental organisations working towards marine education and conservation.

The hotel has over the last three years introduced a programme for rescuing the critically endangered hawksbill turtles, as well as a monitoring programme for coastal erosion.

"It is vital for the future of Seychelles' environment and economy that we respect the beautiful environment, both on land and in the ocean. These resources are the primary reason that tourism exists in Seychelles, and provides so much joy for us and our visitors, and supports the community through trade and investment," said the Manager of Four Seasons Resort Seychelles Nihat Yucel in the statement.

With properties in some 40 countries worldwide, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts inaugurated its luxury hotel in Seychelles in 2009 and since then it has attracted on average around 11,000 guests per year, which according to O'Grady, hails mainly from the Middle East and Europe including Russia and the United Kingdom.

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