

IUCN TECHNICAL REVIEW

1. IDENTIFICATION NUMBER AND NAME 185 ALDABRA ATOLL
2. LOCATION: Latitude 9° 25'S, longitude 46° 25'E. The Atoll lies north of the Mozambique Channel, 420 km north west of Madagascar and 640 km east of the East African mainland.
3. NOMINATED BY: Minister for Planning and Development, Government of Seychelles
4. DOCUMENTATION:
 - (i) Nomination form, including maps
 - (ii) Supplementary documentation (IUCN)
 - a) Videotape, "Aldabra: L'île aux tortues géantes", by Claude Pavard.
 - b) Project documentation, IUCN/WWF Project 1784: "Support for warden of Aldabra Atoll". (\$110,000).
 - c) Management plan for Aldabra Atoll.
 - d) Consultations: Sidney Holt, International League for the Protection of Cetaceans, U.K.; A.W. Diamond, International Council for Bird Preservation, U.K.; Chris Huxley, Consultant to Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), Switzerland.

5. BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY

The least disturbed large island in the Indian Ocean, Aldabra is of outstanding scientific interest. It is the only place in the world where a reptile is the dominant herbivore; some 150,000 giant tortoises (more than on the Galapagos) feed on the grasses and shrubbery, including plants which have evolved to take advantage of tortoise grazing patterns. The tortoises are the last survivors of a life form once found on many Indian Ocean islands; slow-moving and vulnerable, the giant land tortoises on all other Indian Ocean islands have been driven to extinction by human exploitation, leaving Aldabra as their only remaining habitat. The island's isolation has allowed the evolution of a distinct fauna, with two endemic birds (Aldabra Brush Warbler and Aldabra Drongo) and another 11 birds which have distinct subspecies (showing evolution in action); among the most interesting is the Aldabran White-throated Rail, the last representative of the western Indian Ocean flightless birds -- all others have gone the way of the Dodo.

6. INTEGRITY

The boundaries as described in the nomination are ecologically viable; it would be preferable if the seaward boundary were extended some 20 km into the sea in order to provide additional protection to the marine fauna, but this is impossible for practical reasons. Commercial exploitation is a threat, even in such a harsh and difficult area; the island is held by leasehold, which could be changed when it expires. Electing the area a World Heritage Site could help ensure that it is managed for conservation in perpetuity, and there is a Management Plan for the island which would ensure that the necessary steps are taken; the plan has been accepted and endorsed by the government of Seychelles. The only commercial exploitation envisaged in the Plan is carefully controlled tourism, limited only to those who are willing to endure the difficult conditions in return for a unique experience in a living laboratory.

Aldabra is most often compared with the Galapagos Islands (elected WES 1978). Both are vital for the study of evolution, but geologically and biologically they are quite distinct: the Galapagos are volcanic islands surrounded by cold ocean currents far from the South American mainland source of colonizers, whereas Aldabra is a raised coral atoll in warm tropical waters relatively close to Madagascar and East Africa. Galapagos has many more endemic species, but Aldabra has more tortoises and is much less affected by human disturbance, making Aldabra unique in the world.

8. EVALUATION

Aldabra is an outstanding example of biological evolution, contains superlative natural phenomena, and contains the only habitat where a number of animals of outstanding universal value can survive. It therefore meets natural criteria (ii), (iii), and (iv) for inclusion on the World Heritage List.

9. RECOMMENDATION

Aldabra should be added to the World Heritage List. Technical assistance from the World Heritage Fund in the form of support to the Seychelles Islands Foundation to implement the Management Plan should be considered.


International Union for Conservation of
Nature and Natural Resources

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