

Tides of time

Aldabra Atoll, a Unesco World Heritage marine site in the Seychelles, is the world's largest raised atoll. Its unique ecosystem evolved in near isolation for 125,000 years



The atoll is located in the Indian Ocean.

SPOTLIGHT | An isolated sanctuary

Aldabra Atoll: 'Wonder of nature, given to humanity by the people of Seychelles'

Aldabra Atoll is a windswept, unweaving crumb of land, floating in open ocean far from anywhere and covered with razor-sharp limestone and petrified coral. It has no airstrip or fresh water, but it is among the greatest intact wildlife sanctuaries in the world.

Located in the archipelago of the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean, northeast of Madagascar, Aldabra is the world's largest raised atoll. Its ecosystem is unique, having evolved in near isolation for 125,000 years. Aldabra is one of the last natural environments still dominated by reptiles (the giant tortoise), and it has the planet's largest population of them (more than 100,000). Aldabra and the Galapagos Islands are the only remaining islands playing host to important giant tortoise populations; once widespread, they have become systematically extinct upon the arrival of humans into their ecosystems.

Visitors to Aldabra are rare. Those who arrive by infrequent boats cannot stay — there are no hotels, only a lone research outpost staffed by 12 rangers. Any trip is limited to a few hours, and this depends on the tides. Even those who do make the trek to the far-flung outpost in the Indian Ocean shouldn't expect picture-postcard, white-sand beaches. The entire atoll is battered by

breakers that churn in and out of its vast lagoon twice daily. Some visitors never even see the island. The seas may be too rough to view anything but dunes and surf.

Aldabra's natural fortifications have protected it from people; the little there is to exploit has also helped preserve it. During the 1960s, the U.K. government wanted to build a military base, but growing awareness in the scientific community convinced the government to look elsewhere; it eventually decided to establish a base in Diego Garcia.

The atoll is kept closed because environmental organizations — Unesco's World Heritage Centre, which inscribed it in 1982; the Seychelles Islands Foundation (SIF), which has managed it since 1979; and the more recent Aldabra Foundation — want to maintain Aldabra as an example of a pristine atoll wilderness. As a time capsule, or blueprint for evolution, it is of considerable scientific importance, "a perpetually observable storehouse of data on biodiversity in a manner no longer possible in much of the world," according to the Aldabra Foundation's mission statement.

Aldabra is special for Dr. Frauke Fleischer-Dogley, SIF's chief executive officer, because it "feels like a different planet," one of

the few places where nature is not compromised or affected by humans. She notes: "The ecosystem is still intact, and one can experience the feeling of a whole system, not only a handful of species in an otherwise degraded or heavily managed area. One can almost feel the interactions there as they happen."

The atoll has three different marine environments: its vast lagoon, the channels connecting the lagoon with the Indian Ocean, and the outer reefs along the atoll. These coral reefs are home to sea creatures of all varieties: dolphins, sharks, sponges, rays and crabs. The last surviving flightless bird indigenous to the Indian Ocean, the Aldabra rail, is found only here.

These elements make Aldabra a potentially valuable example to other protected marine areas in determining precisely how much human presence and what types of protective strategies are required to sustain its unique biodiversity.

Maintaining the atoll is costly, however. Aldabra lies 1,200 kilometers (745 miles) away from the main island group of the Seychelles (population 80,000). A second World Heritage site, the Vallée de Mai, is located in the main island group, which is an

important tourist destination. Tourist revenues and entry fees are used by the SIF, which also manages the Vallée de Mai, to cover the cost of maintaining Aldabra. The two sites' survival are intimately linked. "This arrangement is practical," says Marc Patry, a Unesco program specialist. "It ensures that Aldabra's management costs are covered. But it's risky. Should something happen to the tourism industry, or should the Vallée de Mai no longer be an important destination, the whole model could fall apart." The SIF, aware of this, is seeking ways to diversify financing and reduce costs: renewable energy for Aldabra is one possibility, notes Fleischer-Dogley.

Carlos Vejarano, a Spanish board member of the SIF, was behind the 2005 founding of the Aldabra Foundation (www.aldabrafoundation.org), a Geneva-based group that sponsors research on the island, as well as educational activities, such as an itinerant exhibit. To this end, it is helped by the

Seychelles's people and government, whose environmental record, Vejarano says, is admirable. "They have environmentally aware people and programs, and the government is behind them," says Vejarano. "Their leaders realize they belong to an international community and are guardians of something they gave to mankind 30 years ago. They are Aldabra's trustees. They're proud of that and take their responsibility seriously." This awareness, he says, has become part of the Seychelles's culture.

At one end of the atoll, a bronze plaque, standing on fossilized coral, reads: "Aldabra, wonder of nature, given to humanity by the people of Seychelles." Vejarano says: "Often when people get the World Heritage label, they think, 'They're going to give us something.' It creates expectations. What's commendable about the Seychelles government and people is they see it another way. They have a real sense of taking care of the place." ■

Annual meeting in Seville
The 33rd Session of Unesco's World Heritage Committee Meeting takes place in Seville, Spain, on June 22-30. This intergovernmental annual event, which convenes nearly 1,000 people, is built around two main themes: nomination of new World Heritage sites, and review of the state of conservation of sites already listed, including reports on 150 World Heritage sites. Review of the year's activities, budget issues and future projects are also on the agenda. Chaired by Maria Jesús San Segundo, Spain's permanent delegate to Unesco, the committee consists of representatives from 21 signatories of the World Heritage Convention. For more information, visit <http://whc.unesco.org>

EXPLORING | Another way of sharing heritage

Virtual tourism: A World Heritage site goes to the people

Most Unesco World Heritage sites encourage tourism, but Aldabra Atoll is an exception. Inhospitable and remote, it is basically a no-go zone. The atoll is 35 kilometers (25 miles) long and 15 kilometers wide, but a mere one-20th of it is accessible, and only two locations are open to visitors; what goes on there is research and preservation work. The atoll is one of nature's crown jewels, however, and Carlos Vejarano, founder of the Aldabra Foundation (www.aldabrafoundation.org), says, "Everyone can't go, but I can bring it to you."

Vejarano has long been involved in environmental activities, such as high-mountain reforestation programs in Nepal. He recalls how he originally sought to make Aldabra better known. "I thought I could create support by going out and asking people to contribute," he says. "But that wasn't working. Instead, I saw one needs to photograph the place and do exhibits of it." Exhibits, he says, are the perfect vehicle for creating awareness of this unusual spot. "Suddenly you're sharing this World Heritage site, but in another way. In this form, it can go to a lot of people, especially children."

Realizing that neither the scientific importance nor the wonders of Aldabra can be adequately described, Vejarano thought the public could get a good idea through a collection of the images, objects, sounds and smells of the place. He put together an itinerant exhibit, which went to The Hague in 2006 and to Paris's Natural History Mu-



Aldabra in images: Traveling exhibits are one way of sharing the atoll with the world.

seum last year (attracting 360,000 visitors in five months). Its next stop could be Monaco's Oceanography Museum, which would be fitting, since Jacques-Yves Cousteau, the museum's director for more than 30 years, was one of the first to reveal to the world the wonders of Aldabra, in the 1950s. The exhibit celebrates Aldabra and features an interactive model of the atoll that explains its uniqueness — everything from the complicated riptides in its lagoon to

the vegetation that surrounds it. Sounds and smells are part of the show, as are multimedia programs, photos, tactile screens and games for children. There are replicas of its giant tortoises and a model reef. Children can send e-cards. The exhibit also tells the story of World Heritage and explains how Aldabra was photographed for the exhibition — an undertaking not without hardship. Since the land is practically impenetrable, most of the filming had to be done in or on the water.

Not many World Heritage sites can say they tour with major, six-month shows at the world's top museums, but it is only through photos that most people can get to Aldabra. Vejarano is raising awareness — virtually — turning it into a World Heritage site that can come to people.

"Each person tries to find a way to help," says Vejarano. "I decided to photograph and make exhibits, bringing Aldabra to people so we all can share it." Bringing humanity its heritage, so people can all better appreciate it, has a message in itself, he points out. "The exhibit has got people talking about Aldabra," he says, "and it is another way to make them aware of the environment, aware that nature is us and is our heritage." He is particularly eager to target young people. "Children see the exhibit, and begin developing an attitude that we have to care more about our environment, that it has to become more sustainable. I think we need to go more in that direction." ■

In the Vallée de Joux, a watchmaker preserves the heritage of craftsmanship

The heart of a "Haute Horlogerie" watch is its caliber — its mechanical movement. Since 1833, Jaeger-LeCoultre has created more than 1,000 different calibers, including the smallest movement, the thinnest and some of the most complicated. Three hundred can be seen in its Heritage Gallery, a museum where its famous watches are on display.

Preserving the heritage of a craft is as important as conserving a natural wonder, and at Jaeger-LeCoultre headquarters, in the Vallée de Joux near Geneva, this heritage goes back to 1559. "That's the year

the first LeCoultre — Pierre — settled," explains Sebastian Vivas, Jaeger-LeCoultre's in-house historian and curator of the Heritage Gallery. "He brought a spirit that has remained. There was something special about the people who came to this isolated valley, cleared the land and developed the villages. They were pioneers. They mastered metallurgy, then watchmaking, transforming the Vallée de Joux into the prosperous place where the world's finest watches are made." Vivas says this heritage gives Jaeger-LeCoultre its special identity.

The Swiss manufacture's inventors and the competencies they passed on to succeeding generations are, he says, directly connected to the culture of the Vallée de Joux. "The first pioneers had to develop a do-it-yourself philosophy and find their own solutions," Vivas says. "Today, this remains because each model of a watch has its own movement, and each is developed at the same time as the watch. The inside and the outside are made for each other. This harmony is one of the secrets of what makes a Jaeger-LeCoultre watch so special and so exclusive."

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Visit the Tides of Time Web site for videos, interviews and more information on World Heritage marine sites: whc.unesco.org/tidesoftime/

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