



Photo courtesy Raymond Simunet - STB



Where nature is second nature

By Catherine Mazy

CAN AN ISLAND nation with the population of Lincoln teach the rest of the world about economic growth that protects the environment?

The Seychelles is giving it a try.

"We have to ensure that we protect our environment and manage it in a sustainable manner," says James Alix Michel, President of the Seychelles. "We need development to deliver progress, but what we have managed to

achieve is to ensure that development and protection of the environment go together hand in hand."

Of the Seychelles 455 sq km of land, almost 50% is protected as national parks. The country hosts two UNESCO World Heritage Sites – the prehistoric Vallée de Mai Nature Reserve, home to the indigenous coco-de-mer; and Aldabra atoll, a haven for rare marine life and home to the world's largest colony of giant tortoises. Coastal zones are reserved for low intensity fishing and the country boasts several

marine reserves. The protection of that unique environment, the president says, has been his country's greatest achievement.

The Seychelles' economy depends on tourism and tuna fishing, both of which require careful guardianship of the environment. Tuna fisheries account for some 40% of the Seychelles economy. But global warming has caused polar ice caps to melt, making sea levels rise. That in turn has killed off some of the coral reefs that serve as tuna habitat.

Rising sea levels pose a more direct threat to the Seychelles, an archipelago of 115 islands spread over 1.4 million sq km in the Indian Ocean. Higher water means less land for an already-tiny country – starting with bites off its famous beaches.

The Seychelles was counting on a robust response at the Copenhagen summit on climate change last year; but, President Michel says, "I was very disappointed, as were most of the other small island states, because for us it is a matter of survival. With climate change,

global warming and rising sea levels, we are the first to be affected."

President Michel would like to see more action from developed countries, not only to reduce emissions but also to develop clean and renewable energy so that poorer countries don't join the ranks of polluters as they grow economically. The Seychelles is bringing in new technology, such as solar power, to reduce reliance on fossil fuels. A project with Masdar of Abu Dhabi is installing a wind-energy farm in the country.

In the meantime, the Seychelles aims for good stewardship of the environment alongside economic growth. "With each hotel development, we get the developer on board to fund the management of the ecosystem of that area," President Michel says. "So, we have development which brings progress, but at the same time we insist that the environment is properly managed. We have proved that it can be done."

La Digue, the fourth-biggest island, hosts the Veuve Nature Reserve, habitat of the Black Paradise Flycatcher, which is on the critically endangered species list, with only about 200 of them in the world, all on La Digue. But, the president emphasises, it is not only the islands' exotic fauna which is in jeopardy.

"As a leader of a small island state, I will continue to champion this cause because it is our survival at stake," President Michel says. "We have to continue making our voices heard in the international arena. It is not only our survival, but it is the survival of the human race."

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Explorers eye a new oil bonanza

By Helen Jones

Discerning tourists have long been drawn to the pristine beaches of the Seychelles' inner islands, which are strewn with huge, ancient granite boulders. But these landmarks are not just attracting sightseers, oil companies are interested too.

The islands are something of a geological oddity. "The Seychelles is unique as a group of mid-ocean islands in that we are not volcanic in nature, we are granitic," Captain Guy Adam, chairman and CEO of Seychelles Petroleum Co. (Seypec) explains. "Furthermore, offshore we have sedimentary rock, which is where you find oil."

As the world's need for oil grows, exploration companies are striving to identify sites that could offer an alternative to volatile oil-rich states in the Middle East and Africa, and depleting resources elsewhere. The stable and relatively prosperous Seychelles could provide a solution.

Seismic studies of the seabed around the Seychelles indicate that it holds large reserves of oil and natural gas. Two private firms, PetroQuest International of the US and Dubai-based East African Exploration (EAX), have signed separate exploration agreements with the Seychelles covering 38,000 sq km of seabed. Jeff Hume, CEO of Black Marlin Energy, EAX's parent company, said in October: "We have no doubt that the Seychelles has excellent commercial oil potential."

The Seychelles will tender a further 70,000 sq km of its ocean floor for oil exploration this year.

Eddy Belle, a geologist and deputy CEO of Seypec, says, "The three key ingredients – the rock that produces the oil, the rock that stores the oil and the rock that seals the oil – are all there, so I am very optimistic."

Whether the Seychelles' hope of becoming an oil-rich nation remains a pipe dream or not will depend on what the oil companies find when they begin drilling next year. However, the country has already created a successful oil transport, export and bunkering business as part of its aim to diversify the economy and keep the Seychelles supplied with affordable fuel. Since 2002, Seypec has built up a fleet of six oil tankers which operate in shipping lanes as far away as Korea and the Canadian Arctic. It's a source of pride for the island nation.

Finance Minister Danny Faure acknowledged in last year's budget address that Seypec's petroleum related activities "are maximizing employment opportunities for Seychellois and bringing economic benefits to the country."

Captain Adam agrees. "We're very proud that the profit from our large tankers has contributed during a difficult economic time to help the Seychelles."

While oil transportation may seem at odds with the islands' commitment to the environment, Captain Adam stresses that its tankers have been specially designed for the conditions of the Seychelles, and to ensure the safe transport of oil and LPG products through its unique ecosystem.