

'Forget climate ideology'

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AS THE public debate over climate change becomes increasingly heated, the leader of a small island nation arrived in Australia with a counter-message: the time for ideological conflict is past.

"It is regrettable that many still view these debates as ideological," James Michel, president of the Republic of the Seychelles, said in Melbourne yesterday.

"There is no ideology involved in survival of people. Let us put the people and the science available to improve the lives of people at the centre of climate change."

In Mr Michel's view, those people include the nearly 90,000 residents of the Seychelles, an archipelago of 155 islands spread across the Indian Ocean.

Speaking as a guest of the federal government, Mr Michel said there was little cause for hope on the evidence of nearly 20 years of UN climate change negotiations, but that did not mean that hope for a solution to climate change should be abandoned.



President James Michel. Photo: Penny Stephens

Though its greenhouse gas emissions are minuscule, he said the Seychelles followed the theory "we have to start somewhere" and was aiming to run as much of the country as possible on renewable energy. An island would be dedicated to a wind farm built by developers from Abu Dhabi, and the government was looking for backers for solar plants and to develop electric car fleets.

The country protects half its 450 square kilometres as nature reserves. "We forego opportunities today to ensure that we create the right opportunities of tomorrow," he said.

Mr Michel suggested the country was already experiencing changes in line with climate change projections. Drought has significantly reduced its water supply, with a major reservoir down to 18 per cent capacity. The government had spent \$25 million importing a desalination plant.

In recent weeks the country's reputation as a tourism hotspot safe for diving and snorkelling has been hit by attacks from a great white shark (or sharks). While the cause is unclear, one theory before the government is that the warming of the Pacific Ocean had caused sea current shifts that had brought cooler water further north than usual in the Indian Ocean. They grey white shark may have come with it.

"Without climate change, and the change in the sea currents, it may not have happened," Mr Michel said. "We just hope it can be proved that it is a freak and once the shark is caught the problem will be resolved."

Mr Michel declined to comment on the Australian debate over a carbon tax, beyond that it was a sign of a healthy democracy. But he said the government had made generous commitments to help small islands cope and praised its recent shift to an 80 per cent cut in emissions by 2050.

"This is far better than most industrial countries have agreed, so Australia is leading in that sense," he said.

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