

New Zealand Team Saves Wildlife in the Seychelles Islands

New Zealand conservation expertise has brought three Seychelles islands back from the brink of ecological disaster.

Rare-species expert Don Merton and a small team of fellow New Zealanders worked three and a half months to eradicate rats, cats and mice from Denis, Curieuse and a neighbouring 219-hectare island in the tropical Indian Ocean group. The pests were threatening to wipe out endemic birds, reptiles and insects, including two high-profile bird species, the Seychelles magpie robin and the Seychelles fody.

The trip was a result of Don Merton's earlier work in the Seychelles which brought his skills to the attention of its government. The first was in the early 1990s when he helped BirdLife International rescue the magpie robin, then down to about 20 individuals. His management techniques are credited with helping bring the species back from the edge of extinction and there are now more than 90 birds. The bad news, he says, is that rats recently invaded the key island refuge.

Then, in 1996 Merton, an internationally known conservationist, again took leave from the Department of Conservation to run a successful rat and rabbit eradication project on Bird Island, most northerly of the Seychelles group.

These visits led the Seychelles government to ask him to carry out an eradication feasibility study as part of its national strategy for restoring island biodiversity. The study was completed in 1998 and this year's operation was the first step in making it happen.

For Don Merton, it was an opportunity to help prevent a repeat of the nightmare he witnessed on Big South Cape Island, near Stewart Island, nearly 40 years ago. In 1964 that island, valued as the final refuge for several southern New Zealand

species, succumbed to an irruption of ship rats. In what has been billed as one of the worst ecological disasters in New Zealand's recorded history, the then Wildlife Service made a desperate bid to save the Stewart Island snipe, Stead's bush wren and the greater short-tailed bat. Sadly all were exterminated. Fortunately, Merton and colleagues were successful in saving the South Island saddleback from imminent extinction.

Don Merton says that this time the efforts appear to have come in time and extinctions have been averted. The New Zealanders worked through a great many challenges to complete the task. These included high temperatures; having to confine several hundred individuals of four resident threatened species for three months; some island residents removing bait for their own uses; and passive resistance by some local Hindus who opposed the killing of pest animals.

For a country facing major economic difficulties, where cigarettes were rationed to one per customer until they ran out completely, island restoration is ordinarily a low priority. However, Merton says rat popu-

In safe keeping: around 140 Aldabran giant tortoises were rounded up and held in captivity on Curieuse Island, while pests were eradicated there.



DON MERTON

Coralline Denis Island (143 hectares) in the tropical Seychelles group, one of three islands cleared of rats, cats and mice by a New Zealand team led by Don Merton. Creatures saved include a giant tenebrionid beetle, and the Seychelles magpie robin.



DON MERTON

lations had reached the point where they were impacting on the country's key industry, tourism. Rat infestations were driving people away.

Only time will tell whether the New Zealand team has successfully eradicated the target pests. If so, rat-free habitat for sensitive Seychelles animals will have been increased several-fold, from about 280 hectares on a handful of tiny islands, to more than 1000 hectares.

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GIDEON CLIMO



DON MERTON