

A First for Seychelles - Cousin celebrates IBA branding

Title Cousin Island Special Reserve has become the first IBA - Important Bird Area - branded site in the Seychelles and the Western Indian Ocean region. The IBA branding states publicly that Cousin island is of outstanding value for bird conservation. IBAs are sites of global importance for birds and their conservation, defined and listed by BirdLife International, the world authority on birds. The branding - a large board in the visitor reception areas of Cousin - was unveiled for visitors to the islands as part of Nature Seychelles? (BirdLife in the Seychelles) activities for the International Year of Biodiversity. ?The IBA branding adds to Cousin Island's stature as one of the best small island reserves in the world,? said Nirmal Shah who is also Nature Seychelles Chief Executive. Because IBAs are recognised world-wide, they attract interest from millions of birdwatchers. They become travel destinations and targets for eco-tourism projects. ?The branding will help in assuring visitors that the place they are visiting is of global significance. Therefore the IBA branding is of tourism importance as well. We hope this will attract higher quality eco-visitors to Seychelles? says Ian Valmont, the Island's Coordinator. A site is recognised as an IBA only if it meets certain criteria, based on the occurrence of key bird species that are vulnerable to extinction or whose populations are otherwise irreplaceable. Conservation on the Island helped save some of the Seychelles' endemic birds, notably the Seychelles Warbler and Seychelles Magpie Robin. Five of Seychelles' eleven endemic land birds - Seychelles Sunbird, Seychelles Fody, Seychelles Blue Pigeon, the Seychelles Warbler and the Seychelles Magpie-Robin are found here. Cousin is also a globally important site for seabirds, with seven species of seabirds in numbers exceeding 300,000 individuals nesting here. IBA branding also reflects measures taken to safeguard biodiversity. The IBA programme aims to identify, monitor and protect a global network of sites for the conservation of the world's birds and other biodiversity. Birds have been shown to be effective indicators of biodiversity in other animal groups and plants. So although the IBA network is defined by its bird fauna, the conservation of these sites ensures the survival of a correspondingly large number of other animals and plants. An IBA thus makes a major contribution to global biodiversity conservation. Indeed conservation efforts on Cousin have also contributed to the improved status other endangered species like the Hawksbill turtles whose nesting population has risen eight-fold since the 1970s . There are 20 IBAs in Seychelles, 11 in the granitic islands and 9 in the outer islands but Cousin is the first to be publicity branded as such. Nature Seychelles encourages the managers of other IBAS to brand their sites in this manner. Photo: US Ambassador to the Seychelles Mary Jo Wills (3rd from left) in front of the IBA sign in this souvenir photo taken during her visit to Cousin Island