Saving nature, saving people in Seychelles

Title
Nature Seychelles (BirdLife in Seychelles) has launched an innovative project to enable vulnerable groups, such as people addicted to drugs and alcohol, to improve their mental and physical wellbeing through contact with nature, and to learn practical skills that allow them to rejoin mainstream society.

The Greening Livelihoods Project is funded by the European Union. Participants will gain skills in conservation, rehabilitation of ecosystems, visitor guiding and horticulture. Activities have already started at the Sanctuary at Roche Caiman, an urban wetland managed by Nature Seychelles.

> *“The Seychelles President, James Michel, has said that drug abuse is the biggest social problem in the Seychelles, and has called for concerted effort to address it,” said Dr. Nirmal Shah, Chief Executive of Nature Seychelles. “We have been working to save nature for the benefit of society, but now that society itself is in trouble, we need nature to help save people."*

The project will work not only with the vulnerable groups, but also with their families.

Nature Seychelles is working with the Seychelles Drug and Alcohol Council (DAC), the body responsible for planning and overseeing national drug control programmes, and with two approved residential facilities providing treatment and rehabilitation, Centre Mont Royal and Centre de Acceuill de la Rosiere.

The Roche Caiman Sanctuary includes a small area of mangroves, and the site serves as a demonstration site for mangrove restoration. Participants in Nature Seychelles’ Greening Livelihoods and Green Health programmes will join community and schools groups in learning the value of mangroves and acquiring skills which will be used in restoring mangroves elsewhere in the Seychelles. This work will be carried out under a new project recently approved by the Mangroves For the Future Initiative. The five-year management plan for Roche Caiman was drawn up by Nature Seychelles with help from the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK).

The Heritage Garden at Roche Caiman, where the participants will learn horticultural skills, was created as a demonstration garden to encourage replication in schools and the community. The plots of edible, medicinal and aromatic plants and fruit trees teach people to eat well, and to grow organic food. Information, seeds and encouragement for start-up gardens are provided.

Dr Martin Varley, Nature Seychelles’ Community and Stakeholder Action Coordinator, said the Greening Livelihoods programme is based on research conducted in the UK and Australia.

> *“The research has shown that nature can be used to help vulnerable people build self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation, through undertaking activities that develop practical and social skills in beautiful, non-threatening natural environments.”*

Phoenix Futures, a UK-based organisation which pioneered “conservation therapy programmes” is helping Nature Seychelles with its programme.

According to Phoenix’s experience in the UK, people who include nature therapy in their rehabilitation are far more likely to show a full recovery from addiction, and they say that thousands of people have been through their programmes successfully in the past 15 years.

> *"We have long known the value of nature in making us feel good", said Nirmal Shah. “We are grateful to Phoenix Futures for sharing their knowledge and helping us with this project, and we*

> *look forward to working with them in the future".*

He added that Nature Seychelles is seeking donors and sponsors to support other Green Health and Greening Livelihoods projects.