

Conservation Challenges on the Dodoland during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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What a year it's been!! 2020 was gearing up to be the 'year of nature', but several global biodiversity and climate conferences were put on hold because of the COVID-19 pandemic. For the first time on a global scale, modern human activities were reduced to its lowest and the word "anthropause" was coined by authors in an article published in *Natural Ecology and Evolution* to define this phenomenon. Many countries have been under lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19. Dodoland (Mauritius) was no exception, starting from March 2020. The lockdown prevented most conservationists in Mauritius, like myself, from entering the field or offices. We were instead cooped up at home for 3 months

Photo Left: Erwin carrying out tree performance surveys



Photos Above: showing volunteering activities with corporate groups just before lockdown began

As the Project Coordinator of Friends of the Environment (FoE), I manage and coordinate a small but high impact ecological forest restoration project. I normally spend 3 to 4 days a week in the field doing monitoring surveys, organising community-based volunteering activities and supervising restoration activities among other related fieldwork. The pandemic negatively affected our organisational activities. From November to April, 60 % of our restoration activities are mainly focused on the re-introduction of site-specific plant species on site through tree-planting programmes with volunteers. Sadly, even before any COVID-19 cases were officially confirmed in Mauritius, 45% of our volunteering activities were cancelled when the fear and panic began to spread. At that time, a study by the University of Southampton claimed that Mauritius is the 3rd country most at risk in the African region and this caused more fear. As a result, we failed to achieve our planting objectives on the fifth year of the project.

Covid challenges

At first, it was a challenge to come to terms with not being able to fully perform my role in the project, knowing that our post-planting maintenance activities were completely hindered and no regular site inspection or patrol could be carried out. We had another big fear to worry about. During mid-May, we regularly face fire outbreaks of moderate intensities and a single fire outbreak can easily reverse 5 years of intense restoration work. Fortunately, essential security services were operating and I was occasionally receiving updates with photographs from a watchman guarding Fort Adelaïde – a 19th century national heritage landmark situated next to the project restoration site.



Photo above: yearly wildfire's caused by anthropogenic pressures and invasive fire-prone grass

Applying adaptive management through the visual aids greatly helped in initiating procedures to allow two staff members to carry out firebreak maintenance on field with a special Work Access Permit obtained from the Police forces. Within 4 days after maintenance, a fire outbreak ravaged 5 hectares of the hill. Fortunately, our restoration site was spared as the timely maintenance of firebreaks stopped the progression of fire successfully. Upon resuming work in late May with a Work Access Permit, I found out that three water reservoirs at the project site were vandalised and about 12 % of saplings had died in our nursery. A proper contingency plan was set-up to address the situation appropriately, as a lack of water supply can result in high mortality of planted saplings during the dry season.

For me, the lockdown was an opportunity to focus on other tasks while “working from home” was gaining ground throughout various sectors. The use of social media skyrocketed during the lockdown and I had the opportunity to reach out to the public on how to contribute to a new normal after lockdown through an outreach programme developed by a digital platform “2 minutes for tomorrow”. In this short video, I was able to raise awareness on the loss of biodiversity and emergence of zoonotic infectious diseases, the need to support local conservation organisations, the urgency to halt illegal dumping in ecologically sensitive areas such as caves and to engage in sustainable agricultural practices.

The video in Mauritian Creole (with subtitles in French) is available from: <https://www.facebook.com/2minutesmu/videos/286866575838830/>

Reconnecting

The lockdown period was also a good time to bond with family and check up on loved ones, colleagues, friends and community. Keeping in touch with friends all around the world, including my supportive DESMAN 2019 classmates, gave strength in knowing that we were all passing through this difficult period together. While I was safely confined at home, Dhanu Munasinghe, Project Manager in Singapore, was put on enforcement duties to make sure that people are following the advisories in parks and nature reserves to prevent spread of the COVID-19.

Over the years, non-governmental organisations have made significant contributions to humanity. However, the COVID-19 has triggered a funding crisis that many of us were anticipating and where it is expected to limit donors' funding capacity and availability in future. As a relatively small organisation, it was urgent to re-think our funding model and diversify our income sources by accessing different types of funding schemes. Our project success depends on ensuring financial sustainability especially for long-term restoration activities and the ability to keep our dedicated staff members employed. With this in mind, I made several funding applications and hope to build new alliances in the upcoming months. Besides this, I'll need to develop a proper volunteer management system to double-up planting activities for the next rainy season.

Amidst this crisis, COVID-19 offers an opportunity to re-think our relationship with our planet. It is more important than ever that we keep working toward a sustainable future. The world's response to COVID-19 demonstrated the incredible capacity of humanity to come together in the face of unprecedented and insurmountable challenges to adapt and take action at the scale necessary. This is what we need to conserve biodiversity and tackle climate change – even at an individual level.

Thankfully, with no new local cases, Mauritius was considered COVID-19-free since June 2020. Reducing the risk of community transmission lies in our hands. Keep safe. Wearing a mask is caring!