



## 75 International Delegates to Attend a Marine Protected Areas Conference in Rodrigues

Island and coastal states across the Western Indian Ocean region are all faced with similar problems of how to protect their unique and fragile marine ecosystems while still maintaining the livelihoods of artisanal fishers and others for whom the sea is a vital part of their culture and daily life.

One emerging solution to these problems is the use of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Within MPAs, activities that damage marine habitats are prohibited, and fishing activities are greatly reduced. As a result, the coral reefs, seagrass beds and other habitats in the MPA flourish, and populations of fish and other marine creatures increase in size, both in terms of the total number of animals and the average weight of individuals. Although fishing within an MPA itself is severely restricted, MPAs can also benefit fisheries as a result of the spillover effect that sees fish eggs, larvae and adults from the thriving protected zone move into the neighbouring areas that are open to fishing.

The environmental benefits of MPAs are widely recognised, and, in the National Environmental Action Plan for the period to 2010, the Government of Mauritius identified the deterioration of marine systems and the degradation of the coastal zone as major national environmental problems, and advocated the establishment of protected areas as a mitigation measure. The Rodrigues Regional Assembly has taken this forward, and on 09 April 2007 four MPAs (at Passe Demi, Grand Bassin, Anse aux Anglais and Riviere Banane) were officially gazetted.

In order to ensure best practice in the establishment and management of MPAs, it is vital that opportunities are provided for the exchange of information, experience and ideas. Even before the new MPAs were declared, local NGO Shoals Rodrigues and UK charity the Marine Education Trust were working with the Indian Ocean Commission and WWF to bring an international workshop on MPAs to Rodrigues.

As a result of these efforts, 75 delegates from 12 countries will be meeting at Escale Vacances Hotel in Port Mathurin between 09 and 14 May to discuss the issues of unsustainable marine resource use and how MPAs can be used as effective management tools. The workshop, entitled “*A Regional Perspective on MPAs in the Western Indian Ocean*”, will be opened by Rodrigues’ Chief Commissioner, Mr Johnson Roussety.

The main theme of the conference is community participation: the organisers wish to reinforce the fundamental importance of involving coastal villagers throughout the process of establishing MPAs, from the ideas stage to set up, monitoring, management and enforcement. Individual workshop sessions will focus on topics including education, financing, research, and impediments and solutions to effective management.

Beyond its importance to the managers of the fledgling MPAs in Rodrigues, the workshop also has regional significance as it will incorporate the first meeting of the Western Indian Ocean Marine Ecoregion (WIOMER) MPA Managers' Forum. This Forum is part of a project managed by the Indian Ocean Commission and WWF to bring regional coherence to MPA development through the creation of an MPA network serving Mauritius, Rodrigues, Seychelles, Comoros, Madagascar, and Reunion.

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