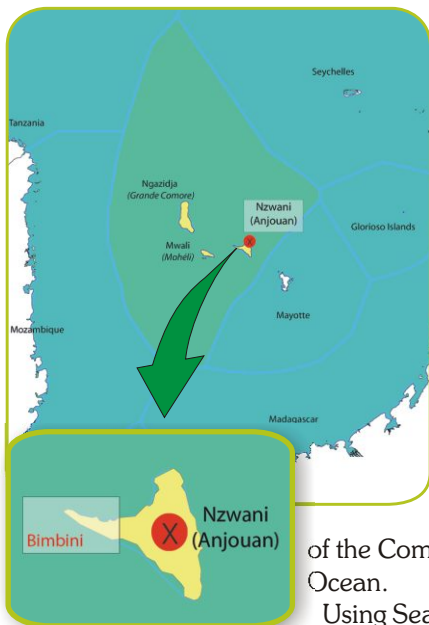


Comoros Islands



Mapping seagrass meadows on the remote Bimbini peninsula of Anjouan Island

Soizic Le Courtois and Daniella Blake report



Exploring the seagrass meadows around a remote peninsula of an island recovering from political turmoil was just part of a challenging expedition conducted by Community Centred Conservation (C3) and local partners in September 2008. This latest expedition was part of C3's ongoing project to map the previously unstudied extensive seagrass meadows on the three islands of the Union of the Comoros in the western Indian Ocean.

Using Seagrass-Watch methods, the C3 team scrambled, waded and climbed along the Bimbini peninsula on the north-west coast of the island of Anjouan through knee-deep mud and fields of sea-urchins. A huge expanse of seagrass, 15 km long and up to a kilometre wide was mapped around the peninsula. Nine species were found: *Thalassia hemprichii* was by far the most common. *Thalassodendron ciliatum*, *Halodule wrightii* and *Halodule uninervis*, *Cymodocea rotundata*, *Cymodocea serrulata* and *Enhalus acoroides* were also regularly observed, but *Halophila ovalis* and *Syringodium isoetifolium* were less common.

This expedition also offered the opportunity to train three members of a local environmental NGO, HTC (Halieutiques-Tourisme-Conservation) in Seagrass-Watch methods. A day was spent out on the peninsula with the three Comorians learning to identify the different species of seagrass and how to conduct surveys using Seagrass-Watch methods. The three students: Anlimouddine Moutouraffi, Andhumaty Omar and Naima Abdallah enjoyed their first experience learning about seagrass.

Unfortunately this biodiversity-rich area, containing nine out of the twelve species of seagrass present in the Indian Ocean, is at threat from pressing environmental problems which include deforestation, clearing of mangroves, daily trampling by seashell and octopus gleaners, coral reef degradation and pollution from household waste dumped into the sea. According to local communities, the knee-deep mud is a recent phenomenon and is probably due to the extensive



Local Fishers gathering octopus and shellfish among seagrass at Bimbini. Copyright Community Centred Conservation C3



Researchers find evidence of Green turtle poaching. Copyright Community Centred Conservation C3

deforestation occurring on the island (Anjouan has lost 73% of its original forest cover).

The Union of the Comoros is situated at the northern end of the Mozambique Channel, equidistant from continental Africa and Madagascar. It comprises three volcanic islands: Grande Comore, Anjouan and Mohéli. The islands

host a number of ecologically important and vulnerable coastal habitats including coral reefs, mangroves and seagrass which support high marine biodiversity. The seagrass meadows of the other two islands of the Union of the Comoros: Grande Comore and Mohéli, have already been mapped by C3 in 2006 and 2007 and the new information from Anjouan will be incorporated into GIS seagrass maps currently being produced by C3 for the whole Union of the Comoros.

This work has been generously funded by the Rufford Small Grants Foundation, SeaWorld & Busch Gardens Conservation Fund and the PADI Foundation. ♡



Red knobbed Starfish (*Protoreaster linckii*). Copyright Community Centred Conservation C3



Anjouan

Anjouan (also known as Ndzwanii or Nzwani), population 277,500 (2006) is an autonomous island of the Union of Comoros, located in the Mozambique Channel. The total area of the island is 424 sq. kilometres.

African mainlanders, Creoles, Arabs, Malay-Polynesians, Antalotes and Shirazi Persians make up the population of Anjouan.

The economy of the island is dependent on agriculture and related industries. These industries employ over 80% of the work force. The island's main food staple is rice, most of which must be imported. Anjouan is the world's primary exporter of ylang-ylang oil, an ingredient in almost all perfumes.

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anjouan>
image courtesy of Google maps

