

Young environmental leaders overcome marine conservation challenges in the Comoros Islands.

By Chris Poonian, Al'yas'aa Ben Ahmed, Melissa Hauzer and Daniella Blake.

The Union of the Comoros faces serious challenges in effective management of marine resources, particularly in the face of climate change and burgeoning population growth. As an island state, with limited natural resources these pressures are likely to result in serious environmental degradation and socio-economic hardship.

In contrast to their poverty, the islands host a number of ecologically important and vulnerable coastal habitats, including

coral reefs, mangroves and seagrass beds, which support high marine biodiversity. These combined attributes of unique natural resources and intensive anthropogenic pressure underscore the importance of strengthening current efforts and implementing further management and conservation strategies which include local stakeholders and communities.

The 'Junior Ecoguard' initiative, established by C3-Comores, a collaborative programme between the national Ministry of the Environment and the British non-profit organization, Community Centred Conservation (C3), has raised aware-

ness of marine conservation issues and has seen the emergence of a new generation of concerned and conservation conscious Comorian constituency.

The original Junior Ecoguards came together in 2006 in the village of Nioumachoua, which is within the Mohéli Marine Park. They were trained in the theory and practice of marine ecology, endangered species conservation and public awareness-raising. Activities to date have included outreach events including lively theatre tours and talent competitions within local communities as well as nightly patrols of beaches

to reduce turtle poaching and learning how to snorkel and appreciate marine life firsthand.

The group of 30 teenagers has now reached over 5,000 people with their messages and have actively prevented poaching on local beaches. When a sample of turtle poachers was interviewed in 2007, they remarked that the Junior Ecoguards' moving plea to halt environmental destruction and conserve turtles had convinced them to stop poaching. One of the key factors in the success of this programme is that most of the Junior Ecoguards were once poachers themselves and so have intimate experience of

Right: Junior Ecoguards give village presentation about Turtle conservation.

Far right: Junior Ecoguards in training on Moheli Island.

Facing page bottom: The latest crop of Ecoguards in Hoani village.

Facing page top: Junior Ecoguards take to the stage in Sweden.

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the needs, means and motivations that make communities hunt turtles illegally.

The Junior Ecoguards received international recognition for their achievements at the UNEP-Volvo Adventure Awards 2008, where they won third prize. More recently, the group was awarded third prize in Reef Check's Year of the Reef Singing Contest with their catchy tune 'Oulanga' which was broadcast on the internet

The programme has now developed into a long term initiative with the goal of establishing a network of young environmental leaders in communities throughout all three islands of the Comoros. A second branch was established on Grande Comore in 2008, raising awareness

through village presentations and theatre and participating in the International Water Association's World Water Monitoring Day 2008. A third group of Junior Ecoguards was recently trained in April 2009 at the village of Hoani, Mohéli. The next step is to ensure that the flow of knowledge continues by encouraging current Junior Ecoguard teams to assist with the training of subsequent groups. We believe that by creating leadership capacity among the youth the appreciation and understanding of marine biodiversity can reach all corners of the country and the education process will retain the dynamism required to self-perpetuate.■

For further information: contact Community Centred Conservation (C3), www.c-3.org.uk

