
The value of the long-term Seychelles White-eye Recovery programme and challenges faced by the species

Elvina Henriette^{*1}, Gerard Rocamora^{†1}, and Andre Labiche¹

¹Island Biodiversity Conservation, University of Seychelles (IBC-UniSey) – P.O. Box 1348 Anse Royale, Mahé, Seychelles

Abstract

The Seychelles White-eye *Zosterops modestus* is one of the globally threatened endemic species. The White-eye became almost extinct because of the excessive nest predation exerted by introduced rats, particularly the Black rat *Rattus rattus*. As part of the Seychelles White-eye Recovery Programme (SWERP), started in 1998, two successive island translocations were conducted from the original source population on Conception Island to two rat free islands in 2001-03 (Frégate) and 2007 (Ile du Nord). Subsequently, the global population size of this species doubled from c. 300 birds in 1998 to 600 birds in 2012. Consequently, the species was downlisted from Critically Endangered to Endangered in the IUCN Red List. The Seychelles White-eye Species Action Plan requires another two island transfers to bring the species to Vulnerable and eventually down to Near-Threatened status. There are currently no rat-free islands suitable for the species in the Mahé group archipelago. Hence Grande Soeur Island, in the Praslin group which was recently rat-free were considered for a translocation of the White-eye from Conception Island. Moreover, a proposal for the reinforcement of the population on Mahe was considered. During a survey on Conception Island early 2018 it was discovered that the White-eye population had been dramatically reduced from ca. 300 individuals to less than a dozen due to invasion of the once rat-free island by the Black rat. The global population stands at ca. 400 individuals a reduction from 650 individuals in 2014. This stresses the key role of biodiversity and how all these island endemics restricted to islands freed of introduced rats remain highly vulnerable to reinvasion. So the more island populations are retored the better it is for the survival of the species, and this is what is being done as part of the SWERP. The long-term Seychelles White-eye Recovery programme (1998-2019) shows that it is possible to successfully save a species but that there are several challenges that needs to be faced. The success of conservation introductions along island restorations programmes paves the way for other species that faces similar problems.

Keywords: conservation, endangered species, islands, invasions, translocation

*Speaker

†Corresponding author: whiteye@seychelles.net