



Creatures of HABITAT

Sue Watt reports on three projects making a splash in remote areas

How weevils are helping to save manatees

In Cameroon's Lake Ossa Wildlife Reserve, tiny weevils just two millimetres long are helping to save African manatees, giant marine mammals that weigh around 500kgs. And they've earned Aristide Kamla, founder and CEO of the African Marine Mammal Conservation Organisation, the 2024 Whitley Award for his pioneering work to protect African manatee habitat.

"Manatees need to surface every five minutes," Aristide explained. "Giant salvinia forms a thick carpet on top of the water that prevents the manatee from coming up to breathe."

Ravenous salvinia weevils have been introduced to feast on the invasive weed that smothers the surface of the lake. Using the bugs

as a biological control and natural predator, Aristide and his team have cleared more than 70 per cent of the *Salvinia molesta*, which in 2021 covered half the lake's surface.

The Whitley Fund for Nature, which granted the award, is a UK charity supporting grassroots conservation leaders, focusing on inspiring projects that combine the latest science with community-based action.

Aristide engaged communities in manatee conservation and earned their trust, inviting them to see how weevils devour the invasive plants. He taught them how important manatees are to

Above:
Salvinia molesta covers the surface of the wetlands in Lake Ossa Wildlife Reserve
Below:
Aristide Kamla



marine ecosystems: their grazing on aquatic plants prevents overgrown fish habitats and their nutrient-loaded faeces enrich the seagrass beds, helping to improve water quality and carbon sequestration.

Aristide also works closely with local fishermen, training them to report sightings of marine mammals using an app called SIREN: to date they've evidenced more than 20,000 sightings. And by helping to developing fish farming he's also boosting the recovery of the freshwater ecosystem, encouraging a healthy population of manatees, which attracts more tourists to

the area. All these efforts are already paying dividends: "We are now seeing more manatees," he confirmed.



Mangrove restoration

Last year, the marine conservation organisation Blue Ventures began working with Eco-Rurale, a Senegalese NGO working with communities to protect mangroves vulnerable to overfishing and root-cutting. The benefits are already being seen. So far, they have reforested over 60 hectares of mangroves, created a nursery and installed oyster farming blocks in four villages.

Introducing oyster farming has given the NGO greater contact with local people and increased opportunities to raise awareness of the need for mangrove conservation. Farmers better understand the need for suitable oyster habitats and BV has funded trainers to teach soapmaking, pastry baking, and fruit and vegetable processing, helping local people start income-generating activities.

REGROWING ZANZIBAR'S REEFS

Renowned among divers worldwide, the beautiful coral reefs of Zanzibar's Mnemba Island have been struggling to survive in the face of overfishing, overtourism and climate change: as waters become warmer, the coral bleaches and dies, and the ability of this vital ecosystem to support myriad fish species diminishes. But coral can recover. Since September 2021, luxury operator &Beyond and Wild Impact (formerly the Africa Foundation) have been working with local divers and conservation rangers to grow new coral from small pieces of the reef, planting them on tables made of steel grids. Once the coral colonies are strong enough, they are returned to the reef to continue growing, with remarkable success: to date some 80 per cent of the house reef has been restored.



SIGNIFICANT SIGHTINGS

Findings making a splash

Shape-shifting octopus in Mozambique

The bizarre and elusive mimic octopus has been sighted off the coast of Mozambique, researchers from the Marine Megafauna Foundation (MMF) and Vilanculos Coastal Wildlife Sanctuary have confirmed. Usually spotted around Indonesia, this marks the first time the *Thaumoctopus mimicus* has been photographed in East African waters. A master of disguises, it can shift its shape and colour to resemble marine animals such as sea snakes, anemone, flatfish and lionfish to fool its predators and prey. "Discovering such extraordinary creatures in new habitats reminds us of the vast unknowns in marine environments, particularly in Africa," Dr Andrea Marshall, co-founder of MMF, commented. "We hope this finding will inspire awe and a renewed commitment to ocean conservation."



A whale of a time

A recent report reveals that blue whales, the world's largest mammals, are back in the seas around Seychelles. In the 1960s they were virtually wiped out in the northern reaches of the Indian Ocean by illegal Russian whalers. When Associate Professors Jeremy Kiszka and Kate Stafford began their research in 2020, they were thrilled to discover five previously unrecorded blue whales, identified through photographing their dorsal regions and unique colouration patterns.

Studying whale song detected on microphones, their latest research suggests

the peak time for whales in the area is March and April. They discovered that these tropical waters are also a productive environment for many other marine mammals, among them Bryde's, sperm and beaked whales. They're now working with tourism operators to ensure that whale-watching activities don't impact negatively on cetaceans and are planning further surveys and research to understand why blue whales have returned, whether they breed and feed in the Seychelles, what they eat there and how climate change might affect them.

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