

PRESS RELEASE

ISLAND CONSERVATION SOCIETY CONDEMNS RESUMPTION OF SOOTY TERN EGG COLLECTION

The decision to resume the collection of Sooty Tern eggs in Seychelles in 2026 is alarming and appears to prioritise short-term policy considerations over the available scientific evidence.

Recent national surveys conducted by the Island Conservation Society and the Ministry responsible for Environment show that Sooty Tern populations in Seychelles have declined dramatically in recent decades, with average reductions at colonies of around 61–70%, and some colonies experiencing declines of more than 90% (¹).

Sooty Terns are an important indicator of marine ecosystem health. Their breeding success reflects ocean productivity and fish availability, both of which are increasingly affected by pressures such as commercial fishing, climate change, habitat degradation and declining prey availability. Reports of chick starvation and breeding failure suggest that food shortages are already affecting parts of the population. Egg harvesting is only one of several pressures acting on the species, but a return to the practice can only add further pressure to already declining populations.

Given the scale of the decline and the uncertainty surrounding breeding success, the Island Conservation Society recommended a complete ban on egg harvesting for at least ten years, with an interim scientific review after five years. There were initial indications that the government recognised the seriousness of the situation. A shorter ban of two years was implemented, and many hoped this would be extended in light of the continuing evidence. The decision to resume egg collection therefore represents a significant step backwards and appears inconsistent with the scientific findings available.

In poorer societies, the exploitation of wildlife is often driven by the need to provide food or income. Historically this was the case in Seychelles, but nowadays such practices are less a necessity and more a choice. In 2015, Seychelles became the only sub-Saharan African country classified as a high-income nation by the World Bank.

Sooty Terns have a delayed age of first breeding, at about 6 years old. However, young inexperienced adults are more likely to breed successfully after a few years of experience. This means that population recovery is slow and requires sustained protection over at least ten years to allow any increase in numbers. A long-term ban would allow colonies time to recover from past commercial harvesting, improve understanding of national population dynamics, and reduce the likelihood that illegally harvested eggs enter the market.

The national moratorium on egg harvesting introduced in 2021, alongside the National Sooty Tern Census Programme led by the Ministry of Environment, Climate, Energy and Natural Resources in collaboration with the Island Conservation Society and the Islands Development Company, was an important step toward improving knowledge of the species' status. However, short-term increases observed at some sites do not offset the substantial long-term declines recorded across most colonies.

Stronger law enforcement is also urgently needed. Although Seychelles has strong conservation legislation, illegal egg harvesting continues at several protected sites such as Aride, Ile aux Récifs and Bancs Africains; and there has been little effective monitoring of legal quotas or enforcement when regulations are ignored. Legislation is only meaningful if it is implemented and enforced in practice.

A scientific study published in 2024 ⁽²⁾ has provided evidence that « egg harvesting has played a substantial role in driving the population decline of Sooty Terns to date and demonstrated that « continued harvesting will probably lead to further, possibly dramatic, declines in population size », and that « recent levels of egg harvesting in Seychelles are not sustainable ». Its results show that even low levels of harvesting, i.e. 10% of the population size, is unlikely to reverse population decline, and only long-term non-harvesting scenarios will allow the population to recover.

Based on the available evidence, there is no scientific justification for resuming egg harvesting at this time. Maintaining the ban for a sustained period would be a precautionary and responsible step, allowing populations time to stabilise and recover while further research examines the broader environmental drivers affecting seabird populations.

Protecting Sooty Terns is not only essential for conserving one of the largest seabird populations in the region, but also for safeguarding an important indicator of the health of Seychelles' marine ecosystems. Seychelles has built an international reputation as a country committed to environmental protection. Reversing the ban risks undermining that reputation and calls into question the country's commitment to protecting its natural heritage.

The Passenger Pigeon was once the most numerous bird in the United States, and perhaps the world, with an estimated population of 3–5 billion. Within roughly a century, the species was driven to extinction by industrial-scale hunting. At the time, the concept of conservation was barely understood. Today, however, we cannot claim the same ignorance. If we witness a dramatic decline in Sooty Tern numbers yet continue harvesting eggs without concern, we fail to learn from the past—and history will judge that failure.

- (1) Morgan M. & Cupidon A. (2021). Sooty Tern National Census Report 2021. Unpublished report to the Ministry of Agriculture, Climate Change and Environment, Mahé. Island Conservation Society. Republic of Seychelles.
- (2) Inch T., Nicoll M.A.C., Feare C.J. & Horswill C. (2024). Population viability analysis predicts long-term impacts of commercial Sooty Tern egg harvesting to a large breeding colony on a small oceanic island. *Ibis*, [166 \(4\)](#): 1296-1310.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ibi.13326>