

# PRESS RELEASE

## The Mauritian Wildlife Foundation

August 14, 2020

### An ecological disaster in Mauritius

On July 25, MV *Wakashio*, a Panama flagged tanker carrying over 4000 tons of heavy oil, lubricants and diesel ran aground off South East Mauritius, a mere 2 km away from Ile aux Aigrettes, island nature reserve managed by the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation (BirdLife Partner and IUCN member) and home to sub-populations of Pink Pigeons, Mauritius Olive White-eyes, Mauritius Fodies, Telfair's Skinks, Guenther's Geckos and dozens of endemic plants, most of which are IUCN red-listed. The vessel was on its way to Brazil when it hit the coral reef at about 2 km off Pointe d'Esny and in the vicinity of two important Ramsar sites (Blue Bay Marine Park and Pointe d'Esny wetlands), nature reserves (eg Ile aux Aigrettes) and islets national park.

The wreck was on the reef for 12 days before oil started leaking out of the tanker on Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> August. About 800 T spilled into the ocean, threatening Ile aux Aigrettes, the fragile marine ecosystem and the turquoise blue pristine lagoon. Within days the oil patch moved further north and reached the four islets overlooking the Mahebourg bay, Ile de la Passe, Ilot Vacoas, Ile au Phare and Ile Marianne key habitats for endemic reptiles such as Bouton and Bojer skinks which have gone extinct on mainland Mauritius. The Indian Ocean island nation, home to over 1.2 million people is heavily reliant on fishing and tourism, which has already been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The oil spill has badly impacted on the pristine lagoons, coral reefs, mangrove forests and biodiversity with images showing shorelines covered with black sludge, in what is turning out to be an environmental disaster and emergency.

The Mauritian Wildlife Foundation is at the forefront of responding to this crisis.

Dr Vikash Tatayah, MWF's Conservation Director declared: *'We had a 3 step plan as we anticipated an oil spill, but had to jump directly to step 3. Precautionary measures to protect threatened unique flora and fauna of Ile aux Aigrettes have now been completed. 12 Mauritius Olive White-eyes and 6 Mauritius Fodies were captured and transferred to the Black River Aviary facilities (also known as Gerald Durrell Endemic Wildlife Sanctuary) with the agreement of the National Parks and Conservation Service, to be kept until the conditions on Ile aux Aigrettes improve and we can then return them back. Similarly, 4,000 endemic plants from the plant nursery – some being very rare plants - have been transferred to mainland and are being kept at Forestry Services Mahebourg premises and Ferney Valley if needed. [https://www.facebook.com/MauritianWildlife/posts/3364742523614657?\\_tn\\_ =K-R](https://www.facebook.com/MauritianWildlife/posts/3364742523614657?_tn_ =K-R) MWF staff on the Kestrel, our ecotour boat, have been relentlessly supporting the oil pumping effort. Two tanks have been installed on the boat and oil on the sea is pumped into it. Then the boat returns to the mainland to be emptied and the process starts all over again day after day, across the bay, from 7 am to 6 pm.'*

*'MWF has rallied volunteers through several calls on social media, with the objective of setting-up teams to help the cleaning effort, where needed, once this work will start. The response from our corporate donors and individuals has been fantastic', says Jean Hugues Gardenne, MWF's Fundraising & Communications Manager. 'The Mauritian population as one has rallied behind the cause and donations have been coming in since day 1.'* he added.

To date the risk of an additional spill is reduced, but present. Most of the oil has been pumped out of the ship but there are still some hazardous products remaining and a change in weather conditions could, break the ship apart and scatter some remaining oil across the bay. Authorities have been deploying additional booms as France sent equipment and technical expertise from neighbouring Reunion Island. Japan also flew across a team of 6 experts. More assistance has or is arriving from the UN, India, South Africa, Russia amongst others.

Thousands of residents and volunteers are assisting in the mop up exercises through booms fashioned from stretch nets, sugarcane straw and plastic bottles sewed together with nylon thread to channel oil on the water. These efforts are paying off, as the booms hold up the oil and facilitate the pumping.

*'For the time being we are not risking volunteers for any clean-up exercises, says Jean Hugues, as we remain careful on the toxicity of the products and the risks on the health of persons exposed to it without proper protective equipment. We have had to fully equip our front line staff, he adds. Many persons have been wading into the oil spilled waters with only thongs and wearing shorts and it is extremely dangerous. A couple of hours exposed to fumes can cause headaches, nose and eye burns and even dizziness.*

MWF is also looking at the impact of this oil spill on seabirds' communities in the area and in addition is carrying out surveys in other areas. Fortunately, so far there haven't been any records of seabirds affected, with only one waterbird reported dead to date. Unaffected Red-tailed Tropicbirds have been sighted to fly over the region. Populations of Lesser Night Geckos, Bouton's skinks and Bojer's skinks are being collected from the South East islets to be kept in a biosecure place on the mainland. These reptiles have gone extinct on mainland Mauritius. <https://in.reuters.com/news/picture/oil-spill-devastates-mauritius-after-jap-idINRTX7OSZM>.

*"While there is no indication of how long the cleanup operation will take, the impact of this spill will definitely be felt for a much longer time to come. The local communities relying on fishing to earn a living are heavily affected, and currently those residing on the coast line are constantly exposed to the fumes and vapours. Mangroves, corals and marine ecosystem are affected and the impact on tourism, a pillar of our economy will be huge. The conservation work carried out on Ile aux Aigrettes for nearly four decades is at stake.'* concludes Jean-Hugues.

#### **For interviews**

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#### **For news updates**

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## How to donate

You can support Mauritian Wildlife Foundation oil spill recovery efforts, by donating through the different following platforms.

Just-giving platform:

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Go-fund-me platform:

<https://gf.me/u/ypit3h> or,

Website <https://www.mauritian-wildlife.org/donate> mentioning 'Wakashio' or

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