

# The Law of the Wild

An Ecologist's Life



Ian R. Swingland



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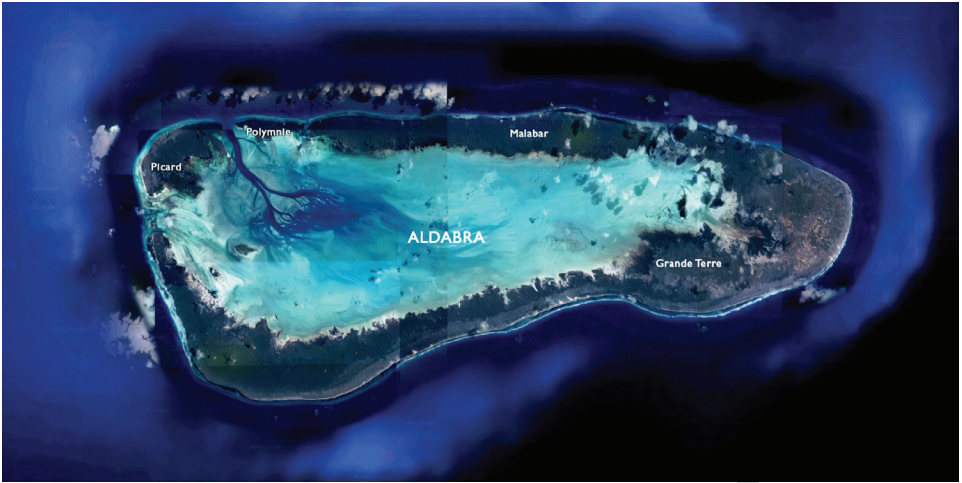
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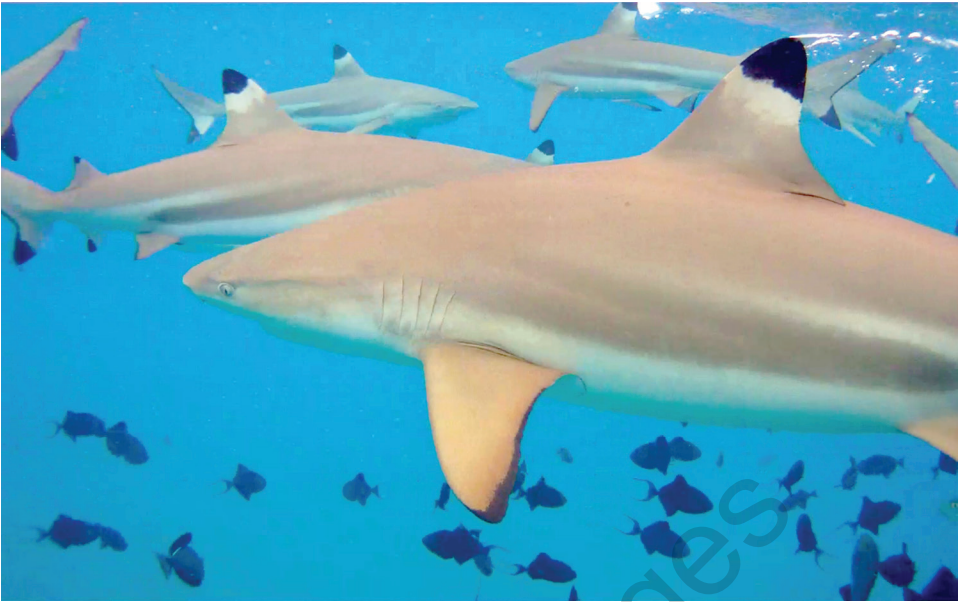
Aldabra Atoll (Courtesy © Google Maps)

### Living and Working on the Atoll

I had two main research sites one in the northern island at Anse Malabar and the other at Cinq Cases on Grande Terre, in the extreme east (see Atoll map p.117, *Phil.Trans.R.Soc.Lond.B* 286). Fred Topliffe, the director during my first tour, was anxious about me using the landing beach halfway along the northern side of Malabar that could only be approached by sailing outside the Atoll so he wanted me always to take two boats (a dory and the large



Bernard, me, nephew Brian, Harry, Inesse Houreau. Aldabra 1976

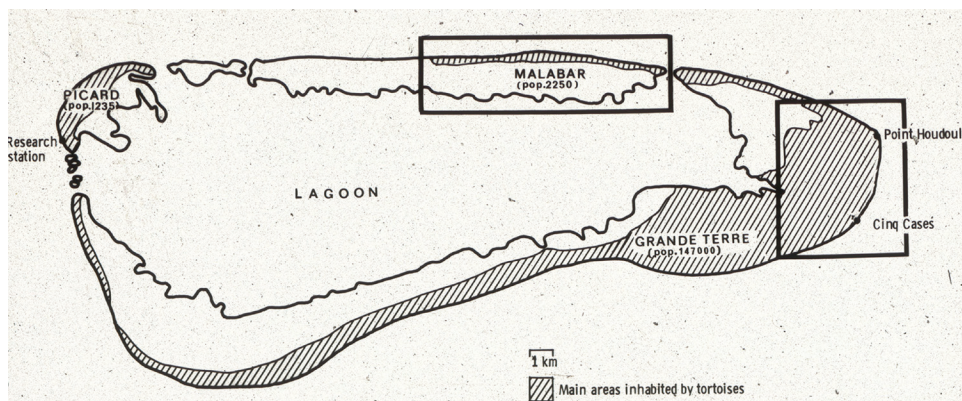


Black-tipped reef sharks (*Carcharhinus melanopterus*) Photo: Jon Rawlinson (licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license)

aluminium 'bumboat') and two engines just in case. There were very strong currents around the Atoll and should an Evinrude engine fail one could end up disappearing forever. Anse Malabar was a very small beach in the middle of Malabar or Middle Island on the open sea side. It had very dense vegetation whereas Cinq Cases ('five huts') was a large open area on the extreme south-east coast of Grande Terre that needed a high-speed dash, planning (hydrodynamic lift) if possible, lifting the hull onto the surface avoiding the coral heads at high tide, to get from the Station in the west right across the lagoon to the extreme east before the spring high tide disappeared otherwise the engine would hit coral heads and the pin securing the screw to the driveshaft would constantly need replacing. The 'high-speed dash' was not often possible for our extended trips into the field with all the supplies we took with us so we had to resort to using a large dory negotiating round coral heads which needed either polarising sunglasses or the practised eye of the Seychellois.

By the time we could set off from the Station in the west the tide was already going down in the east and we often had to pole or push the boat the last half mile waist deep in water struggling through the mangrove-lined creek. Having arrived at Bras Takamaka, we tied up the boat exhausted. We had backpack frames to cart all our rations, emergency water in the dry season, tents and scientific gear another few miles across the island to Cinq Cases on the coast. Like Anse Malabar, there was a hut with some crudely fashioned bunks and drums which stored rainwater from the roof





Aldabra Atoll, Indian Ocean, showing the sampling sites. The hatched area is frequented by giant tortoises and the remainder shows the extent of dense inland *Pemphis* scrub



Carrying giant tortoises was an occupational hazard as they often relieved themselves which is why I never did put them on my shoulder like the Seychellois! Royal Society Aldabra Research Station Aldabra 1974

coastal grasslands that had very little shade.

Out in the field I started work at first light walking set transects and using a tape recorder recorded every tortoise that I came across within 50 feet, took note of their disc number if they had one, measured their third dorsal scute and took note of their sex. This was later transcribed from the tape when I got back to the station in the air-conditioned library into formatted sheets and later when back in Oxford these data were input into a main-frame computer and using SPSS as I had with my rook research in Edinburgh carried out analysis to find out what these amazing animals were up to and what life history strategies they were employing.

The Aldabra giant tortoise nares are the most forward part of their head enabling them to drink from a teaspoon as I have demonstrated. This surprised Nick Arnold, Curator of Herpetology, Natural History Museum London as he had seen the algae in nasal chamber of skeletal

conditions will be more abundant<sup>77</sup>. This result refers to numbers of males and females in the population. By contrast, no clear prediction can be made about the allocation of resources to the two sexes.



Hot babes and cool dudes!



Harry Charles making a tortoise long-stretch

### Long stretch and the flightless rail

A peculiar posture that both sexes of giant tortoise demonstrated was to stretch up as far as they could on their legs and stretch out their necks. I called this the long-stretch posture and it can easily be elicited by humans tickling the inside of their back legs.

Whenever a flight-

77 Frank, S.A. & Swingland, I.R. (1988) Sex ratio under conditional sex expression. *J. Theor. Biol.* 135: 415-418.



less white-throated rail or Cuvier's rail approached a tortoise, especially if they started pecking, it would stretch up and the rail will inspect every inch of the body presumably for ectoparasites. Most of the time rails were searching for other food which included tortoise hatchlings, rotten eggs we excavated or anything else. They were quite fearless as with all animals on Aldabra except perhaps the goats. The difference being we chased the goats for food but not the others.



I was elected as the youngest member of the Zoological Club founded in 1822, a dining club following meetings and lectures of the Zoological Society of London, but it ceased to exist in the 1990s after interfering busybodies fetched the ire of the Society.