

# The Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Mauritius

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Chers membres

Certains d'entre vous ont dû voir cet article dans l'express parlant de déforestation à Chamarel et mentionnant une lettre de la Société Royale, d'autres ont peut-être vu cette lettre sur le site web de l'express d'autres encore ont peut-être entendu une rumeur de-ci delà sur cette question. Certains en seront perplexes, d'autres se demandant de quoi il s'agit et comment le nom de la Société Royale circule de cette manière.

Alors, vous devant une explication je voudrais vous éclairer sur le cours des événements.

Il y a tout juste un mois, à la fin mars je reçois un appel au secours d'une personne concernant un déboisement sauvage avec des effets dramatiques sur la flore et même la faune endémique menacée d'extinction sur la route de Chamarel. Demandant des précisions il se trouve que ce déboisement sur plusieurs centaines de mètres avec l'abattage de nombreux grands arbres endémique dont des ébéniers noirs (*Diospyros tessellaria* aux diamètres variant entre 50 et 100 cm) et des colophanes (*Canarium paniculatum*) parmi bien d'autres, était en cours pour permettre l'élargissement de la dite route.

J'ai pris la décision, après consultation avec le comité exécutif, d'écrire une lettre au ministre de l'environnement détaillant la situation et les préoccupations de la Société Royale. La rédaction et la composition de cette lettre devait être faite avec énormément de soins si je voulais avoir les meilleures chances d'atteindre nos objectifs. Le lundi 5 avril j'ai communiqué ma lettre par email au ministre de l'environnement, copie au ministre de l'Agro-industrie, des Infrastructures Publiques, au bureau du Premier Ministre ainsi qu'au Leader de l'opposition. Quinze jours sont alors passés sans réponse ni accusé réception.

Le lundi 19 avril, les services postaux étant ré-ouverts, j'ai envoyé la lettre à nouveau mais par courrier postal recommandé cette fois. Le vendredi 23 avril suivant, n'ayant toujours pas reçu de réponse, j'ai pris contact avec la députée Johanna Bérenger que j'ai rencontrée le même jour pendant plus d'une heure et demi pour discuter de sa possible participation au parlement sur cette question. Nous avons convenu qu'elle poserait une question au parlement au ministre de l'environnement le mardi 27 avril suivant, ce qui fut fait très adroitement. La réponse du ministre n'a pas eu la même élégance, ni très adroite et encore moins convaincante. Johanna a déposé la lettre au parlement en faisant de ce fait un document public pouvant être publié dans les journaux.

Nous avons pensé aller à la presse dès le début mais nous nous sommes vite ravisés car la Société Royale étant neutre et apolitique, ne peut entrer dans des polémiques à tendance politique. Mon objectif n'étant pas, ni ne sera, de faire un coup de pub qui ferait mal médiatiser la RSAS nous avons donc décidé de ne pas aller vers la presse nous-même. Nous ne sommes pas là pour faire des coups de pub mais pour développer une organisation qui est respectée des autorités et qui a de l'influence .

Aujourd'hui nous maintenons cette position. Toutefois la presse peut s'en emparer et en faire des articles. Plusieurs personnes et institutions se sont manifestées en soutien de notre action, tant à Maurice qu'à l'étranger. Johanna a posté la lettre sur le site web de l'express et un article sur sa page Facebook.

Lundi j'ai réuni mon comité pour discuter de la situation et la marche à suivre. Il y a une chose de certain, le nom de la Société circule bien et nous recevons beaucoup de soutiens.

**Président : Pierre de B. Baissac, 5423 6032 ; Secrétaire ; Marie-Josée Martial-Craig, 5729 1503 ; Trésorier : Jean-Marie Huron, 5796 8200.**

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Vous trouverez en pièce jointe ma lettre au ministre.

Je vous remercie pour votre attention et

Bonne lecture

Pierre Baissac

Président

Hon. Kavydass Ramano  
Minister of Environment, Solid Waste  
Management and Climate Change

5 April 2021

Dear Minister

### **Deforestation along B104 Road at Chamarel**

I have very recently been informed that a roadside deforestation is currently taking place at Chamarel for the account of the Road Development Authority for the purpose of slope stability and landslide prevention along an approximately one kilometer stretch of the R104 road.

It appears that this tract of land is being cleared, or rather clear felled to bare earth, by heavy machinery with the result that many endemic trees are being destroyed in the process. Photos are attached in annexure for your information. I am informed that tall black ebony trees (*Diospyros tessellaria*) of diameters at breast height (DBH) ranging between 50cm and 100cm, and bois colophane (*Canarium paniculatum*) of diameter exceeding 100cm, amongst many others, have been destroyed. It may be difficult for you to appreciate what this means, but a tall ebony tree of that diameter felled by the sweep of a bucket could be up to one thousand years old.

This is very disturbing news indeed given that this area represents a unique forest type of Mauritian native vegetation, a great many of which are endemic species. A description of this unique ecosystem is provided in the following extract from the publication by Page and D'Argent (1997) *A Vegetation Survey of Mauritius*:

“This forest type is subjected to a dry period between May and November with the driest months occurring in October and November. The forest physiognomy is markedly different from the upland forests and includes characteristic heterophylly in the juvenile stages of numerous trees and shrubs (Vaugnan & Wiehe 1939)”.

Page & D'Argent specifically describe the region of Chamarel Hills as follows (p68): “The forest at Chamarel includes characteristics of the true lowland species, semi-deciduous species and transitional rainforest. The areas illustrated is in the authors' opinion the best tract of lowland/transitional forest on Mauritius and was found to have a high diversity of native taxa, of which four are classified as critically endangered. This area was noted to have extremely good natural regeneration due to the near full native canopy.”

I must note that this study, which I personally managed and supervised when I was employed by the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation, was funded by the IUCN, Netherlands Rainforest Grant for the purpose of the identification, protection and conservation of our native forest, in particular the key forest biodiversity areas.

Descriptions of all the zones around the island are accompanied by area maps where all the biodiversity rich zones or hotspots are highlighted in colour, where **Purple** represents Grade 1 native vegetation forests, **Blue** represents Grade 2 native vegetation and **Green** represents Grade 3 native/exotic vegetation, Grade 1 being

forests which are high quality areas which support 70% or more native vegetation cover, Grade 2 being moderate quality forests where the indigenous vegetation cover is between 50 and 70%, and Grade 3 where indigenous species occupy 20% and 50% of the overall vegetation.

The map for the Chamarel area (Figure 1 attached) clearly indicates the native rich forested areas as described above. A close up view focusing on the roadworks (Figure 2) shows that the top portion of the site is situated right next to the Grades 1 and 2 zones, and the lower portion being surrounded by Grade 3 i.e. 20% and 50% indigenous species occupancy along with degraded areas. During a rapid visit by people passing through twenty two native plant species were identified on the site as follows:

Table 1.

	Scientific Name	Common Name
1	<i>Mimusops petiolaris</i>	Maka
2	<i>Canarium paniculatum</i>	Bois colophane
3	<i>Cassine orientalis</i>	Bois d'olive
4	<i>Diospyros tessellaria</i>	Bois d'ébène noir
5	<i>Diospyros leucomelas</i>	Bois d'ébène blanc
6	<i>Diospyros melanida</i>	Bois d'ébène marbré
7	<i>Tambourissa quadrifolia</i>	Bois tambour
8	<i>Foetida mauritiana</i>	Bois puant
9	<i>Ochna mauritiana</i>	Bois bouquet banane
10	<i>Homalium integrifolium</i>	Bois cyclone
11	<i>Tarrena borbonica</i>	Bois de rat
12	<i>Eugenia lucida</i>	Bois clou
13	<i>Eugenia sieberi (?)</i>	Bois clou
14	<i>Eugenia tinifolia</i>	Bois de nèfle
15	<i>Erythroxylum sideroxyloides</i>	Bois de ronde
16	<i>Erythroxylum hypericifolium</i>	Bois à Balais
17	<i>Grangeria borbonica</i>	Bois balais
18	<i>Dodonea viscosa</i>	Bois de reinette
19	<i>Doratoxylum apeltatum</i>	Bois de sagaie rouge
20	<i>Molinea macrantha</i>	Bois de sagaie
21	<i>Myonima nitens</i>	Bois pintade
22	<i>Scutia myrtina</i>	Liane bambara

This examination of the site was accompanied by the following very distressing observations:

- a. The rapid visit revealed that some very large endemic trees were being destroyed, felled by large JCBs. These included tall ebenier noir trees (*D. tessellaria*) with diameters ranging between 50cm and 100cm at breast height (DBH) and a bois colophane (*Canarium paniculatum*) with a DBH of at least 100cm (i.e. one meter) amongst the many others of less impressive size. As I have stated above it is necessary to realise that ebonies of that size are very, very old trees, possibly between 500 and 1000 years of age.

- b. Many seedlings were found growing under the native trees, mainly the ebonies, confirming the statement by Page and D'Argent "This area was noted to have extremely good natural regeneration due to the near full native canopy."
- c. Finally, and also cause of serious concern, was the particularly distressing presence of a kestrel, the most emblematic bird of Mauritius of international fame, reduced to only seven birds in the 1970s but saved from extinction after decades of dedicated work. The bird landed at not more than 2m from the person who contacted me, puffing out defensively as if to protect its nest situated obviously very close nearby. It seems that not only threatened trees but also endangered and protected fauna are being destroyed on Chamarel R104.

Dear Minister, we do accept that from time to time our road and transport infrastructure has to be upgraded, secured and improved. This, though, may not be done at any cost. You are, I am quite sure, well aware that Mauritius is classed amongst the most vulnerable countries, particularly the Small Island Developing States (SIDS), to the impacts of climate change and that we are confronted with serious environmental pressures such as intense rainfall over very short periods, sea level rise and the accelerating erosion and loss of our beaches.

To mitigate the effects of these climate induced damages the country has put in place so-called adaptation measures. I would say that the present road works is classed as an adaptation measure. We must not forget, however, that the island, like most other parts of the world is suffering from severe loss of native ecosystems and erosion of our most unique native biodiversity, loss essentially linked to human activity.

Our native biodiversity should not be viewed simply as an emotional asset. Our forests, our ebonies, our geckos, kestrels, coq des bois (Paradise fly catchers), not to forget our riverine and marine environments could become a major economic asset with a new form of tourism. As I mentioned earlier we are losing our beaches at a very preoccupying rate, threatening our economic pillar, tourism. Development and so-called climate change adaptation should not mask or cloud these key issues.

It has now become most important and urgent that works of the nature being undertaken on road R104 be in the best manner and motivation possible to protect our heavily threatened environment with a scrupulous respect and application of the laws of the country, our policies and the international conventions we have signed.

I regret to say that this does not seem to be the case with Chamarel Road R104. It would appear that, in spite of the very severe impact to our threatened native flora and fauna, no studies or no Environmental Impacts Assessment studies have been undertaken. I am aware that the Environment Protection Act 2002 as amended does not make it mandatory for EIAs to be undertaken for road works. This requirement is mentioned nowhere in the law and is particularly absent from Schedule 6 parts A or B of the EPA, thereby creating the illusion of exemption.

I would, however, like to demonstrate here through the examination of current legislation that this is not the case and that a project of this nature is not, in fact, exempt of an EIA.

## **The Environment Protection Act 2002 (as amended)**

The EPA states clearly in Schedule 6 PART B: **List of undertakings requiring an Environmental Impact Assessment** clauses:

**10.** *Conversion of forest land to any other land use, and*

**24.** *Land clearing and development, including installation of high tension lines in environmentally sensitive areas such as water catchment areas, waterlogged areas, wetlands, mountain slopes and islets.*

Here we do have infringements of these clauses as there is:

- Conversion of forest land to another land use, and
- Land clearing and development in a mountain slope, the mountain slope being Chamarel Hill.

## **Forest and Reserves Act 1983**

### **14 Offences**

(2) No person shall-

(a) Without the written authority of the authorised officer or in the case of forest land, the owner-

(i) Introduce any article or thing injurious to plant life onto Crown land forest land or a mountain, river or nature reserve;

(iv) damage, destroy, dig or remove any forest produce on or from Crown land, forest land or any reserve or be in possession of any forest produce so damaged, destroyed, dug or removed;

(v) act negligently or maliciously in a manner which causes or is likely to cause soil erosion;

f) Be in a national forest, between 6 pm and 6 am; plant, cultivate or intentionally spread or propagate cuscuta creeper; or damage or interfere in any way with a protected plant on any Crown land or reserve.

Here we do have here the following very blatant infringements:

- With the use of heavy machinery the introduction of articles and things injurious to plant life onto Crown land forest land and mountain land has taken place,
- Causing damage, destruction and removal of forest produce on (Crown) State forest land (evidence the accompanying photos)
- The authorities having thereby most certainly acted negligently in a manner likely to cause soil erosion. (You will note that though pretending to act for the prevention of landslide and soil erosion the very denudation going on at the moment in fact favours landslide and erosion at the next heavy rain). And finally,
- Having, thereby, caused damage or interfered with protected plants on Crown/State land or reserve.

## **The Native Terrestrial Biodiversity and National Parks Act No. 14 of 2015**

### **PART VI – PROTECTION OF FAUNA AND FLORA**

#### **21. Protected wildlife**

(1) Any person who wishes to –

(a) pick, pluck, gather, collect, cut, uproot, process, breed, hunt, rear, have in his possession or under his control, or otherwise obtain, plant, propagate, purchase, sell, offer or display to the public, any protected wildlife or its derivative;

shall make a written application to the Director for a permit.

(2) Where the Director receives an application under subsection (1), he may, subject to such terms and conditions as he considers appropriate, issue a permit.

(3) No person shall, except in accordance with a permit issued by the Director and subject to such conditions as may be imposed, do any act referred to in subsection (1).

I, therefore, wish to inform you that the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Mauritius views this situation with grave concern, particularly at a time when your Ministry, realizing the gravity and urgency of our environmental situation, has launched just over a year ago at your own initiative a major review of the situation. You have held, to that effect, the Assises de l'Environnement in December 2019, followed by a consultative workshop a year later in December 2020 and a review of the EPA for which you have requested comments and suggestions, all very important actions.

### **Assises de l'Environnement**

### **Biodiversité et Ressources Naturelles**

### **Ministère de l'Environnement, de la Gestion des déchets et du Changement climatique**

#### **Aim of the Assises de l'Environnement**

The aim is to provide a forum for discussion on the means for the protection, as well as conservation of the biodiversity, environmentally sensitive areas (ESAs) and natural resources through a concerted and participatory approach. Its objectives are to protect and conserve critical ecological systems and resources which are essential for life-support, livelihoods, economic growth and biodiversity through sustainable practices, legislative framework and enforcement.

#### **Targets:**

- Achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 15 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to “protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”
- 
- Address the underlying causes of biodiversity loss by mainstreaming biodiversity across government and society
- Reduce the direct pressures on biodiversity and promote sustainable use

Dear Minister, these targets are most laudable but through lack of determination they could fail just as the highly publicized CBD Aichi Targets with their target dates of 2020 have been the most dismal failure with not one single objective of the twenty reaching anywhere near fulfillment. We must at all cost ensure that this will not be the case the SDGs for Mauritius and your vision.

It is clear that the current approach and activity being undertaken at Chamarel for the count of the Road Development Authority is completely in opposition to the objectives set in your own vision and is contrary to the law.

If we really want to overcome the huge looming environmental problems that face us we cannot carry on with the old practices and business as usual approach. We will have to not only change our operational and thinking model but completely transform it. I pronounced myself firmly on that issue at the consultative workshop last December. In trying to conceive the future we will have to be bold, courageous and imaginative. It will require considerable honesty, dedication and determination. I am afraid the Chamarel project does not have these qualities.

We, the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Mauritius, therefore, formally request you to place an immediate Stop Order on all works being undertaken on the present R104 project until such time that a full investigation has been undertaken and its recommendations made.

I remain at your full disposal to participate in any discussions, workshops or meetings relating to the present matter.

Yours sincerely

**Pierre de Boucherville Baissac**  
**President**

Copy to:

Hon. Pravind Kumar Jugnauth, Prime Minister  
Hon. Mahendranuth Hurreeram, Minister of National Infrastructure and Community Development;  
Hon. Manesh Gobin, Attorney General, Minister of Agro-Industry & Food Security  
Hon. Xavier Luc Duval, Leader of the Opposition