



Rivière Noire's green belt

A few miles from Morne Brabant, near the "lands of seven colours", Chamarel and the peak of Rivière Noire – at 828 m the highest point of the island - lies the National Park of the Gorges of Rivière Noire. Stretching out over an area of 6,500 hectares this is one of last endemic flora and fauna sanctuaries of Mauritius, its fragile balance now under threat from foreign plants. It may be difficult to believe that such a grandiose and largely still unexplored landscape would be vulnerable to such a danger, yet it is a real one.

Botanist Jean-Claude Sevathian is one of the pillars of the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation (MWF), a local association involved in the protection of the environment.

He supervises the safeguarding of critically endangered species. "To inexperienced nature lovers the Gorges of Rivière Noire are magnificent" he says "but to the trained eye the landscape has an unsatisfactory biodiversity. Eighty per cent of the area is covered in invasive plants." Among these is the guava of China (*psidium cattlianum*), the Sri Lankan privet (*ligustrum robustum*), the "piquant loulou" the fearsome Hip-tage, and the ravenale or "traveler's palm" from Madagascar. "The colour of the canopy shows the extent to which the forest has been invaded" says the botanist. "A true endemic forest is heterogeneous. It has several colour patches in a million different shades, indicating numerous species. A totally homogenous forest however, where the colour is the same all over, is a sign of one specific dominant plant having invaded the site." The Gorges of Rivière Noire are invaded to such an extent that the MWF has given up. "The entire island is endangered" says

Jean-Claude Sevathian "only 30 % of our land is covered by forests and of these only 2 % is still primeval forest. There is a lot of work to be done and only a small budget. At the moment we prefer to work on what can still be saved.

He has made his point; the Gorges of Rivière Noire are not a priority. However the MWF is not totally disinterested and has an important project for the protection of endangered fauna. "We are working on the census and follow up of birds. To date we have counted no less than 380 big Mauritian Echo Parakeets, 300 Pink Pigeons and nearly 3500 Rousettes (large arboreal bats). We take some birds from the gorges to re-populate other sanctuaries in Mauritius."

The site however remains a national park and falls under the Department of Agro-forestry and Fisheries. Listed as a park in 1994, the Gorges of Rivière Noire were the very first nature conservation area of Mauritius. Since then, eight more conservation areas have been set up. At the Gorges' National Park conservationists work relentlessly to restore the endemic flora, removing the invasive plants; maintaining the paths and manning information centres about the fauna.

"Not enough" says our guide Yan de Maroussem who knows the gorges inside out since childhood. He is a seasoned sports man and goes hiking two to three times a week in the gorges. As far as we know he is the only guide for the area and has a great respect for the site. Yan is an inexhaustible source of information, guiding the hikers along still undiscovered trails. Thanks to him, an exceptional corner of nature is now revealed for all to enjoy.

LA RIVIÈRE DE
MARE AUX JONCS.