

MISSION REPORTS N°7

MERCI PROJECT

MISSION TO THE SAINTES ISLANDS

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MISSION REPORT - June 2023

Study and eradication of invasive exotic turtles in the Saintes islands, Terre de Haut, Guadeloupe

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CONTEXT

The MERCI project ("Managing Exotic Reptiles on Caribbean Islands"), led by the association Caribaea Initiative (CI), aims to establish management plans for invasive exotic reptile species on the islands of the Lesser Antilles based on results of robust scientific studies. In Guadeloupe, attention is drawn to the Antillean slider, *Trachemys stejnegeri*, and the pond slider, *T. scripta*, both considered as invasive alien species in the Lesser Antilles.

Following the communication of the progress of the MERCI project, the Conservatoire du Littoral, in agreement with the Town Hall of Terre de Haut – one of the islands of Les Saintes, in the southwest of Guadeloupe – called on CI scientists to carry out an eradication campaign of a pond infested by trachemydes (see report Nº5 of the MERCI project). The eradication campaign provided an opportunity to collect information on the diet, blood parasites and behavior of invasive alien turtles.

ACTIVITIES CARRIED-OUT

Collection of individuals and field data

Seventy-one individuals of the species *T. stejnegeri* were collected during six missions with nets and basking traps, from March to April 2023 (Fig. 1). Individuals were killed by Mr. CAMBRONE, who has a certification for the use of non-hosted wild animals for scientific purposes (see report Nº5), in compliance with the procedures required by the regulations.



Figure 1. Capture of invasive exotic trachemydes in Les Saintes with net and basking traps.

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Morphological data (apparent species, sex, age class, weight, photos of temples, Fig. 2), behavioral data (latency and number of rollover attempts when the individual is placed on its back, a measure of response to predation, Fig. 3) and blood samples were collected on each individual captured. These data will enable us to detect variations in Guadeloupe's exotic populations compared with their native populations.



Figure 2. Morphological data measured on invasive exotic trachemidae in Les Saintes: identification of species by temple color, and sex by tail length (here, a male), weighing and measurement.



Figure 3. Behavioral tests on invasive exotic trachemidae in Les Saintes.

Raising public awareness

Based on feedback received from island residents during the first mission, it became clear that actions were needed to raise awareness among the local population and visitors about the impact of invasive alien trachemids on local biodiversity, and to explain the study and eradication project in the pond. To this end, the team, in coordination with Dr. Sophie LABAUDE, Communication Officer for the MERCI project, produced an explanatory educational panel (see report Nº5), replicable for other ponds facing infestation by invasive turtles (Appendix). This panel provides the general public, in an adapted format, with key information for understanding the actions carried out on site (rehabilitation of the pond via turtle eradication), for understanding the problem of invasive exotic species, and particularly turtles, while giving an overview of the local biodiversity that can be observed in Guadeloupe's ponds. The panel was installed near the pond, in coordination with Mr. DE PROFT, our contact at the Conservatoire du Littoral, and the town council (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Explanatory panel on the impact of invasive exotic turtles on local biodiversity and the study and eradication project at the Marigot pond in Les Saintes (see Appendix).

In order to reach a wider audience with information about the issue and the project, a TV report was coordinated with the local TV channel Guadeloupe la 1ère (Fig. 5). The report was broadcast on the 1 p.m. news on Thursday, March 2, 2023.

Link: https://la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/guadeloupe/programme-video/la1ere_guadeloupe_le-13h-en-guadeloupe/diffusion/4643644-emission-du-jeudi-02-mars-2023.html



Figure 5. Photogram of the Guadeloupe la 1ère local channel's report on the project to study and eradicate invasive turtles in Les Saintes.

CONTINUATION OF THE PROJECT

The entire digestive tract contents were collected for genetic analysis of stomach contents to determine the food preferences of these species in invaded territories and better understand their impact on local biodiversity. Liver samples were also collected to determine the taxonomic composition of the parasites present in the population, the individual parasite load and the infestation rate of the population.

Digestive tract contents and liver parasites are currently being analyzed to identify the taxonomic groups present via genetic analysis using the metabarcoding technique. The genetic analysis is being carried out by Dr. CAMBRONE and student Ms. Maryne ROMUALD (2nd year Bachelor of Technology, Biological Engineering, Environmental Sciences and Ecotechnologies), in collaboration with Dr. BEZAULT.

La Mare de Marigot Un écosystème en réhabilitation

Les mares sont des étendues d'eau stagnante, peu profondes. Elles représentent des écosystèmes riches et de grande valeur, en particulier dans le contexte actuel de réchauffement climatique. En effet, elles apportent fraicheur et humidité et fournissent des points d'eau pour les oiseaux et chauves-souris qui viennent s'y abreuver. Les mares sont aussi le refuge d'une faune et d'une flore variées : nénuphars, poissons d'eau douce, libellules, gastéropodes, ainsi qu'une biodiversité invisible de microorganismes. Elles constituent enfin un lieu de reproduction privilégié pour les batraciens.

Tout comme d'autres, la Mare de Marigot constitue ainsi un réservoir de biodiversité pour les espèces natives de la Guadeloupe et des îles des Saintes.

Certaines libellules peuvent passer plusieurs années de leur existence à l'état de larve dans l'eau, en se nourrissant essentiellement de larves de moustiques.





Lorsque des espèces non originaires d'un milieu s'y installent, elles peuvent proliférer et affecter la biodiversité locale. On parle d'espèces exotiques envahissantes

Etudier et réguler les reptiles envahissants

La réhabilitation de la Mare de Marigot s'inscrit dans le cadre du projet MERCI (« Maîtrise des Espèces de Reptiles exotiques dans la Caraïbe Insulaire »), mené par l'ONG Caribaea Initiative. L'objectif est d'étudier différentes espèces de reptiles exotiques envahissants dans les Petites . Antilles afin de mieux les contrôler.





Tortues invasives : une menace pour l'écosystème

Dans la Mare de Marigot, trois espèces de tortues classées parmi les 100 espèces les plus envahissantes au monde ont été recensées. Omnivores, voraces et très compétitrices, ces tortues d'eau douce exercent une forte pression de prédation sur la faune et la flore des mares et subtilisent les ressources aux espèces natives. Leur prolifération mène également à une détérioration de la qualité de l'eau et pose un risque sanitaire avec la transmission possible de maladies comme la salmonellose. Dans la Mare de Marigot, la végétation aquatique a diminué et l'eau est devenue trouble.

Pour limiter leur impact négatif, la population de tortues invasives de la Mare de Marigot est régulée grâce à des pièges à tortues. Les individus capturés sont étudiés afin de mieux comprendre leur impact sur les espèces locales.

























