

Tiny Seychelles island coaxes bird back from brink

AFP | Cousin Island, Seychelles

Giant tortoises amble across Cousin Island as rare birds flit above.

The scene attests to a stunning success for BirdLife International, a conservation group that bought the tiny Seychelles isle in 1968 to save a songbird from extinction.

Thick vegetation smothers ruins that are the only reminder of the coconut and cinnamon plantations that covered the island when the group stepped in to protect the Seychelles Warbler.

Now teeming with flora and fauna and boasting white beaches, Cousin Island is firmly on the tourist map, with managers scrambling to contain visitor numbers and soften their negative environmental impact.

More than 16,000 people visited the island in 2018, compared with 12,000 a decade earlier.

"Tourism is important for Cousin. That's what allows us to finance the

conservation projects we run here.

"But 16,000 tourists... that was too much," said Nirmal Shah, director of Nature Seychelles, which is charged with running the special reserve.

Before the island was in private hands, the population of Seychelles Warblers was thought to have shrunk to just 26, barely hanging on in a mangrove swamp after much of their native habitat had been destroyed.

Now, they number more than 3,000 and the greenish-brown bird has been reintroduced to four other islands in the archipelago. The former plantations have transformed into native forests, teeming with lizards, hermit crabs and seabirds, and the island is the most important nesting site for hawksbill turtles in the western Indian Ocean.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) waxes lyrical about the "unique biodiversity and conservation achievements" of Cousin, "the first island purchased for species conservation", a model since replicated around the world.

Nature first

Tourists have been allowed onto the island since 1972, but the message is clear: nature comes first.

In a well-oiled routine, every morning a handful of luxury sailboats and small motorboats anchor off the island, where their occupants wait for Nature Seychelles to skipper them ashore on their boats.

"Tourist boats cannot land directly on the island, the biohazard risk is too big," Shah said.

"Non-indigenous animals who may accidentally be on board could come to the island and threaten its (ecological) balance." Too many tourists can also upset this balance.

Nature Seychelles in July increased the price of visits from 33 to 40 euros (\$36 to \$44) and removed a free pass for children under 15, resulting in a welcome 10-percent reduction in visitor numbers.

"Something had to be done, there was too much pressure on the envi-

ronment," said Dai-lus Laurence, the chief warden of the island.

"When there are too many tourists it can bother nesting birds and turtles who want to come and lay their eggs on the island."

One guide said that some tourists, bothered by the island's ubiquitous mosquitos, would "leave the paths, move away from the group and walk where they are not supposed to", putting fragile habitats at risk.

Shah said that if they wanted to increase the number of tourists, it would require hiring more wardens and guides who live on the island, which would also have a negative impact on nature. "Our absolute priority is nature, and it comes before tourists. If we have to take more steps to protect it and reduce the number of tourists, we will," he said.

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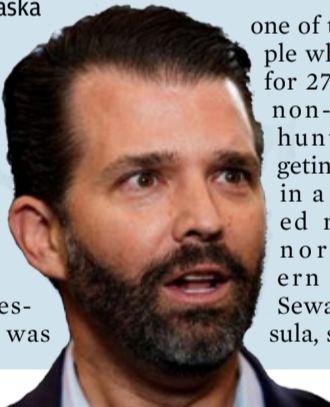


Trump's son gets permit allowing him to hunt Alaska grizzly bear

Reuters | Anchorage, Alaska

Donald Trump Jr. has been granted the right to hunt a grizzly bear in northwestern Alaska near the Bering Sea town of Nome, a state official said on Friday.

The son of U.S. President Donald Trump was



one of three people who applied for 27 spots for non-resident hunters targeting grizzlies in a designated region of northwestern Alaska's Seward Peninsula, said Eddie

Grasser, the wildlife conservation director for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

The state conducts periodic drawings for permits to hunt bears, caribou, moose and other animals in various regions. Winners are chosen by a lottery, and there are typically many more applications than hunting tags awarded.

"We get thousands of appli-

cations," Grasser said. Whether anyone wins, he said, comes down to "pure chance, luck of the draw."

But in the case of the bear-hunt permit that the president's son won, there was little competition. Twenty-four tags for hunting bears in that region went unclaimed, Grasser said.

Winners of the state's latest hunting-permit drawings were

announced on Friday.

To follow through with the Nome-area bear hunt, Trump must pay a \$1,000 non-resident tag fee and buy a \$160 non-resident hunting license, Grasser said.

The president's eldest son is an avid hunter and has made several trips to hunt in Alaska and Canada.

He is scheduled to come to

Alaska later this year to hunt deer and ducks.

The Safari Club this month raffled off a \$150,000 seven-day "dream hunt" expedition with Trump Jr. The raffle winner got the right to accompany the president's son on a yacht traveling in November along coastal areas of the Tongass National Forest.

Tourists brave sub-zero temperatures at Sweden's ice hotel

Jukkasjaervi | Sweden

High above the Arctic Circle and nestled in the snow-dusted forests of northern Sweden, gaggles of tourists gathered on a February morning for a glimpse of hallways, bedrooms and a wedding chapel sculpted from ice, part of the 30th incarnation of Sweden's ice hotel.

Stopping in blue-white hallways to take snaps of a chandelier and ornately decorated bedrooms entirely carved from ice, the tourists are among the 50,000 day visitors to the hotel every year, founded in 1989 by a hotelier looking to attract visitors to the remote town of Jukkasjarvi, 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of the Arctic Circle.

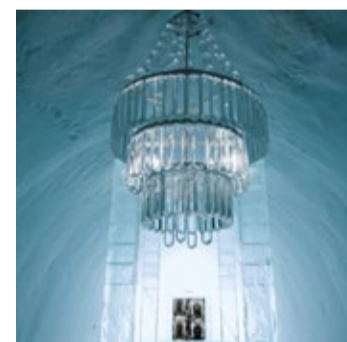
Built every October from the frozen waters of the nearby river Torne, the winter hotel has 35 bedrooms.

Temperatures reach -5 degrees Celsius (23 Fahrenheit) in the rooms, which start at around three times the average price of a night in a three-star establishment in Stockholm.

Individual suites cost more, and feature sculptures and designs by artists from around the



Built every October from the frozen waters of the nearby river Torne, the winter hotel has 35 bedrooms



An ice chandelier hanging in the main hall of the ice hotel



Around 20,000 guests spend a night in the hotel every year

and noise around you, and inside the ice hotel it's completely quiet," said Hansers, peering out from under a thick woolly hat.

Bo Bjerggaard, a gallerist from Copenhagen, spent a night wrapped in a sleeping bag and a reindeer-skin throw.

"During the night I had to get up and then it was of course cold," Bjerggaard said, standing outside in the hotel's dazzling white courtyard made from snow.

"Then (it's) great again when you come back into the sleeping bag -- you sleep so well because of the temperature," he said with a smile.

Guests can also enjoy a drink in the ice bar, where all beverages are served in glasses made from ice.

Since 2016 the hotel has also used solar panels to generate electricity to cool a nearby building to below zero to allow them to keep 20 rooms frozen all year round.

When spring arrives, the winter hotel's rooms are closed and it melts back into the river until October, when construction begins again.

world.

One room inspired by the aurora borealis -- the northern lights that can be seen in the skies nearby -- features light-

ing that changes colour, as well as a giant snow sculpture of a reindeer's head, all set to a soundtrack of ambient music and, occasionally, reindeer

grunts.

Around 20,000 guests spend a night in the hotel every year.

But 25-year-old guide Julia Hansers said guests usually re-

act less to the cold than to the tranquility.

"A lot of people coming here live in the city, and there you always have some sort of sounds