INVESTING IN PEOPLE TO STRENGTHEN MARINE CONSERVATION ACROSS THE WIO

The largest WIO-COMPAS certification event in the programme's history, with 22 candidates recommended for certification in a single assessment and a 100 percent success rate



As countries across the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) work towards protecting 30 percent of marine and coastal areas by 2030, one reality is becoming increasingly clear: conservation success depends not only on the number of protected areas established, but on the people responsible for managing them.

This was the driving focus of the recent French-language Western Indian Ocean Certification of Marine Protected Area Professionals (WIO-COMPAS) assessment held on Sainte Marie Island, Madagascar, from 11–15 May 2026. Bringing together marine protected area professionals from Madagascar, Seychelles and the Comoros, the event strengthened one of the region's most important foundations for effective marine conservation – a skilled, recognized and connected conservation workforce.

The event represents the largest WIO-COMPAS certification event in the programme's history, with 22 candidates recommended for certification in a single assessment and a 100 percent success rate. Together with one previously deferred candidate now recommended for certification, the regional network of certified WIO-COMPAS professionals increases to 174 certified practitioners working across WIO region. The event also recorded the highest scores ever achieved in both the Level 1 and Level 2 assessments, demonstrating the growing depth of expertise within the region's marine conservation workforce.

The assessment forms part of WIOMSA's long-term commitment to strengthening the capacity and leadership of those responsible for managing marine protected and conserved areas. Rather than testing academic knowledge alone, WIO-COMPAS evaluates the practical competencies required to lead effective conservation, including governance, strategic planning, adaptive management, stakeholder engagement, monitoring, communication and leadership.

Investing in people to close the management capacity gap

The assessment reflects a growing recognition that achieving the ambitions of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework requires sustained investment in people. While marine protected and conserved areas continue to expand throughout the region, assessments consistently show that management effectiveness remains constrained by institutional capacity, workforce development and access to recognized professional pathways.

Hosting the assessment in French also represents an important step towards making professional development more accessible across the WIO region's diverse linguistic landscape. Beyond the assessment itself, the event fostered the exchange of practical experience between professionals managing a wide range of marine conservation areas. Participants shared lessons on leadership, compliance, community engagement, monitoring and adaptive management, while guest presentations showcased emerging technologies supporting conservation, including strategic enforcement systems and experiences from the Sainte Marie Marine Protected Area.

These exchanges form an important part of the broader vision of the Western Indian Ocean Marine Protected Area Network, which seeks to strengthen management effectiveness by connecting practitioners, facilitating knowledge exchange and supporting long-term workforce development across the region.

As the WIO region continues to advance towards global biodiversity targets, **success will be measured not only by the extent of ocean placed under protection, but by how effectively these areas are managed**. Building a skilled, connected and recognized conservation workforce remains one of the region's most important investments in ensuring that marine protected and conserved areas deliver lasting ecological and community benefits.

Note: The French-language WIO-COMPAS assessment was delivered by WIOMSA with support from the VARUNA Biodiversity Programme and the Blue Nature Alliance, together with a dedicated team of regional assessors and mentors.



WIO-COMPAS Candidates during the boat and beach patrol simulation exercise



WIO-COMPAS boat and beach patrol simulation exercise