The Palgrave Handbook of Blue Heritage

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Waking up to Wakashio: Marine and Human Disaster in Mauritius

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'Blue' heritage consists of that assemblage of tangible artefacts, intangible cultural practices, and landscapes that are important to the sustainability of identities and livelihoods connected to the oceans and coasts. In a Post-2015 UN Task Team document on sustainable development, it is stated that culture, an enabler and driver of development, does not prominently feature in the UN SDGs. Moreover, while culture and the relevance of a culture-centric Africa is emphasised as a key aspiration of the Africa Agenda 2063, national governments in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region still emphasise the economic benefits of the Blue Economy. Mauritius, a SADC country with a sizeable African diaspora population, is one case where this contradiction is especially important. This chapter, therefore, draws on past ethnographic research in Mauritius (2016–2019), commemorations of the MV Wakashio disaster (August 2021), and a key interview (August 2021) to reflect on the complexities of blue heritage in this Indian Ocean country with a sizeable African diaspora population.

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The discussion proposes that the impacts of the MV Wakashio oil spill in July 2020 may be more complex and damaging than presently realised by the local population. These are the immediate impacts of the disaster (noted in this chapter), the long-term economic and health effects of the oil spill discussed by health researchers and environmentalists, as well as apparent and increasing marginalisation of local coastal communities, in particular small-scale fishers. Specifically, the discussion shows that not only have the rights of small-scale fishers in Mauritius in general, and in the oil spill affected areas in particular, been steadily eroded over the years, but that the Wakashio disaster has now created conditions for the further marginalisation of fishing dependent families. The chapter also proposes that the story of the Wakashio disaster goes beyond the details of the event itself. It is an event symptomatic of larger, more pernicious processes of exclusion and is indicative of the growing disregard for vulnerable populations and precarious coastal livelihoods.

The chapter is organised as follows. The first part introduces and discusses the concept of 'blue' heritage as it relates to the life of coastal dwellers and those who rely on the sea for their livelihoods. The next section offers a brief introduction to Mauritius and the place of small-scale fishers in the country's socioeconomic landscape. The third and fourth parts of the chapter outline the Wakashio disaster and national government response. The final section of the chapter discusses how, a year later, inhabitants of the affected regions are responding, and provides information on their situation. The research presented in the paper uses a mixed-method approach, drawing on secondary data from academic papers on pollution and environmental conservation in Mauritius, to media articles and video recordings after the disaster, as well a key qualitative interview with a sea-dependent entrepreneur and activist, directly involved in managing the social and economic impacts of the Wakashio disaster. The research forms part of a larger, multi-country project in Africa and its nearby diaspora which seeks to investigate the richness of oceanic and coastal heritages and cultures, and the complexities and challenges facing them.

Mauritius History and Blue Heritage

Mauritius is a multicultural country of some 1.3 million people. According to Eriksen (1993), Mauritians speak some 22 languages, are adherents to at least four major religions, and can trace their ancestry to India, Africa, Europe, and China. The country is described in historical (colonial) accounts,

as being *terra nullius* (empty land) prior to its settlement by African slaves, Indian indentured labourers, and European slave owners and colonials. While colonial accounts of slavery 'silenced' the contributions of Africans to the making of Mauritian society, more recent revisionist accounts have revealed a vibrant, interethnic, and dynamic world in the slave period and shortly thereafter (Allen, 2017; Nwulia, 1981; Teelock, 1998). These accounts reveal that Africans who had been forcibly relocated to the island settled, at first, on the east coast of the island, in a port town called Mahebourg. The town is named after the first French governor of Mauritius, Mahe de Labourdonnais, it is also the place where the English seized control of Mauritius from the French in 1810. It was at Mahebourg that the first slaves were bathed and prepared for sale to plantation owners. The tangible heritage of this past is still visible in the town, in the form of stone slave baths, and a local cemetery containing graves from the slave period and the names of settlements, described in Mauritian sugar estate parlance as *camps* (labour camps). In addition, there is, a little further along the coast, a monument commemorating the abolition of slavery (Fig. 14.1).

The demographics and landscape of Mauritius changed dramatically however, after the arrival of Indian indentured labourers in 1834. The Indian labourers not only sought to express their beliefs through the construction of tangible religious monuments and temples they also increased the population, changing the ethnic landscape. In time, many Indian descendants also

Fig. 14.1 Monument to Commemorate the 170th Anniversary of Abolition in Mauritius (*Source* the author, 2016)

pursued alternative livelihoods beyond the plantations, with some of them choosing to blend subsistence fishing with land cultivation. Most of the sugar plantations were located close to the coastline, and this, also, facilitated such strategies. In an early account, Robertson indicates that,

> …sugar cane was introduced by the Dutch but not cultivated until 1735. It now occupies the greater part of the coastal districts of Savanne and Grand Port on the Southeast, the plains of Flacq on the east, and much of the northern district of Rivière du Rempart and Pamplemousses. (1930, p. 338)

In the early 1900s, the island also received traders and merchants of Muslim and Chinese origin. The latter were prominent in coastal villages, where they brought imported consumer goods to the island society. In brief, today, Mauritius is a thoroughly creolised society (Vaughan, 2005), in the sense that its inhabitants share a lingua franca, *Kreol*, participate in the exchange of culinary practices, and engage in interethnic marriage and social groups, developing hybridised beliefs and values.

Despite such intermingling and social exchange, ethnic identification has remained a factor in Mauritius and, in some cases, historical patterns of ethnic group clustering and geographical location have persisted. In an earlier account (Boswell, 2006), I posited that the island's early colonial agricultural *camps*, the Best Loser electoral system, racism, and government efforts to maintain cultural roots deepened ethnic affiliations. However, and as I argue here, identity is also shaped in other ways. When slavery was abolished in 1835, African slaves left the plantations and migrated to urban centres and the coast (Carter & D'unienville, 2001). Many slave-descended Africans began new and independent lives as fisherfolk along the south and west coast of the island. In part, some settled in these areas because they had been living in the forested areas of the southwest part of the island, having formed slave maroon communities there prior to abolition. By living along the coastline, some African descendants acquired an alternatively located identity, one closely associated with the sea and coast. Those who remained close to urban centres such as the capital, Port Louis, and joined the workforce there, as dockworkers, builders, artisans, and entrepreneurs, also came to appreciate this coastal aspect of identity. As my earlier ethnography (Boswell, 2006) showed, Creoles or African descendants came from towns and cities to the coast to relax, be entertained and to socialise (Fig. 14.2).

There were also those African and Indian descendants along the southeast coast of the island, in Mahebourg and Grand Rivière Sud-Est, who lived close to estuaries and rivers. These waterways influence sociality and identity, in ways still remembered by those interviewed in 2016. It is for this reason that I argued that,

Fig. 14.2 Map of the villages and towns of Southeast of Mauritius (*Source* https://www.mapsland.com/africa/mauritius/detailed-road-map-of-mauritius-with-cities-and-villages accessed 23/08/2021)

> By turning to the sea to deepen understanding of identity in Mauritius, one might be able to consider issues of identity in terms of scale, depth, border, area, and temperature, in other words, other means of 'measuring' identity. One might also be able to perceive the salience of the sea itself in the making of islander identity. The waters are oceanic (vast), and there are tidal pools, reefs, eddies, and open sea. The environment of the water is also diverse. It is sonorous, viscous, and tidal. Perceiving identity from a marine perspective and including maritime ethnography in assessments of identity, one might propose that racialized and mixed identities are incredibly diverse and diversely (where feasible) measurable. Identities ebb and flow like tides, with personal, communal, and social shifts. (Boswell, 2019, p. 467)

When one considers, however, the perception and conservation of heritage in Mauritius, it becomes evident that the country's government perceives heritage as a territorialised asset and a part of national, tangible artefacts. In other words, there is still a grounded concept of heritage. Moreover, heritage is also treated as a legacy that one passes from one generation to the next

(Garcìa-Canclini, 1995). In the case of Mauritius, heritage is also at risk of becoming an ethnic legacy, useful to narratives of fixed identity.

Peckham states that '"heritage", globally, carries two related sets of meanings (2003). On the one hand, it is associated with tourism and with sites of historical interest that have been preserved for the nation…on the other hand, it is used to describe a set of shared values and collective memories; it betokens inherited customs and as sense of accumulated communal experiences that are construed as a "birthright" and are expressed in distinct languages and through cultural performances' (Peckham, 2003, p. 1). Thus, heritage has two purposes. However, in both instances, 'cultural heritage does not exist, it is made' (Bendix, 2009, p. 255).

In the context of Mauritius, I propose that heritage is primarily useful in government construction of national (ethnic) narratives of the nation. The cultural nature of the society however also necessitates, as Peckham argues, the sharing of values, collective memories, and sense of belonging. Heritage in Mauritius is therefore complex, because not only is it deliberately constructed by a state which faithfully documents and preserves it, but it is also something made by local people. This means that cultural practices and values are subject to multiple processes of 'heritagisation', and that heritage becomes a multiply valued asset of enduring historical and national importance. Unfortunately, though, the authorised heritage discourse prevails, and is presented for public and tourist consumption as the distilled, publicly approved identity of the Mauritian nation. As I show further on, the making of heritage has become even more complex and multi-layered. Today, authorised heritage discourse in Mauritius now appears to be tied to projects of gentrification and re-racialisation and these processes, along with the environmental disaster of Wakashio, are further alienating locals. To clarify (and as explained in more detail at a later point in this chapter), coastal areas are systematically being 'whitened' and gentrified, while local black communities are being shifted to livelihoods beyond the coast and constrained to perform identities that cohere with, and conform to, the narrative of re-racialised landscape. I return to this point in greater detail below.

The inscription of the Apraavasi Ghat (the landing place of Indian immigrants) and the west coast mountain of Le Morne (the site of a mass suicide by formerly enslaved Africans who feared that British soldiers were coming to take them back into slavery, shortly after the declaration of slavery's abolition), on UNESCO's World Heritage List (WHL), are two examples of public heritage in which ethnic identity is emphasised. To be fair, these heritages have only recently been accepted as narratives of the Mauritian nation. I use the word 'recently', here, because for a long time, the histories

and cultures of slavery and indentured labour were not considered acceptable as heritages of Mauritius. Colonial and European histories were foregrounded and celebrated. Discourses of the latter were still found in both the Blue Penny Museum in Port Louis, and in the Naval History Museum in Mahebourg between 2016 and 2019. One might ask, then, what is the connection between Aapravasi Ghat, Le Morne, the Blue Penny Museum, and the Naval Museum? The simple answer is that all of these sites offer a state-accepted, sanctioned, authorised national heritage discourse.

Herzfeld has another plausible explanation. He argues that nation states are unlikely to foreground that which compromises their public identity (Byrne, 2011). His argument may apply to Mauritius. It took decades of lobbying and global discussion for slave heritage to be perceived as important to the public heritage in Mauritius. Today, Mauritians' common heritage of the sea is overlooked. Several reasons may be offered for this, the most compelling being that existence of a common heritage compromises the state discourse of ethnic distinctiveness. A more complex explanation would be that recognition of the common heritage of the sea would shift attention to very valuable resources, the ocean, and coasts. Let us follow the more complex explanation.

Since the 1970s, when the Mauritius government sought to diversify the economy so as to leverage different sources of income and advance economic development, it has actively sought to rebrand the country as a hub for foreign investment. In the last 20 years, that process has involved building luxury property development schemes for a foreign, and elite, tourist clientele. To emphasise the cultural dimension of locals' connection with the sea and their fundamental, that is, human and heritage rights to it, could severely compromise both the property development goals and tourism revenue.

It would appear, as Herzfeld (in Byrne, 2011) and Xia (2020) have argued for other societies, that ordinary citizens in Mauritius have tried to shift to culturally intimate engagements with heritage that do not form part of the authorised heritage discourse. With direct reference to blue heritage, Mauritians have continued, or tried to continue, a private, social and recreational engagement with the sea, despite the increasing pressure on them to relinquish the island's beaches to tourism. But, as I have shown over the years, the hold that locals have over the sea and coasts (as well as their intimate relationships with the marine), remains a tenuous one, and continues to be eroded. That process of erosion has accelerated since the Wakashio disaster.

Among other interventions, the national government is now setting up various inland livelihood options for those no longer able to live with or from the sea. As I show in the next section, however, the marine cultural

(and intangible) heritage of Mauritius is significant and indicates cross-cultural elements including beliefs, fishing practices, fishing technologies and cultural-linguistic contributions (Boswell, 2021). The inland livelihood options offered by the government cannot be a substitute for the coastal, marine livelihoods that people pursue, because what the state is offering cannot restore rapidly eroding significant cultural knowledge embedded in fishing practices, technologies, and the substance of life at the coast.

The coastal areas of the island are key to the island's tourism. Tourism in Mauritius remains mostly recreational, and the east coast of the island, from Rivière du Rempart (in the north-east) to Mahebourg in the south-east is already dotted with luxury hotels. Writing about anticipated tourist arrivals from 1 October 2021, a news media source indicated that Mauritius was anticipating about 100,000 tourists and that this amounted to about 3000 tourists per day (Khodabux, 2021). Bhuckory (2021) states that, in Mauritius, tourism 'revenue… dropped to 578 million rupees ($13.6 million) from 16.08 billion rupees a year ago, according to the Port Louis-based Bank of Mauritius. Revenue in June fell to 20 million rupees from 383 million rupees'. This translates into a *96 percent* drop in revenue in the first half of 2021, a catastrophe due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recreational tourism is, therefore, not only a most important source of foreign direct investment for Mauritius: it is one where no further losses can be sustained (Bhuckory, 2021). Furthermore, tourism remains important because a historical elite that still holds much power in Mauritius (Salverda, 2015) continues to invest in it. The first stage of luxury property development for instance, benefited those European-descended Mauritians who owned large tracts of land along the coastlines. They benefited from a property development programme entitled the Integrated Resorts Schemes (IRS). This programme had many stringent requirements for those seeking to participate in it, including the stipulation that potential investors would need to have access to vast tracts of land. Subsequently, the government put forward similar schemes with more flexible requirements for investment that then benefited a wider pool of landowners: however not only do, the historical (white) elite families still hold considerable economic power (Salverda, 2015), they are still, in present times, using historically acquired collateral for big investments along the island's coastline. A quick glance at the board of directors of the Beau Vallon Company, of which Riche-en-Eau, a sugar estate that spans from Grand Port to the Midlands (3500 hectares), close to Mahebourg provides one example of this phenomenon. In days gone by, those associated

with the company would have been regular visitors at the chateau Riche-en-Eau, a massive colonial home built on an expansive site overlooking both cane-fields and the sea.

In recent years, the same company has pursued a Property Development Scheme (PDS), along the same lines as the IRS described earlier. This PDS is meant to recreate an idyllic coastal life for foreign investors. The most expensive property on offer to them is priced at approximately Euro 1.7 million and offers investors the opportunity to live an 'authentic' village life on grounds previously part of the Riche-en-Eau sugar estate. This is an estate that previously had slaves, and slave descendants. Thus, coastal areas of the island and the southeast coast discussed here, have become zones of prime real estate, in which historical sugar estates where slavery flourished have now become property development schemes.

Since the late 1990s, the national government's Board of Investors (BOI), more recently known as the Economic Development Board (EBD), has approved the construction of many luxury development residences and complexes along Mauritius' coastlines to provide high-end accommodation for foreign investors. It is noted that many of the luxury development residences and high-end hotels are located close to the country's marine parks and fishing reserves. This suggests one of two things. Either these biodiverse sites (and the ecological ethos which they represent) are of high value to these high-end tourists, or, alternatively, that the national government is, in collaboration with private investors (some of whom are descendants of the historical elite), specifically 'controlling' local community use of marine resources in those areas deemed to be of value to the high-end tourist industry. What some may dismiss as cynical and unfounded speculation is supported by the fact that luxury development residences and property development schemes aimed (Boswell, 2008) at creating a 'supportive' and visually appealing socioeconomic setting for a high-end tourism environment. In other words, there has been a strange and 'perfect' confluence of gentrification, whitening, and the creation of prime real estate along Mauritius' coastlines. This phenomenon is not unique to Mauritius. Across the Caribbean, similar processes are being played out, which led one author, Polly Pattullo, to lament in 1996, that some Caribbean peoples now feel as aliens in their own land.

In the following part of the discussion, I offer some insight into the lives of people who were resident in Mahebourg and its environs in 2016, after the processes of gentrification described above and five years before the MV Wakashio disaster. I follow this with an analysis of the immediate effects of the bulk carrier's grounding off Pointe d'Esny, before then moving on to

discuss contemporary challenges and experiences. My purpose, here, is to demonstrate that the inhabitants have a rich tangible and intangible 'blue' heritage in Blue Bay and in the southeast coastal villages of Mauritius, and to show how, in the wake of gentrification as it has been emerging in Mauritius and, now, the Wakashio disaster, this blue heritage is being severely compromised.

Marine Parks, Fishing Reserves, and Fieldwork

Mauritius has two marine parks (Balaclava on the northwest coast, and Blue Bay on the southeast coast), an estuary reserve (Rivulet Terre Rouge), and six fishing reserves (Poudre d'Or, Port Louis, Black River, Post Lafayette, Trou d'Eau Douce, and Grand Port). The last three of these are located along the east coast of the island. Blue Bay, an ecologically pristine lagoon off the southeast coast was declared a Marine reserve in 1997. A document describes the unique features of the bay as follows:

> The Blue Bay Marine Park, located in the South East of Mauritius was proclaimed a National Park under the Wildlife and National Parks Act 1993 in October 1997. It was declared a Marine Protected Area and designated a Marine Park in June 2000 under the Fisheries and Marine Resources Act 1998. In January 2008, it was officially nominated as the second Wetland of International Importance (RAMSAR Site) for Mauritius. The total area of the Marine Park is 353 hectares; it includes the lagoon starting from Pointe Corps de Garde as its northernmost point up to Pointe Vacoas, its southernmost point and extends about one kilometre seaward from the reef crest. The depth of the park varies from 1 to 150m metres. The Blue Bay Marine Park is known for its diverse and rich fauna and flora especially the corals, mainly for a brain coral of diameter 6-7metres. 108 species (33 genus) of coral, 233 fish species, 201 species of molluscs were inventoried in 2012.
>
> Blue Bay being a popular tourist spot and the most favourite beach in the southern part of Mauritius is extensively used for recreational purposes. It is estimated that more than one hundred thousand visitors including Mauritian and foreign nationals visit the park every year. The various recreational activities that are carried out in the park are: (i) scuba diving and snorkelling, (ii) non-motorised surface water sports such as wind surfing, sailing, water skiing, paddle boats, kayak, (iii) swimming, (iv) boating activities such as glass bottom boats, boats transporting divers and snorkellers, boat transporting visitors into and outside the boundaries of the park, (v) recreational fishing with pole and line along part of the coast, and (vi) fishing using pole and line and basket trap beyond the fringing reef. (Hurbungs & Mohit, n.d., pp. 2–4)

The purpose of this declaration, therefore, was to recognise and protect the unique marine biodiversity of the bay. In particular, the bay has a wealth of marine life, as well as well-developed and diverse coral, much of which was at risk of being degraded by ocean pollution and acidification in the years prior to the declaration. According to the Mauritius Fisheries and Marine Resources (Marine Protected Areas) Regulations 2001, no commercial, polluting, extractive, or otherwise ecologically compromising activity is permitted in the Bay (Government of Mauritius, 2001). Only limited, recreational and artisanal fishing is allowed. In Sect. 6(2) of the Regulations, it is noted that 'A person may fish with a bait gear in a Fishing Reserve if he holds a licence issued under Sect. 31 of the Act authorizing him to do so'. Fisherfolk are not permitted to use fish traps or to beat the water to attract the attention of fish for a catch. Similarly, the use of boats in the marine reserve is governed by particular rules, and the entire area is zoned to ensure that human movement in the area is limited to less fragile sections.

In 2016, I conducted anthropological field research in Pointe d'Esny and Mahebourg, on the south-eastern coast of Mauritius. The research conducted at that time provided a preliminary framework for the larger project on 'ocean cultures and heritage' funded by the South African National Research Foundation, the first phase of which coincides with the first five years of the UN Ocean Decade. While in Mauritius in 2013, I had heard about a village called Ville Noire and that it was possibly founded in the 1700s, at the time when slavery began in Mauritius. I was curious about Ville Noire, and felt that anthropological research there would enrich my understanding of slave history in Mauritius, adding to the doctoral and postdoctoral work I had conducted in both Mauritius and elsewhere in the southwest Indian Ocean region (Fig. 14.3).

After a day of interviews in and around Mahebourg during the fieldwork session in 2016, I would 'finish' the day by walking along the beach where I was staying, to Blue Bay beach. There, I would engage with locals and visitors who had come to the beach to relax, or, as one interviewee put it, '*pou kasse stresse*' (to break stress). As usual, I found young children playing in the shallow, clear waters of the bay, their parents (for the most part) sitting on woven mats under trees lining the beach, while some men on the beach would sit and play cards at a makeshift table. Unlike in the case of Le Morne on the west coast of the island, I did not witness people wading in to collect shellfish from the bay. I later learned that this was because the bay was a marine protected area, where people could not collect any seafood from the lagoon without a permit.

Fig. 14.3 Ville Noire village. The village's slave history is indicated via its twinning with Ilha de Mozambique, and the allusions to efforts to overcome enduring inequality (*Source* https://www.lemauricien.com/actualites/ville-noire-ancre-dans-son-histoire-et-tourne-vers-lavenir/275203/ accessed 23/08/2021)

However, on going further 'inland' to Ville Noire and interviewing people there, I found that some women still collected shellfish from the river (*Rivière la Chaux*) that flowed through the village. In particular, the women collected *mangwak/mongwate* which, the women say, is key to survival in difficult times. The shellfish was, and remains, an important source of protein in those seasons when the fishing catch is poor, or when the fishing season is concluded. Moreover, it appeared to be gathered by women, while men went out to fish. One of the women interviewed said,

> We used to wake up before dawn to go and collect it [*mongwate/mangwak*]. It was important to get there before the tide came in and there was a way to do it. Our mother taught us and my sisters and I waded out into the cool waters at first light, our feet sinking in the mud and sand of the [tidal] zone to collect the shellfish. We knew those waters as if they were fields. You couldn't just go in there to collect it. You had to know where to go and you had to be careful when removing it from the rocks. They are so fragile you know, that a clumsy hand can easily lead to the shell breaking and spoiling the flesh. Not many people know this of course and today people just go to the shop to buy stuff. In my day though, we went out at first light. I remember that time so well. The sky was light but the sun had not yet risen and we were always the first ones there. (cited in Boswell, 2019, p. 471)

Reflecting on recent (pre-Wakashio) access to the sea and to seafood, a fisherman, interviewed in 2016, indicated that,

> My life has changed. There was a time when I was young and you know in those days I could go out in my little boat and catch up to 200 pounds of *carangue* [trevally] in a day. Now, well now you're lucky if you get 50 pounds on a good day. You see, the problem is that people don't understand the seasons. It took me four full years to learn how to be a fisherman. I didn't just go out there on a boat. But these days, people just buy a boat, get a license, and think that they will know how and where to fish. The sea is like a map. Underneath it has coral, stone, valleys, and hills. The water moves over it differently at different times of the day. You may be out there and suddenly the wind will change. If you can't read the wind you will get lost at sea. That happened to me once and I was lucky to have someone rescue me. (cited in Boswell, 2019, p. 471)

One day I took a glass bottom boat ride across the bay. As noted earlier, only those with the relevant tour operator or fishing permits can access the bay's deeper waters. The tour operators on the boat were a father and son. While the father steered the boat, I spoke with the son, who had been given the task of explaining what marine life and other marine features I was seeing through the glass bottom of the boat. He was about to launch into a rehearsed English script of the visit, when I stopped him and explained that he could continue in *Kreol*, because I understood the language. This seemed to make him more relaxed and he proceeded to describe the different kinds of coral we were seeing below. It soon emerged that there are specific *Kreol* words used to describe the different corals in the bay and that young men, like the son of this tour operator, enjoyed a multiply situated existence with the sea. The son explained how most of his time after school is spent at sea, scuba diving, snorkelling, swimming, fishing, night hunting for crab, and joining leisure catamaran tours as a helper on weekends. This rich, embodied existence with the sea came to a halt in 2020, when the MV Wakashio ran ashore off the reef, just beyond Pointe d'Esny.

The Wakashio Disaster

'On 25 July 2020, the Japanese ship, MV Wakashio, ran aground the coral reef off the eastern coast of Mauritius. The vessel discharged more than 1000 tonnes of oil into the island's pristine lagoon including its Blue Bay Marine reserve' (Boswell, 2020, online). The spill of Very Low Sulphur Fuel Oil

(VLFSO) near Pointe d'Esny in Mahebourg on the east coast of the island spread, to varying degrees, from Rivière du Rempart in the northeast part of the island, to Mahebourg in the south. According to Asariotis and Premti (2020, online), the grounding of the vessel occurred close to the Blue Bay marine park and two internationally protected wetland sites, as well as a small atoll (Ile aux Aigrettes) which has endemic bird species and other biodiverse fauna and flora.

The Pointe d'Esny site is also known for its association with the history of the first Dutch landing in Mauritius in the early 1700s, as well as the 1810 battle between the French and the English, which resulted in Mauritius becoming a British colony. The seas nearby contain historic shipwrecks that are about 200 years old. Asariotis and Premti (2020) argue that the catastrophe has consequences not only for the natural environment but also for human and other animal health. For marine species, oil spills can physically smother the animals, cause chemical toxicity, produce ecological changes in the marine environment, and can lead to the loss of shelter or habitat.

Regarding events precipitating the disaster, it was initially proposed that MV Wakashio was compromised by poor weather off the coast of Mauritius. Subsequently, when interviewed, the captain of the vessel claimed that the crew had been on board for more than a year due to the global Covid-19 pandemic and that a decision had been made to steer the vessel closer to Mauritius to obtain WIFI signal, so that crew members could contact family. Apparently, a crew member was celebrating his birthday. However, this story was soon disputed, as several media sources revealed that access to the internet is possible beyond the reef, and that the vessel had not needed to come closer to Mauritius' shores to obtain internet access. It was also revealed that most ships travelling such routes and distances have access to satellite technology and internet connectivity. More importantly, in a preliminary report, the Panama Maritime Authority (AMP) stated that it was poor seamanship which led to the grounding of MV Wakashio (The Maritime Executive, Online). The key officials on duty on the bridge of the vessel failed to supervise and monitor the navigation equipment, appeared not to hear/notice the warning calls from shore authorities in Mauritius, and did not apply good seamanship practices that would have involved analysing the situation of the vessel followed by the taking of action appropriate to avoid the accident. As of this writing, a year after the accident, however, the final report of AMP however, has not yet been released. Key documentation and recordings remain inaccessible to the investigators, and some of the vessel's crew, including its captain, are still being held in custody in Mauritius. Worse, and according to the statement of the interviewee offered next, the captain of the vessel was apparently

interviewed further. This was when it was revealed that he had completed similar journeys past Mauritius on at least seven occasions in the past, which suggests that he would have known the risks of coming too close to shore with the bulk carrier. BP, the supplier of fuel to the MV Wakashio, denies any responsibility for the disaster, stating that the fuel sold to the charterer, Mitsui OSK Ltd (MOL), was of a standard acceptable to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).[1] Discussion of these matters remains ongoing (Fig. 14.4).

Around the fifth of August, it was noted that the ship was sinking, despite the local efforts that had been made to steer it off the reef. Providing an overview of the government's response, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) stated that,

> The [Mauritius] Government is leading the response and has established the following coordination mechanisms: the National Crisis Management Committee (chaired by the Prime Minister) meets daily in the afternoon to review operations and provide strategic guidance; the National Oil Spill Coordination Committee (chaired by the Director of Environment) meets daily in the morning to review progress, assess the situation and needs, and plan work for the next 24 hours; there is also a National Emergency Operations Command chaired by the Commissioner of Police and a dedicated Coordination Committee for the Salvaging of the Vessel (chaired by the Director of Shipping).

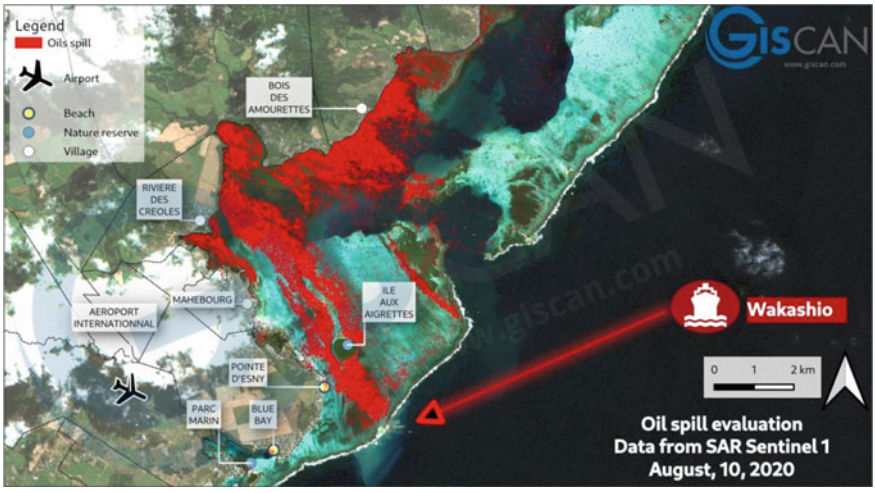

Fig. 14.4 Extent of the MV Wakashio Oil Spill, August 2020 (*Source* https://giscan.com/monitoring-the-impact-of-a-shipwreck-the-case-of-the-wakashio-bulk-carrier/ accessed 10/08/2021)

> A team of environmental experts from the International Tanker Owner's Pollution Federation Limited (ITOPF) and Le Floch Depollution—the international contractor appointed by the Protection and Indemnity Club (P&I), insurers—are onsite in Mauritius and are preparing an action plan for clean-up and restoration of affected sites. (OCHA, 2020, online)

Then, on 15 August, the vessel split in two, releasing oil onto the coral reef and into the lagoon. Reflecting on the government's decision to seek to float the vessel, a Mauritian ecologist, Sunil Dokwarkasing, said that the.

> delay in trying to address the problem of this wreckage on our reef is, I would say, grossly negligent by our government. Their primary concern was to refloat the ship – no one considered the danger represented by the 3800 metric tonnes of oil on the ship. No one considered or seemed to care about the substantial risk this would present to the island and the lagoon; the government sat on the file for more than 12 days without making the decisions that should have been made. (Kingdom, 2020, online)

Internationally, certain states rallied to assist in alleviating the immediate impact of the disaster. Specialists were sent form Japan and France to deal with the clean-up process. There are four international conventions which can provide the basis for medium to long-term compensation to countries affected by oil spills. These are the Civil Liability Convention (CLC), the FUND Convention (an additional layer of funding support), the Bunkers Convention and the Hazardous and Noxious Substances (HNS) Convention, which is not yet in force. According to Asariotis and Premti (2020, online),

> Mauritius is a State Party to the IOPC FUND regime (International Convention on Civil Liability for Oil Pollution Damage (CLC) and the International Convention on the Establishment of an International Fund for Compensation for Oil Pollution Damage (FUND), as amended in 1996) –which would have provided liability and compensation of up to 203 million SDR (approx. 286 million USD) for this incident (also covers reinstatement of the environment). The 2003 Supplementary Fund Protocol provides even higher liability and compensation, up to a maximum of 750 million SDR (around 1.05 billion USD) per incident, but has not been ratified by Mauritius.

In a more detailed analysis of the international legal framework dealing with oil pollution damage from oil tankers, Asariotis et al. (2012) note that claims for damages can only be lodged with the insurer and shipowner, that there is

a time limit for the claim (preferably within three to a maximum of six years after the accident), and that from the IOPC Fund, a maximum of about 300 million US dollars can be claimed. Claims can be dismissed if it is found that the claimant (i.e. Mauritius) did not follow protocol (or was negligent) in respect of guiding and communicating with the stricken vessel, or if there was naturally bad weather causing the accident, or if the accident resulted from acts of sabotage or war (Asariotis et al., 2012, pp.50–76).

Far from the international legal landscape, and horrified at the event and the impending disaster for their country's shores, volunteers gathered from across Mauritius to construct booms and mop up the oil. From the University of Mauritius, Karishma Daworaz and Arun Ramluckhun spoke about fishermen who risked their lives and went out to sea to set up the booms. Ramluckhun noted that the task was difficult, and it would have been preferable to avoid this catastrophe. He added that after a day's worth of cleaning up, 'we would go to bed at night with our eyes and throats burning and it was really uncomfortable'. A few days after the oil spill, Daworaz said, 'we had dolphins and whales all dying. Crabs were running to the shoreline and there was a dreadful stench of rotting marine life not long after' (*l'express* YouTube 25 July 2021, online).

Bagasse, as the fibrous remains of sugarcane stalks are called, were collected from nearby operating sugar estates (Riche-en-Eau and Bel Ombre) to fill the makeshift booms. Shade cloth was also provided by textile firms to house the *bagasse*. Mauritians were also encouraged to supply hair for the filling of the booms. Many had their hair cut, and then supplied the cuttings to the boom-makers. The process was captured by a number of photographers, both amateur and professional, showcasing the humanitarian aspect of the disaster and the willingness of Mauritians to collaboratively respond to the disaster. Looking back on the crisis a year later, Mauritians remarked that they had collectively responded to 'save the lagoons', beaches and fishing spots (Figs. 14.5 and 14.6).

Local Voices, Long-Term Consequences

Reflecting on the consequences of the oil spill a year later, those interviewed by the Mauritius media (l'Express Youtube, 25 July 2021) had the following to say,

Fig. 14.5 Volunteers carry booms for the Wakashio oil spill (Photo by Daphney Dupré, 2020)

Fig. 14.6 A volunteer helps to clean up after the Wakashio oil spill. Photo by Daphney Dupré, 2020

'*Bé après panne kapav fer narnier. Ki pu fer?*' [afterwards we could not do anything, what could we do?]?

'47 ans monne vivre ar la mer – pu nu, ti ène premier fwa sa. Kans maré nwar la vini, nu business affectée [for 47 years I have lived with the sea – for us it is the first time we are experiencing this. When the black tide came, our businesses were affected]'

'*Amène en mofinne are nu. Dimoune pa le aster, banians pas le prends. Ziska ler enkor ena de l'huile, manguier enkor ena de l'huile. Zwitre pe mor, mongwate pe mor*. [It brought bad luck to us. People don't want to buy (fish), the banyans

[middle men] don't want to take our fish. There is still oil. The mangroves have oil. Oysters are dying, shellfish are dying].'
'*pwason gagne li moyen, pwason rester. Government ti nu ène ti l'argent, après sa fini, bizin rouler*' [fish are there but much less, and fish stay behind, that is they are not sold. Government gave us a stipend but after that finished, we had to fend for ourselves].
'*péna pwason. Pwason ine quitte paye ine aller. Dimoune pas pu desann Mahebourg pu aster pwason. Dimoune per'* [there is no fish. The fish has left the country. People are not coming to Mahebourg to buy fish. People are scared].

An inhabitant of the region, a Creole businessman and a citizen committed to coastal justice, had the following to say when I interviewed him in August 2021 (I interviewed him in *Kreol* to better understand the nature of blue heritage in Mauritius, and the potential long-term challenges posed by the grounding of MV Wakashio. The following extracts from the interview are translated from *Kreol*:

I have lived in Mahebourg for more than 40 years. My father was a fisherman but as I was growing up, I knew that I didn't want to become a fisherman, I wanted to try something different but to still be with the sea. You must excuse me I have a problem with my one ear. When I was younger, the doctors told me that I would have problems with my ears one day, because I love to scuba dive. I enjoy all things to do with the sea, swimming, sailing, fishing, and diving. I know that in the area where I live there are about 150–250 fishermen.

Our communities were already being affected by Covid-19. We had not been working for four months when the Wakashio accident happened. The government closed the lagoon for six months and provided a solidarity grant of Rs. 10,200 to the affected families. This money was not enough, people had a lot of commitments, therefore there was a lot of stress. So, for almost an entire year, tour operators, taxi owners, street food sellers and fishers were badly affected by the double problem of Covid-19 and Wakashio. The people sat at home and worried first about Covid-19 and then the long-term financial effects and finally the pollution caused by Wakashio. Some people are especially worried about the long-term consequences of dealing with the oil, especially the high risk of cancer. People are also really worried about the seafood because of oil contamination and the risk that potentially contaminated seafood, can cause cancer.

For many people the beach is a place to release stress or, as we say in Mauritus, *casse stresse*. People swim, scuba dive, snorkel – but now not many people are doing this. They are scared. So, there is the immediate effect of the grounding of the MV Wakashio but there is also fear, a psychological damage which the government must consider in its plans for compensation and support.

Up to now (August 2021) there is still no formal report from government regarding the water quality in the Mahebourg lagoon. No-one really knows if it is safe to go into the water. Lots of people have started to live like our forefathers did a century ago. They are scared of eating fish even if it is the thing that is the easiest to get. So they are cultivating chickens in their backyard, growing vegetables and just staying away from the shore. I even stopped my son from swimming and going windsurfing, it was difficult, imagine making a teenage boy not go out to swim.

Before Wakashio, fishermen working 6 days a week, could earn up to Rs. 24,000 because they earn up to Rs. 1000 per day. So now, the fishermen are getting only half of their income. The other thing you need to consider is that the fishermen has to put fuel his boat, he has to buy mesh to mend his fish traps etcetera, all these input costs add up. Before, the fisherman's day was divided in two in the afternoon he might well take up another job that will allow him to add to his income. With Covid-19 and Wakashio, this became very difficult because jobs were already scarce.

It is also well known that if you come from a coastal area it is difficult to get work. There appears to be discrimination against coastal inhabitants. Our people look for jobs at the airport but we are told that there is no transport for locals even though you see that transport is being provided for inhabitants from the north. There appears to big promises made during the election times, but our people are forgotten when it comes to getting jobs. The other thing is that coastal peoples are mostly fishermen and labourers, so many are uneducated and it is difficult for these families to ensure that the next generation moves into a more lucrative position. When elections take place, they are likely to accept support in kind from the candidates, instead of really asking what that candidate can do for them.

As for me, I wanted to become a coastguard, a sea policeman but I did not make it even though I had the education. I think I did not have the 'backing', so I had to do my own small business to support myself and family. There is still a lot of corruption in Mauritius. One must have that beautiful little envelope that you can pass under the table. If you don't have this, the chances are you will not progress. But there are also other worrying phenomena, where you see people that have no money actually spending money in a way that does not help the family to move forward, to *sorti dans zotte petrin*.

There is also a reluctance to engage in activism for coastal justice because there is fear. People want to ensure that they are not associated with actions for claims, or to pose as victims because they do not want to be seen as "opposing" the government who is telling them that everything is alright. Government has said that they will give a compensation of Rs100,000 to the fishermen. But this is a pittance if we consider the health issues that may still come. We still don't know what government has received or what it will get for the claims it is making against the owners of the Wakashio. We know that the Japanese

government has given a lot of money just to "say sorry" and that money does not even include the claims that government must still make.

What I find strange is that government waited 12 days to attend to the vessel. I am not sure what was happening but to me it sounds like if you put a tank of petrol in your house and I tell you that is dangerous, you come back to me and say, 'no, don't worry, its fine, what do you know? I am an expert'. We would have been much better off if we had people in Mauritius who know how to handle environmental disasters, but we don't. No-one screamed or shouted about this. Everyone let government and the experts handle the matter. In the end, it was volunteers who came to remove most of the oil from the shores.

I want to tell you something else. On the day of the grounding of MV Wakashio, a few of us were standing on the shore looking out to sea. We could see that the vessel was moving. We came back the next day and it had changed direction. When we saw this we enquired if we, as people who own boats could somehow help to perhaps advise on how to steer it off the reef. We were told that the "experts" are busy with it. But I want to tell you something. I am a child of the sea. When a boat changes its direction on the reef, it means it is not stuck at all or, that only a piece of it is stuck. This means that it is not entirely difficult to remove it. This was a "floating boat".

My grandfather always said, it is easy to say come home and I'll give you a fish dinner tonight. It is much harder to say come with me and I will teach you how to fish. What I mean by this is that in Mauritius and certainly in our poor communities, people are willing to take monetary compensation provided by the government. They are less likely to challenge government and to ask why it is that they are being given money or to ask government to justify the amount they are being given.

The entire tourism value chain was already being affected by Covid-19 but when Wakashio happened, the closing of the beaches of the southeast affected the taxis, the tour operators, the small beach restaurants, the suppliers of food to the restaurants and hotels on the southeast coast. For me, I used to pay about Rs200,000 worth of boat fuel per month but with the closure of the beaches, I didn't buy fuel. There was also the issue of not having money for a whole year, so we didn't buy from shops and grew our own garden and didn't buy from the local market, so many people suffered, not just those directly involved in the tourism industry.

Lastly what I don't understand is that the government has opened the lagoon after several months to allow the fishermen to fish but, there is a sign at the beach that says "do not swim in the water". Reflecting on this we are wondering. How can it be safe to fish in these waters but not safe to swim? What happens if tomorrow I bring tourists to swim here and something happens to them, they have a skin reaction or they fall sick?

Regarding that YouTube interview that you watched, I wanted to say that when the comment was made about the persistence of oil in the lagoon, the ecologist in the interview answered that he had recently taken a sample just

below the sand and that he had still found oil. You ask me why I think the environmentalist from the government offered a different view, why he claimed that when his team took samples there was no oil to be found. Well, all I can say is that sometimes, a person is employed and paid to say things that they do not want to say. Unfortunately, if the government does not open the tourism season in October 2021, it will be chaos in the country. And, there is a high risk that even if we open, there may be consequences that may lead to other forms of chaos, as I have already described.

You have also asked me what I think of the rumours that the MV Wakashio was perhaps carrying drugs and that is why so much effort was being made to float the boat and send it on its way. I will ask you, what has government done in the last year to dispel this rumour? From what I see, nothing has been said and so that remains a great mystery. We do not know whether there were drugs on the Wakashio. Nothing else seems to explain to us why it needed to come so close to our shores. From what we hear, the captain of the vessel had done this route via Mauritius seven times. I can't understand then, how it is that the vessel got stuck on the reef, if he had sailed such a massive vessel, seven times on this very route.

Right now though, people are not thinking about the long-term health and pollution consequences of the Wakashio. People are thinking about the money that they can get in compensation, and many fishermen families don't even understand the quantity of money which is due to them. Worse, they don't understand the true value of the sea they think that money can buy them that value. I would say that it is because people have been so poor for so long.

For me and the people of Mauritius who live with the sea today, it is a part of our body. I grew up with the sea and I would be sad tomorrow if I could not touch the sea and enjoy it. The most relaxing thing you can do to relieve stress, is to go to the sea. What I know is that the salted water of the sea is also healing. When you have a wound and you go into salt water, the wound heals faster, it is also good for people with arthritis. For me, salt water is like the water that you drink. Without this water you die.

This multi-layered interview, like the conversations gleaned from the media interviews cited above, reveals the palpable fear of locals as they are now compelled to return to the sea to fish. The interviews also reveal the seminal role that the sea plays in the lives of coastal inhabitants. For the key interviewee, not only does the sea provide him with a livelihood, it provides him and his family with multiple forms of leisure and an embodied sense of identity, which have now all but disappeared because of the Wakashio disaster. In this regard, when we consider blue heritage, we must remain aware of the fact that small-scale fishers, too, live complex lives. There are important generational distinctions, in that while a grandfather and father might choose to pursue small-scale fishing, a subsequent generation might engage in tour

operation or, other tourism ventures but still 'live' with the sea. The key interview also reveals that blue heritage stretches beyond the coast, as people from inland are drawn to the coast and sea for stress relief and healing. The seaside also provides important opportunities for socialising and intergenerational bonding. These social ties have been eroded after Wakashio.

The issue of ongoing pollution and contamination is also critical. Although the Wakashio oil spill is less than the oil spills in France (1978) and the Gulf of Mexico (2010), it affected three ecologically sensitive areas. Of concern is that the oils released contain Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAHs) which are known carcinogens for both marine animals (Seveso et al., 2021) and humans (Abdel-Shafy & Mansour, 2016).

Conclusion

In the last few years, Mauritius' coastline has become prime real estate. As one luxury property site puts it, 'blue is the new black'. This means that there is a financial incentive for government to shift small-scale fishers from their original source of livelihood, fishing, to alternative, inland, livelihoods: it also means that fish are declining in the lagoon (Government of Mauritius, 2018). To continue attracting FDI, the government also appears to be pursuing a 'development' plan of continuing to shift coastal peoples inland.

The Wakashio disaster has produced an additional set of problems. Pollution may mean that coastal areas are no longer prime real estate and knowing this, foreign investors seeking new 'green' horizons may not want to invest in a place that may no longer be pristine.

Third, the Mauritius government is a signatory to key conventions that will permit it to claim for damages caused. However, it will be interesting to see how the government frames its claims, especially if it only considers damage to the natural environment and neglects the quantum of blue heritage lost. Those living close to the sea engage with it by eating fish and other seafood, swimming, diving, sailing, fishing, and snorkelling or, alternatively, simply by sitting on the beach and looking at the horizon. People describe themselves as children of the sea (*zenfants la mer*).

A year later, the waters appear to be cleaner but, as some ecologists and locals argue, there is still oil in the mangroves and under shallow layers of sand in the lagoon. In September 2021, the key interviewee cited in this article, let me know that the Mauritius government is offering fisher families Rs. 52,000 each in compensation (approximately 900 Pounds Sterling) for

damages incurred by Wakashio. But, as discussed here, the damages appear to be far greater and government is eligible to claim for a vastly greater amount.

The conservation and inclusive sustainable use of the oceans involves close attention to historic livelihoods and sensitivity regarding the meaning and value of such livelihoods to local communities. Blue heritage, like other forms of terrestrial (tangible or intangible) heritage, cannot be summarily alienated and replaced with this or that putative alternative. This is so because living and working with the sea is much more than a matter of income: it is a way of life, and an integral part of selfhood's constitution and identity. The Wakashio disaster will be felt by Mauritians for many years to come, and its tragedy will be experienced through the unfolding of its health and pollution effects. The Mauritian government has a duty to come clean with its citizens, and to reveal the true impact of the disaster. As it is, coastal citizens have just woken up to Wakashio, and many have not yet realised that they are in a nightmare that will not end soon.

Note

1. BP specifically states that the oil sold was graded ISO-8217–2020.

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