



A Voice for Youth & Oceans
Angelique Pouponneau
Seychelles, East Africa

Angelique Pouponneau grew up on Mahé, the largest of the 115 islands in Seychelles. Growing up in a little village, her childhood was “typical for an islander,” with the beach only a five-minute walk away from her house.

She liked to play a game all children growing up near the ocean know well. You stand in the water, up to your hips, and when a wave comes at you, you try to jump over it. One day when she was three years old, her father was standing in the water, holding little Angelique tight in his arms. When he saw a really big wave coming at him, he realized he couldn't jump over it—and he couldn't dive under it either. “When he landed on his feet, I wasn't in his arms anymore,” Angelique says.

Her father looked for her frantically, everywhere in the water, but she was nowhere to be found. In a panic, he turned around and scanned the beach—and there she was, lying under a tree and enjoying the sun! The wave had swept her onto the beach. “The wave had kept me safe,” Angelique says. “So, I now see the ocean as a friend; and at the same time, I know it can be threatening.”

By the time she was five, there was a muddy path she liked to walk along. It was called Barracuda Lane, and it ran alongside a marsh that was teeming with life, with all kinds of little animals crawling around, and insects buzzing through the air. She would step out onto the beach, listen to the waves crashing on the sand, and breathe in the smell of the ocean breeze.

When she was 19, Angelique left Seychelles to study law at the University of London. It was a very different kind of life there, and soon she realized that there were many things that she had always taken for granted. “People used to ask me what it was that I missed the most,” she remembers. “I would always say the sea breeze.”

She missed other things, too. In a city like London, where most of the time you can't see further than the next block of housing, she would daydream about the infinite view she had known back home, spanning the horizon over the Indian Ocean.

But when Angelique returned to Seychelles after finishing her degree, it wasn't the same anymore. Barracuda Lane was no longer the muddy little path that she used to walk down to get to the ocean: it had been turned into a boardwalk. And there was no longer a marsh full of mudskippers and other insects. In its place was a fancy new hotel. What was left of the marsh was full of discarded plastic bags and bottles.

“I saw a Seychelles that I hadn't ever seen in my life,” Angelique says. “It's a very beautiful country - but it's also one that's had many challenges with development as well as climate change.”

In fact, small island nations like Seychelles are among the most vulnerable to the effects of the climate crisis. Sea-level rise and land degradation threaten the very existence of these nations. With coral reefs dying, one of the last natural barriers against more extreme flooding is disappearing. And changes in the water temperature are a threat to the livelihoods of many islanders, who depend on the sea for their income.

Angelique decided to take action. She joined the Small Island Developing States Youth AIMS-Hub (SYAH), an organization that had advanced youth-led initiatives on sustainable development. She travelled to Mauritius to help set up the organization's regional chapter. And when she returned home, she started the organization's Seychelles office.

Soon she became an accomplished speaker for the Seychelles National Youth Assembly. She found a network of other young activists like herself to help recruit volunteers for her efforts. "When you are a young person, you have these great ideas and you want to make a difference," she says. "But it's important to first identify, and map what already exists."

Building on the existing infrastructure, and drawing from her own network, Angelique and her fellow SYAH activists were able to make remarkable changes in a very short period of time. Within three months of the official founding of the national SYAH organization, they managed to push the Seychelles government to pledge that they would outlaw the use of single-use plastic bags—a major victory for the youth activists, *and* for the environment.

The campaign against plastic bags had originally been a much more modest idea. Angelique and her colleagues had planned to organize a celebration of July 3rd, the international day for the banning of plastic bags. But they quickly realized that they didn't just want to protest for one day, and then return to their normal lives. Instead, they started a long-term campaign that was built on two pillars: education and action.

"There was the need for education, which we did through community engagement—going to schools, and targeting different audiences," Angelique explains. "And then there was action—every month we would dedicate one day to cleaning up an area that had a lot of plastic bags lying around."

They shared before-and-after pictures of their clean-ups on social media, reached out to politicians and decision makers, and invited them join them in their actions. Eventually, even the Minister for the Environment showed up. "You know, it was a great photo op for him," Angelique says, with a smile.

But it was more than good publicity—by inviting decision makers to join them, and reaching out to other youth, Angelique and her fellow activists from SYAH managed to turn single-use plastic bags into a political issue. This was in 2015—and 2015 was an election year in the Seychelles. "We managed to make the environment, and plastic pollution, a political issue that mattered," Angelique says. "This became a determining factor of who the young people would vote for."

When the ban on plastic bags was passed, Angelique and her colleagues learned about it from newspapers and the radio. It was a very exciting moment for them: they exchanged high-fives and big smiles, and everyone cheered. "It was a feeling of pride and appreciation of our work," Angelique remembers.

Buoyed by their success, SYAH expanded their environmental work. They set up the Blue Economy Internship Program, to organize work experiences in sustainable jobs for young people. And to encourage unemployed youth to become entrepreneurs, they launched a project to produce canvas bags to sell to tourists in the hotels. Next they set up a collaborative project with a prison. "The female inmates had a lot of great skills with designing bags," Angelique explains. She was proud that the women were learning new skills, and that once they returned home, it would be to a cleaner, healthier environment.

With all of these initiatives, SYAH was able to increase the prominence of their voice in their country's environmental decision making. "We were always asked to give our views about young people," Angelique says. "Whether we thought that this or that was a sustainable path."

Over the years, Angelique has leveraged her wealth of knowledge and experience in environmentalism as an important asset. Now, as CEO of the Seychelles' Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust Fund, she is "Investing in the Country's Blue Future," dispersing \$700,000 dollars each year to research and conservation programs. "Business has a significant role in driving the climate change agenda, and then bringing about the change," she explains. "So, helping them do that has been very fruitful."

For Angelique, financing ocean and environmental projects means fighting for sustainable development. It brings her back to her childhood, when the marshes and beaches weren't plastered with fancy hotels and polluted with plastic waste.

Looking back at her career in activism, Angelique has one important piece of advice to share. “If you want to see something change, start somewhere,” she says. “It can be as easy as a little change in your everyday life, all the way to bringing others with you. But start somewhere—don’t just sit back.”

The greatest danger to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it.

Robert Swan

Call to Action: Learn more about best practices in the Blue Economy: <https://seyccat.org/>
Angelique's work with young people: <http://syah-seychelles.weebly.com/>

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
www.soup4youngworld.com