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1 message

Karl Ammann <karl@karlammann.ch>

To: Karl Amman <karl@karlammann.ch>, gillett.tricia@gmail.com, Bili Mzee <bilimzee@gmail.com>

19 April 2024

[LVMH: the back of the luxury empire](#) Investigation

Bernard Arnault and the Emirati royal family have vandalized the environment to build a palace in Seychelles

Bétonnage, deforestation, excrement spills: the construction of the new LVMH luxury hotel in Seychelles has severely damaged a natural site inhabited by protected species, including critically endangered turtles.

[Yann Filipino](#)

19 April 2024 at 09:27

LuxeLuxury, calm and delightful. After Courchevel, Paris or the Maldives, Cheval Blanc, the brand of hotels of the LVMH group, will open its sixth palace at the end of the year, on the island of Mahé, Seychelles. It will take several thousand euros per night to enjoy one of the fifty-two villas with terraces and swimming pools, located by the beach or on the hill, with a view of the Indian Ocean. Not to mention the five gourmet restaurants, tennis courts, the swimming pool, and even a surfing simulator. And so much the worse if the round trip by air from Europe emits 2 tonnes of CO₂, as much as an average Frenchman in two and a half months.

To build this vacation village for ultra-fortunates, the world's number one luxury (Dior, Vuitton, etc.), controlled by Bernard Arnault, allied with a wealthy partner: the royal family of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Its leader, called Mbe, the so-called MB, emir, the highly aid dictatorship of the Gulf, which includes the oil emirate of Abu Dhabi and the Dubai oil emirate.

The two billionaires have invested a sublime place: the Intendance cove, a white sand beach nestled in the heart of an ecologically ultra-sensitive area, consisting of ponds, marshes, and rainforest. The hotel was "*thought*" as a "*homjuquet to the surrounding nature*," LVMH said in a [statement](#).



The President of the United Arab Emirates, Mohammed bin zayed al-Nahyane (left), and the head of the LVMH group, Bernard Arnault and Illustration Sébastien Calvet / Mediapart

But the opposite has happened. Concrete mixing, deforestation, pollution: the construction of the hotel has caused serious damage to the environment, several of which have been committed in violation of the regulations. This is revealed by numerous documents obtained by Mediapart and the Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation (SBC).

As a “*homo to nature*,” LVMH allowed its Emirati partner to pour out, for two years, the urine and excrement of the hundreds of workers on the construction site, directly into the wetland that adjoins the hotel, when it is one of refuges of turtles and birds classified as critically endangered by the International Union of Nature Conservation (IUCN).

These practices violate the commitments publicly displayed by LVMH: in 2021, the French group was just [committed](#) to preserving biodiversity ... at the IUCN congress.

Contacted by Mediapart, LVMH claims to be committed to “*preserving the environment*”, but has provided us with imprecise and sometimes misleading answers (to be read in the annexes to this article). The companies of the L royal family involved in the project did not follow up.

A role of “consultant” and “interim assistant” for LVMH

It all starts in 2018. Murban Energy, an Emirati company, acquires the Seychelles company Hill View Resort Seychelles Limited (HVRSL), owner of the Banyan Tree Hotel, located on the beach of the Intendance. Murban is co-owned by Royal Group, a company run by Sheikh Tahnoun al-Nahyane, brother of MB.

The Emiratis took charge of the deep renovation of the establishment (largely destroyed) to become a White Horse palace, which would then be operated by LVMH, in exchange for rent.

Bernard Arnault's secret business with MB's brother

LVMH has never communicated on the subject. Cheval Blanc has quietly associated himself with a society linked to the UAE royal family, led by a brother of the Emirati President Mohammed ben zayed al-Nahyane, known as

The first operation took place in 2017, when an Emirati company, Murban Energy, bought the walls of the White Cheval Hotel in Maldives. A year later, Murban was buying a hotel in Seychelles to turn it into a White Horse palace.

Murban's boss is Mohamed Murshed al-Rumaithi, a multi-mandate businessman who has long presided over the UAE Chamber of Commerce. It was a very close friend of MB's, who [attended](#) the wedding of one of his sons in January. It is impossible to know who Murban originally belonged. But one clue suggests involvement of the state or royal family: two of Murban's leaders also work for Mubadala, a UAE sovereign fund.

In June 2021, shortly after the start of the work of the Hotel Cheval Blanc in Seychelles, Murban was acquired by Alpha Dhabi Holding, 76% owned by International Holding Company, a company listed on the Abu Dhabi Stock Exchange, itself controlled by Royal Group. The company, whose shareholders are not public, is [described](#) by a Reuters journalist as a *family office* to manage the royal family's fortune. Royal Group is led by the powerful Sheikh Tahnoun al-Nahyane, brother of MB, head of the largest sovereign wealth fund in the UAE and head of the secret services. On 14 March 2024, Murban was resold to the Emirati National Corporation for Tourism and Hotels (NCTH), 36% controlled by Royal Group.

If he did not carry out the project, it was Bernard Arnault's group that designed the project. According to our information, the contract provides that LVMH has a role of “*consultant*” and “*assisted management*” during the work order to ensure that “*the aesthetic and technical standards of Cheval Blanc are respected*”. “*Obviously, this consulting role does not abhor us from our responsibilities*,” said the world's No. 1 luxury leader at Mediapart.

In order to obtain the building permit, the company HVRSL, the owner of the hotel, has had to order several environmental impact reports at the end of 2020. One of the greatest dangers identified concerns a 6-hectare natural wetland part of which is literally belted by the hotel, and which has a “*enormous value in conservation*” of wildlife, point to the impact reports.

Despite their major biodiversity importance, 90% of Seychelles' wetlands have disappeared, due to the development of tourism and agriculture. Only four remain on the island of Mahé. The one that borders the Hotel Cheval Blanc is home to as many as nine protected species, including fish, birds, and two populations of critically endangered freshwater turtles, which exist only in Seychelles: the yellow-bellied tortoise and the black vase turtle.



On the right, the Intendance cove and the former Banyan Tree hotel before the work. On the left, the plan of the new Cheval Blanc hotel built on the site by an Emirati company for LVMH. - Mediapart documents

“The yellow-bellied turtle and the crowned black heron at night are probably the most endangered species in Seychelles. It could be extinguished due to the rapid disappearance of their habitat,” warns the environmental impact report. This document therefore requires HVRSL, which LVMH is supposed to monitor, drastic measures to protect the wetland. But many of them have not been respected.

High contamination of water by faecal bacteria

The man who has shown this is Karl Ammann. This Swiss citizen has, just above the Hôtel Cheval Blanc, a villa that totally depends on the infrastructure of the establishment. In 2020, the new Emirati owners are brutally threat to permanently cut off water and electricity. Karl Ammann had to go to court – the case is still ongoing.

Karl Ammann, who lives in Kenya, is an animal photographer and documentary filmmaker, who has received numerous international awards. It has been very committed to nature conservation and has carried out surveys of trafficking in wild animals.

In early 2021, when the hotel works began, Karl Ammann noticed that there was a problem with the workers' toilets. On 13 January, he alerted, through a friend, the head of LVMH's hotel division, Olivier Lefebvre. Who is simply accusing receipt.

The following year, another nature lover, Guy Esparon, noticed the same problem. Accommodating from the village next to the hotel, he often walks along the wet area to the beach, where he collects the garbage on a voluntary *“I saw that a pump was discharging wastewater from the site into the wetland,”* he told our partner SBC.

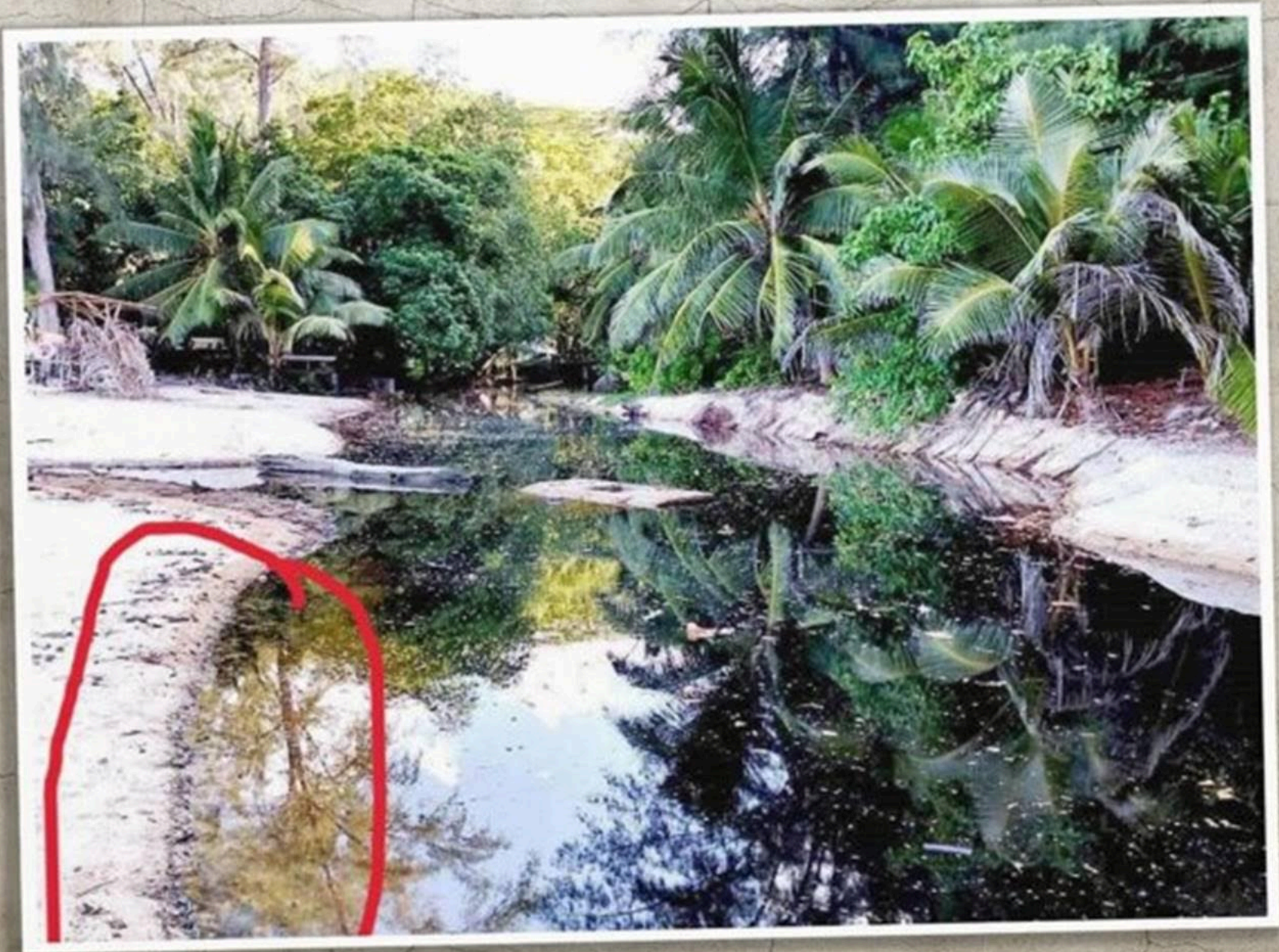


Photo of the excreta-discovered wet area near the construction site of the Cheval Blanc Seychelles hotel, taken in December 2022 by Guy Esparon, resident of the nearby village. Document Mediapart/SBC




Over the weeks, he found that the water in some ponds became black and stinky. In a photo he took in December 2022, you can see excrement pieces on the banks. *"It was around Christmas. The waters of the wetland flowed in sea, and the beach was covered with black water. It smelled of the sewers."*

In June 2023, photographer Karl Ammann had a water sample analysed by a specialized laboratory. The results show high contamination by faecal bacteria, including *Escherichia coli*. “High levels of *E. coli* mean that there is a probability of the presence in water of other pathogenic bacteria and viruses,” says one scientist interviewed by Mediapart.

In France, the level of *E. coli* must be zero in drinking water. For bathing water, the threshold of good quality is set at a maximum of 100 units per 100 ml, and the threshold of poor quality, from which bathing is strictly prohibited, is 1800. However, the *E. coli* rate measured in June 2023 in the wetland bordering the Hotel Cheval Blanc was 60,000, or thirty times more.

FINAL CERTIFICATE OF ANALYSIS

COA N°:	780223-0
COA Date:	27/06/2023
Page	1 / 1

ANALYTICAL RESULTS

Tests	Analysis Start Date	Results	Units	Limits <i>[Target value]</i>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Coliforms METHOD: SWJM 48	22/06/2023	200000	cfu/100ml	Result <= 10 cfu/100ml
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Faecal Coliforms METHOD: SWJM 56	22/06/2023	60000	cfu/100ml	Not Detected cfu/100ml
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Escherichia coli METHOD: SWJM 45	22/06/2023	60000	cfu/100ml	Not Detected cfu/100ml
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TMA METHOD: SWJM 35	22/06/2023	30000	cfu/ml	Result <= 1000 cfu/ml

Analysis of a water sample taken in June 2023 in the wetland by photographer Karl Ammann. Document Mediapart/SBC

Analyses of two other water samples, carried out in July and August 2023, showed the presence of salmonella, a highly toxic faecal bacterium, potentially lethal to humans and animals alike. “The analyses provided show a high of microbiological contamination, incompatible with human activities,” two other experts we consulted conclude.

By mid-2023, most of the wetland was a vast greenish expanse, invaded by water lenses.

These discharges of effluents have fuelled another harmful phenomenon, eutrophication, which is the cause of the green algae phenomenon in Brittany.

Urine and nutrient-rich excreta cause the proliferation of often invasive plant species, which cover the surface of ponds. They deplete oxygenated water and block sunlight, with harmful effects both for native vegetation, but also turtles (whose food is decreasing), fish, and in turn for birds that feed on them.



Photographs of the wetland invaded by water lilies in 2023. - Mediapart/SBC documents

This is exactly what happened next to the LVMH hotel: in mid-2023, most of the wetland was only a vast greenish expanse, invaded by water lilies.

Karl Ammann's discoveries do not stop there. For two years, he investigated, took photographs, ordered and paid for expert opinions, and harassed the Seychelles government to obtain official documents on the Cheval Blanc project. This is how it has discovered the extent of environmental damage.

The company HVRSL, controlled by the Emirati President MB and his family, had committed not to do any heavy work in the wetland to protect the turtles. Unfulended promise: photos show that the workers ploughed the shore a shovel, and even built a vast dyke of land in the middle of a pond (see below).

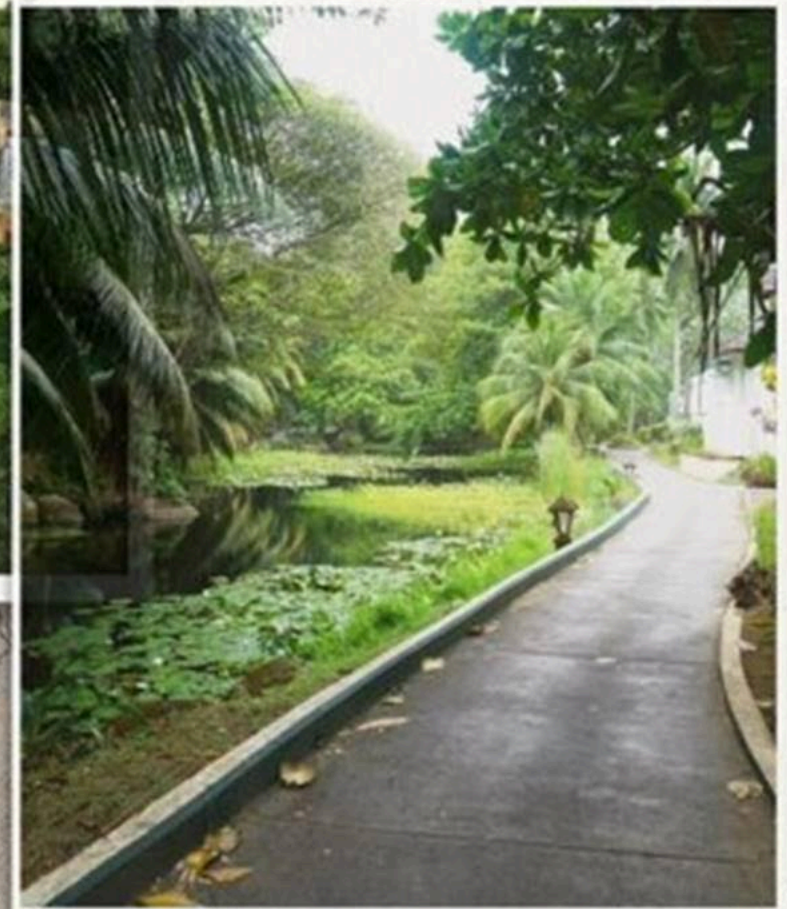
When asked by SBC, the Ministry of the Environment stated that it had ordered HVRSL to cease the work. But there was no legal action or fine.



The work and the dyke (on the right) carried out in the wetland during the hotel's construction. - Mediapart/SBC documents

HVRSL wanted to retain, for the needs of the construction site, a dirt track that cuts one of the ponds in half. Environmental experts called for the construction of a new stilted road so that water could circulate. But HVRSL retained and even expanded, the initial track. As a result, the closed part of the pond turned into a eutrophied zone, invaded by water lenses.

The old hotel had kept the shores of the wetland in their natural state. But the Emiratis and LVMH felt that the paved path, which allowed guests access to their villas, was too narrow. To enlarge it, they filled some of the pond and artificialized the banks with stone blocks.



The banks of the pond of the wetland that borders the hotel, before the work (on the right) and today (left). The road that cuts the pond in half should have been carried out on stilts so that the water can circulate. - Mediapart/SB documents

The two partners had also promised to “touch the land slightly”, i.e. to use “the current footprint of the old hotel and to keep the construction of new buildings to a minimum.” In fact, the Emiratis and LVMH undertook massive concretification of this paradise site. Analysis of plans, satellite images and videos taken by drones shows a strong growth in the artificial surface (it has doubled, according to an expert opinioner commissioned by Karl Ammann) expand villas and build new infrastructure.



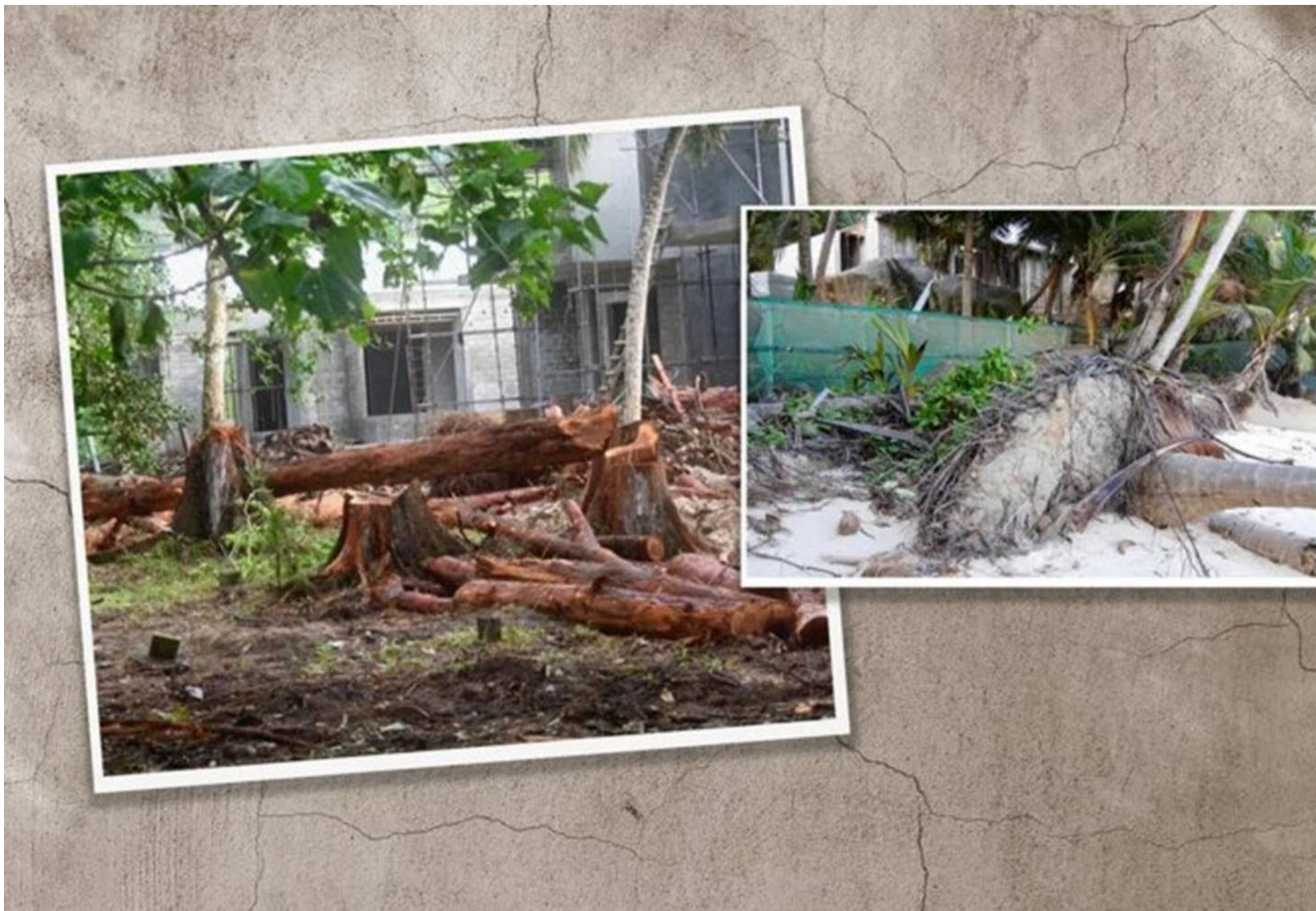
Satellite view of the former Banyan Tree Hotel on 14 December 2019 (top) and the new LVMH White Horse Hotel on 5 October 2023 (bottom). Google Earth/Airbus/Maxar

This work has resulted in significant deforestation. In the hills, the hotel company cut down a hundred-year-old tree without permission, which resulted in a fine. In the wetland, a large area was deforested to build a swimming pool and the hotel's children's club.

Problems were also raised on the Beach of the Intendance. It is one of the main places in Seychelles where two critically endangered species of sea turtles (the green turtle and the nested turtle) are laid, protected by law. The me of disturbing them is an offence punishable by two years' imprisonment, as recalled by a paper on the beach.

The turtles settle in the thin strip of tree vegetation that separates the sand from the first villas of the Hôtel Cheval Blanc. The environmental impact report required “*maintaining this vegetation buffer zone*” in order to continue *provide a protected area for turtle laying*”.

Once again, the Emiratis have gone by without LVMH immersion. Photos of the construction site, as well as images of drones and satellites, show that the hotel had cut trees near the beach to equip the villas with private terrace swimming pools. In some places, the strip of coastal vegetation has even completely disappeared.



Chanyard of the Hôtel Cheval Blanc near the beach of Intendance, in 2023. - Mediapart/SBC documents

Asked about concreting and cutting trees, LVMH points out that the plans for the new hotel have been approved by the government. *“Where, by mistake, breaches of the initial permits could have been noted, immediate correcti were made in consultation with the competent authorities,”* the group continues. Clearly, violations of the building permit would have been regularized *a posteriori*.

From 2022, Karl Ammann increased alerts to the Seychelles Ministry of the Environment. Without success.

On 4 July 2023, he sent the first results of his investigation to LVMH, reporting "*damage against the environment*", some of which he claimed were "*in violation of Seychellois law*" and "*commitments made [by the group] with . . . to environmental liability*".

LVMH's lawyers told him that the group had conducted the investigation with its Emirati partner. They denied all the accusations and claimed that "*the work was carried out in accordance with local laws*". When questioned by Mediapart, Bernard *Arnault's* group believes that Karl Ammann's work includes "*major factual inaccuracies*", without specifying which ones.

The embarrassment and injunction of the Ministry of the Environment

At the same time, the photographer wrote to the Seychelles MPs. On July 11, 2023, one of them challenged the Minister of the Environment, Flavien Joubert, during a question session in the government in the National Assembly.

On the heavy work carried out in the wetland, the Minister told MEPs that the Emirati society had, in accordance with its obligations, captured the protected turtles in order to relocate them temporarily to the place before the site. But that is not true: turtles have in fact never been transferred, as the Environment Ministry subsequently admitted to our partner SBC.

On the subject of wetland pollution, Flavien Joubert says that everything is fine: the proliferation of water lenses would have nothing to do with the construction site, and the company HVRSL, owner of the hotel, *has "made water analyses"*.

ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION ACT 2016
ENFORCEMENT NOTICE

Mr. Murad Obeidat
Project Manager, Client Rep.
Hill View (Resort) Seychelles Limited
@murban.com

Dear Sir,

**RE: SEWAGE TREATMENT PLANT EFFLUENT STANDARDS – EX-BANYAN TREE
HOTEL AND STAFF ACCOMODATION, TAKAMAKA**

Reference is being made to the sampling conducted on the above-mentioned property on the 13th July 2023, by officers from the Ministry of Agriculture, Climate Change and Environment.

During the course of the visit samples were taken at the Sewage Treatment Plant located at the staff accommodation and the Sewage Treatment Plant situated inside the hotel premises.

The samples taken have been analyzed at the Seychelles Public Health Lab. The results show that both STPs contain a high amount of Total Coliform, E. Coli and Intestinal Enterococci. Salmonella species are also present in the STP located on the hotel premises (Please find results attached). The Chemical Oxygen Demand for both STP's are above the required standards which is 90 mg/L and the Total suspended solids for the STP at the hotel premises is high, 217 mg/L.

YOU ARE INSTRUCTED TO:

1. Immediately stop the discharge of the final effluents into the marsh for both STPs.
2. Dispose of the final effluent from both STPs at the Public Utilities Cooperation centralize sewage treatment Plant until the required standards are met. Standards must meet the Environment Protection (Effluent Standards) Regulations 2023.

Failure to comply with this Enforcement Notice is an offence under Section 54(3) of the Environment Protection Act, 2016. Pursuant to Section 68(1) of the same Act, any person who commits an offence under section 54(3) is liable upon conviction, to a fine of not less than SCR 25,000 and not exceeding to SCR 100, 000 and two years imprisonment or to both such fine and imprisonment.

In accordance with Section 74 of the Environment Protection Act 2016, a person aggrieved by the decision made, can submit an appeal to the Appeals Board. Kindly email envappealsboardsec@env.gov.sc for further guidance.

Yours faithfully,



Mrs. Nanette Laure
ADMINISTRATOR

The injunction sent on 7 August 2023 by the Seychelle

Ministry of Environment to the company HVRSL, owner of the Cheval Blanc Hotel. Document Mediapart/SBC

In fact, the Minister for the Environment is very embarrassed. On 13 July, two days after his intervention in the Assembly, his services had emergency water samples taken inside the hotel evacuation system being tested. The results confirm the presence of salmonella and faecal bacteria *E. Coli*, and an overshoot of the regulatory thresholds.

On August 7, the Ministry of the Environment sent an injunction to HVRSL, ordering it to "*immediately stop dumping effluent into the swamp*", on pain of legal proceedings. This document states that the Emiratis must now take waste water to the nearest treatment plant and build a new treatment plant as soon as possible.

When asked by Mediapart, LVMH denied any faecal pollution: "*We are categorically refuting claims about the discharges into the wetland, no effluent was dumped*". Released over the government's injunction, which demonstrates the contrary, Bernard Arnault's group refused to answer.

This episode contradicts one of LVMH's arguments, which states that the work is closely followed by the Ministry of the Environment, "*which is not known for its gentleness in the face of any degradation of fauna and flora*".

A right to pollute with impunity

The lies of the Minister in the Assembly, as well as the absence of sanctions imposed by his services despite the irregularities noted, show, on the contrary, that the Emiratis seem to have the right to pollute with impunity.

This is not the first time. In 2010, the then UAE president, Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the half-brother of the current ruler Mohammed bin Zayed, had built a palace on the top of a hill on Mahé Island. Here, too, the spillage of workers from the yard had caused serious pollution of the valley below. Nearly 350 villagers [sued](#) the government for compensation.

To be read also

[Dossier "Abu Dhabi Secrets": our revelations 6 articles](#)

This gentleness seems to be explained by the Seychellois government's dependence on the petrodollars poured over the archipelago by the UAE. Emirati societies, as well as members of the royal family, invested heavily in the country, where they built hotels and villas. While the UAE government is providing generous subsidies to the Seychelles state to fund, among other things, roads, a sports complex, or even a drug detoxification center for drug users.

When asked by Mediapart, the Ministry of the Environment did not reply.

For the 356 turtles identified, an impact to be assessed

At the end of 2023, after the government's request, the Emiratis set out to clean the wetland to remove the water lenses. It remains to be seen how the two years of pollution were affected by the 356 protected turtles, identified in a scientific study published in May 2020 by the Marine Conservation Society of Seychelles (MCSS).

This NGO, which is referring to the subject, then set traps in December 2020 and grabbed six turtles. It renewed the operation between September and November 2023, and only two turtles were captured. But these tests are insufficient to show that the population has gone down.

In order to be at heart, it would be necessary to have a comprehensive census, which the MCSS no longer has the means to carry out. The NGO was partly funded by the former hotel owners. The MCSS even operated a conservancy centre within the facility, which identified protected species, cleaned invasive vegetation and monitored water quality. But following the purchase of the hotel, the Emiratis removed subsidies and the center closed.

The controversy in the National Assembly, followed by the broadcast last February of a first [investigation](#) by public television SBC, could have raised awareness at LVMH and its Emirati partner. It was none.



The wall built in March 2024 on the beach, in front of one of the villas of the Hôtel Cheval Blanc. SBC

In March, the Cheval Blanc Hotel cleared part of the beach vegetation, where the sea turtles nest, and began to build on the sand, illegally, a concrete wall intended to protect the largest villa in the complex from the glance. The authorities asked the Emiratis to destroy the wall within two weeks. Without success. The government had to issue an injunction, with threats of legal action, for the company to finally implement, as SBC [revealed](#).

And that's not all. In early April, photographer Karl Ammann discovered that the hotel buried electric cables under the beach near the same villa. This seems to be illegal once again, since the beach is a public domain.



The electric sheath that emerges from the beach, opposite the Hôtel Cheval Blanc. Document Mediapart

One of the ducts, which emerges from the sand just before the waterline, could be intended to power a lighting system. If this were the case, it would be detrimental to the reproduction of green turtles, one of the two species of turtles: they come to lay exclusively at night and cannot tolerate light.

Asked about the wall and the electric cables, LVMH refused to respond.

I did not expect the Emiratis to be very concerned about respect for the environment, but I expected LVMH to be more concerned about it.

Photographer Karl Ammann

Karl Ammann wrote to the lawyers of the group again in November 2023, last January, and finally on 18 March. He is not asking for anything for himself, but asks for discussions to commit themselves so that LVMH can finance *"measures correcting environmental damage"*: resumption of subsidies granted to the NGO MCSS, rehabilitation of the wetland, correction of certain differences noted with the recommendations of the impact assessments.

These letters remained unanswered. *"I didn't expect Emirati owners to be very concerned about respect for the environment and biodiversity, but I expected LVMH to be more concerned about this,"* says Ammann.

The Swiss photographer is currently preparing a complaint with his lawyers before the Constitutional Court of Seychelles against the government for failing to protect the environment. It is also considering bringing LVMH before French courts.

To be read also

[Dossier LVMH: the back of the luxury empire 27 articles](#)

In his response to Mediapart, Bernard Arnault's group questioned Karl Ammann's integrity, claiming, without providing evidence, that he *"stilled to take an interest in the environmental issue around this project when negotiating the sale of his house – open at his request – were stumbled because of a misunderstanding about the purchase price."*

The photographer denies. On the contrary, documents he provided us show that it was the Emiratis who offered to buy his villa, five months after the first alert e-mail he sent to LVMH. And in a letter sent to the photographer in 2023, the group's lawyers acknowledged that *"Mr. Ammann is genuinely concerned about the environment."*

[Yann Filipino](#)

If you have any information to contact us, you can contact us at enquete-mediapart.fr. If you want to send documents via a highly secure platform, you can go through SecureDrop de Mediapart, [the way forward is explained on this page](#).

Black box

At request, LVMH sent us a written reply (to be read in full in the annexes to this article). Released about new information and the fact that LVMH had denied faecal pollution in the wetland, the group refused to respond.

We asked the Emirati companies involved in the project: Murban Energy (owner of the hotel walls and manager of the construction site), its boss Mohamed Murshed al-Rumehi, and the two companies that have succeeded one after another as owners of Murban since 2021: Alpha Dhabi Holding (ADH) and National Corporation for Tourism and Hotels (NCTH). Our questions remained unanswered.

The Seychelles Ministry of the Environment acknowledged our questions but did not reply.

Administration:

Residence On The Rock

K. & K. Ammann

P.O. Box 437 Nanyuki 10400 Kenya

Tel: 254 62 32448 Fax: 254 62 32407

UK Mobile: 44 7801 730 284 (roaming)

Email: karl@ammann.ch

www.residenceontherocks.com

