

Large-scale marine protected areas: a new conservation tool for the oceans?

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Abstract: Since the 2010s, large-scale marine protected areas (LSMPA) have thrived in the Pacific Ocean and have profoundly transformed the geography of the Region. More than anywhere else in the world, in the Pacific region they have turned Small Island Developing States into Large Ocean Island States and generated a significant political shift on the regional and international level. This research note presents a new exploration of the ongoing political construction of the ocean. An anthropological approach is used to investigate the governance processes that involve many actors and shape marine environmental policies of two French overseas territories, New Caledonia and French Polynesia. Based on fieldwork focused on the Parc naturel de la mer de Corail and the Tai Nui Atea large management area between 2014 and 2016, this research interrogates socio-environmental dynamics and governance issues in the francophone Pacific and offers an overview of current structural changes that occur in Oceania.

Keywords: marine protected areas, governance, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Oceania

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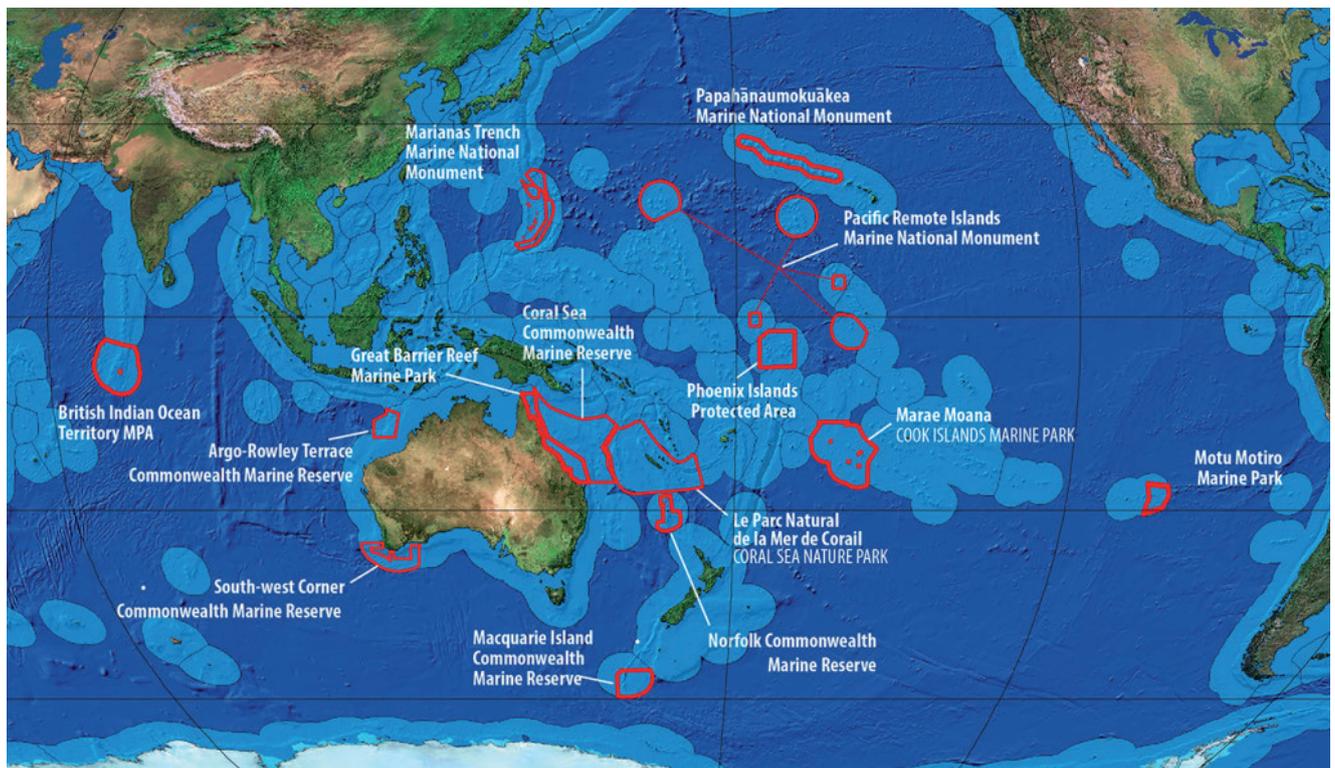
Over the past decade, the Pacific Ocean region has been experiencing an expansion of large-scale marine protected areas spreading over vast ocean areas with a myriad of actors aboard. Associations, private and public sectors and big international conservation NGOs (BINGOs) interact, confront and negotiate new norms shaping the maritime world hitherto invested mainly by offshore fishers and shippers.

In New Caledonia, the Parc naturel de la mer de Corail was founded in April 2014 following the inscription of the exceptionally rich lagoons to the UNESCO World Heritage List. The creation of the Parc naturel marks a turning point in the economic future of the country, which over the last decades has been exploring potential alternatives to nickel exploitation, an industry that is profoundly linked to the colonial history of this South Pacific Territory.

In French Polynesia, the turning point is more recent. The announcement in September 2016 by the President of the local government at the IUCN World Congress in Hawaii about the establishment of a large-scale managed marine area (LSMMA) had a resounding effect. Until now, the French Marine Protected Area Agency and the Pew Charitable Trust—a powerful conservation NGO—were the key stakeholders involved in ocean conservation in French Polynesia. They ran two large marine protected areas projects over the Marquesas Archipelago and the Austral Islands, which together represents more than 700,000 square kilometres of ocean surface. With the announcement of the implementation of a LSMMA over the entire exclusive economic zone (EEZ), the French Polynesia government thrusts these two near-completed projects into uncertainty.

Source: Kowasch, 2012

Figure 1: Lagoon of Ouvéa island, one of six clusters classified Unesco World Heritage site in New Caledonia



Source: Big Ocean, Naitā 2014 (<http://bigoceanmanagers.org/14-member-sites-help-protect-7-2-million-square-kilometers-of-ocean/>)

Figure 2: The fourteen member sites of the Big Ocean large-scale marine protected areas network.

Through these case studies, this research note explores the emerging issues that arise from environmental policies, between new territorialities and the social perceptions of the oceans. Based on the author's doctoral research in anthropology, the analysis focuses on the issues underlying these marine governance dynamics, which are meaningful to understand the ongoing geographical, political, environmental, social and cultural processes that are currently underway in Oceania. The examples of two large scale marine areas, the Parc naturel de la Mer de Corail in New Caledonia and the Tai Nui Atea in French Polynesia, illustrate the processes through which the Pacific Islands are reshaping new territories and governance models.

After a short presentation of the methodological framework, I will explain the international context in which the LSMPA conservation tool is developed. Then I will focus on two cases of large marine areas to highlight the governance processes that lead to the implementation of this new management framework of natural resources. The final section will question the contemporary issues intertwined with the Pacific Ocean and how the French Overseas Territories are experiencing the emergence of LSMPA beyond the only environmental purpose.

Methodology and Framework

I began fieldwork on these issues in New Caledonia in 2014, the year the Parc naturel de la mer de Corail was established. My multi-sited fieldwork in New Caledonia and also in French Polynesia lasted until the end of 2016. I conducted interviews with members of public institutions, customary authorities, and professionals from the private sector, NGOs, environmental associations as well as local management committees related to marine resources and biodiversity. I participated in workshops and meetings concerning management plans for LSMSPAs' governance. Furthermore, I conducted several interviews at different steps of the marine park creation with the members of the management committee and the persons who chaired the management structures at a political and technical level. The fieldwork aimed to investigate the arena formed by the configuration of actors involved in the marine governance process at multiple scale, from the local level to the global level. Based on the assumption that the ocean gives rise to new centers of power (Abélès, 2008), I investigated how environmental issues are tightly woven to sovereignty, cultural and also identity claims.

Oceans (re)invested

Since concerns about the environment has become a global issue, as illustrated by the COP 21 on climate change, large-scale conservation programs have multiplied. Following the Rio Conference, the Convention on Biological Diversity has indeed promoted large networks of increasing numbers of protected areas worldwide (Adams, 2004; Leenhardt, Cazalet, Salvat, Claudet, & Feral, 2013).

Moreover, the recent dynamics of maritimisation of the world emphasizes the economic, strategic and/or military high potential of the oceans in the 21st century (Bennett, Govan, & Satterfield, 2015; Hannigan, 2016; Marroni & Asmus, 2013; Schöttli, 2015; Steinberg, 2001; Vigaric, 2004). As a result, there is a new form of reinvestment of the world's maritime spaces, thirty years after the establishment of the EEZs by the Montego Bay Convention on the Law of the Sea.

As the most widespread conservation tool, the protected area intensively extends towards marine environments. The percentage of ocean areas covered has risen from 3.5% in 2014 to 14% in 2016 (UNEP-WCMC & UICN, 2016). Aichi Target 11, ratified during the Conference of the Parties in 2010 to protect 10% by 2020, is the main springboard. It confirms a dynamic initiated since 2006 for which the



Figure 3: Lobster fishing in northern New Caledonia (west coast)

Pacific Islands are at the forefront (Gruby & Campbell, 2013; Jupiter, Mangubhai, & Kingsford, 2014). Fifteen of the seventeenth LSMPAs of the world are located in the Pacific Region (Lewis et al., 2017).

The Parc naturel de la mer de Corail, a political weight for New Caledonia

In this rush for ocean conservation, New Caledonia took the lead. Four years after the adoption of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020, the Parc naturel de la mer de Corail has become one of the biggest marine protected areas in the world. Covering the entire Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the marine park encompasses more than 1.3 million square kilometres of coral reefs, islets and seamounts. Its main objectives, detailed in the proposal document published by the French Marine Protected Area Agency in 2014, follow the principles of sustainable development which recommend reconciling economic development and environmental conservation in an integrated management policy.

The management committee of the natural park is a collegial entity

and involve a representative range of stakeholders including: institutional actors (State services, provinces, government); customary authorities (from the eighth customary areas); socio-professional (private sector); and civil society (associations, NGOs). Stakeholders met monthly, sometimes weekly, over the three years following the creation of the natural park, to argue their position regarding the development of extractive activities, no-take areas or sustainable fisheries. The management committee of the natural park has an advisory role and is entrusted to define the management plan. After three years of consultation, the management plan is submitted to the New Caledonia government for approval. Although the EEZ of New Caledonia is legally attached to the French State, it is under the jurisdiction of the local government, which is the final decision-maker.

The technical and institutional support provided by the main actors of the project offers a wide range of opportunities for the Government to lead its maritime policy. The management tools conveyed by the environmental NGOs and based on

IUCN standards, as well as marine spatial planning approaches developed by state agencies, represents a high innovation potential in terms of ocean governance.

The management committee is made up of 22 members resulting in a wide set of strategies with many interests and issues at stake. Hence, the Government of New Caledonia benefits from an experimental tool dedicated to serve many purposes. In the context of the institutional transition organised after the Noumea Accord signed in 1998, and the coming referendum for self-determination, the Parc naturel de la mer de Corail can be seen as a political instrument.

The quasi-intact natural resources contained in the EEZ are considerable wealth for the economic future of the archipelago. The minerals, ecological or halieutics resources enable the tourism, fishing or mining industries to develop. They represent a significant development potential for a decolonized country. However, the mining history and its impacts, the active role of environmental associations and NGOs, and the still low profitability remain obstacles to deep-sea mining.

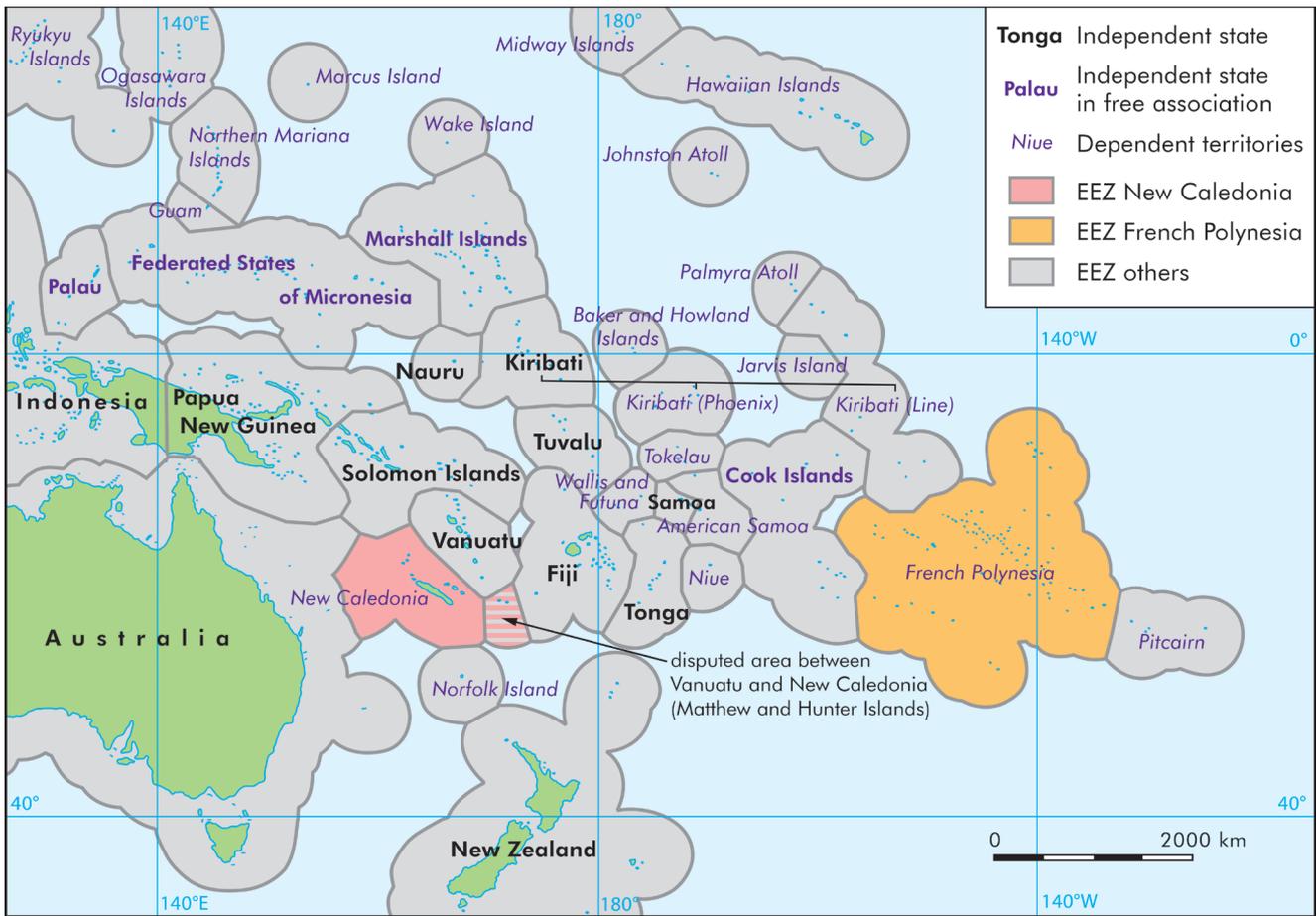


Figure 4: Pacific island countries with EEZ (exclusive economic zone)

At the beginning of the marine parks' creation process, deep-sea mining was considered to be a main issue by the management committee members, especially the civil society (composed of environmental associations and NGOs). The opposition between environmentalists and representatives of the mining industry was at the core of the discussions until they decided to stop attending the committee meetings. The mining industry sector is also present in other organisations dedicated to marine spatial planning, such as the maritime cluster of New Caledonia. This Cluster, which gathered the economic actors of the private maritime sector since 2014, contributes to promote economic activities and maritime development such as transportation, wind farm or yachting.

Since the management plan has not yet been approved, the Parc naturel de la mer de Corail is an hollow shell but already attracts financial funds from national, regional or international programs dedicated to run the implementation and management framework process. Since the announcement of the

establishment of a large-scale marine protected area, New Caledonia has gained political visibility. The natural park also represents an opportunity to strengthen the regional integration and increase its influence at international meetings.

A Polynesian way of governing resources

In French Polynesia, large-scale marine protected areas emerged as a conservation tool in the early 2000s. This French overseas territory located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean is composed of 118 islands and atolls and is divided into five groups of islands. The northern archipelago of French Polynesia is the Marquesas Islands and the southern archipelago is the Austral Islands.

The Marquesas Archipelago has been on the tentative list of UNESCO World Heritage in the 'cultural landscapes' category since 1996. From 2003, the UNESCO Marquesas application progressively extended from terrestrial areas to the creation of a large-scale marine protected area covering the over 700,000 square kilometres of the entire archipelago. The French Marine

Protected Areas Agency is the main player in this project, in a partnership with a Marquesan association called Motu Haka. There are both involved since 2009 in the UNESCO application to coordinate the local committees.

In April 2014, another large-scale marine protected area project emerged in the Austral Islands with the intervention the NGO Pew Charitable Trusts (Salvat, Bambridge, Tanret, & Petit, 2015), mainly known for its international program Global Ocean legacy that aims to establish large marine parks worldwide. This powerful NGO is mostly active in the Pacific Region, including New Caledonia. In the Austral Islands, the NGO planned to implement a large-scale marine protected area, including a vast no-take zone, all over the entire archipelago, which corresponds to 1,000,000 square kilometres.

Like New Caledonia, French Polynesia holds an autonomous status and obtained administrative competencies in 2004, including the management of environmental and natural resource within its 5.5 million square kilometres exclusive economic zone. Since early 2016, the government



Figure 5: Place which local people call "sharks strait" in the lagoon of Ouvéa island. A face of a monkey can be seen in the form of the rock.

has opted for the development of a coherent maritime policy framework on an EEZ-wide scale. With the aim of regaining control of the EEZ, the government decided to create a large-scale managed area named *Tai Nui Atea*, which includes the five islands groups of French Polynesia and effectively suspends the two ongoing large-scale marine projects in Marquesas and Austral Islands. By establishing this large-scale managed area, the local government expresses its willingness to implement a global coherent framework regarding its maritime policy. The Marquesas and Austral Islands waters will be subject to the same regulations as the other archipelagos.

Although the announcement tends to crystallize the tensions between Tahiti and the island groups, the current Polynesian government fills the gap of a disorganized maritime strategy related to the political instability of successive governments since the early 2000s.

By adopting a large-scale marine managed area, the Polynesian government aims to distinguish itself from conservationists and the French

Agency. This opposition underlies a conflict of legitimacy regarding actors who are supposed to provide technical support. The French Polynesia government and some of the island's mayors and local representatives want to gain control over the marine territory. The members of local government are also founding the *Tai Nui Atea* project by proposing a model considered closer to local conceptions of the human-nature relationship. With the objective of developing marine economic activities, such as pelagic fishing in remote areas of the EEZ, which are under-exploited according to fishery stock assessments. The president of the Polynesian government argues that a managed area, rather than a protected area, allows adjudicating between conservation and resource exploitation such as the *rahui*, a traditional management system of resources. The *rahui* is a temporal ban over delimited space or resource and ruled by a traditional authority who authorizes access depending on seasons or for a particular event (Bambridge, 2015). The *rahui* traditional rules are usually implemented in coastal or lagoon areas at a village or communal scale.

This traditional system has been restored on several islands in French Polynesia since the recent movement to reconnect with local culture and identity.

In this context, the government members in charge of the large marine managed area (Ministry of Culture and Environment and the Ministry of Blue Economy) seek to develop an alternative framework for the management of vast ocean areas. This position thus requires redefining the concept of LSMPA and questions the international standards of environmental conservation.

Followed by the Cook Islands in this dynamic of reshaping the classic conservation tools, the French territories of the Pacific hold an active role in the reappropriation of the Pacific Ocean as a common space for the islands countries.

Reshaping Oceania

The Polynesian approach echoes the regional concerns about the recognition of traditional knowledge and culture linked to the ocean emphasized by Tongan writer Epeli Hau'ofa (Hau'ofa, 1998) who invites us to consider the



Source: Kowasch 2012.

Figure 6: Humpback whale in the southern Caledonian lagoon

Pacific Ocean as a place of ancient uses and practices. In his approach, he also suggests that we rethink Oceania in terms of large ocean states instead of small island countries. During regional and international meetings, Pacific leaders are now referring to Hau'ofa's perspective to assert their sovereignty over the ocean space. Although Oceania is composed of a mosaic of countries with various political status, the recent movement related to ocean governance and the emerging issues offers opportunities for the Pacific countries to elaborate new standards regarding contemporary issues. From New Caledonia to French Polynesia, the strong and ancient connection to the ocean is mobilized by customary authorities and political leaders as an argument to legitimize their positions. Throughout the seafaring practices and history, the ocean formerly connected the islands from West to East (D'Arcy, 2006; Kirsch, 2010) and is still a part of the community's daily life.

While in New Caledonia, the large-scale marine protected area is used to redefine the complex relationship with the metropole state and offer an opportunity to draw a new management

framework adapted to the territory-specific issues. cultural concerns shared by the Pacific communities is also a key feature of the Parc naturel de la mer de Corail.

The recent rise of large-scale marine protected areas at the global level takes different forms in the Pacific region. The revitalization of culture and the identity claim is strongly tied to recent interest in the oceans by different actors at different scales (local, supra-local, national or international). The cultural dynamics and the political claims experienced by the Pacific Ocean countries stemming from the new scramble for the ocean from a political, economic, ecological, social and cultural standpoint. These dynamics are shaping new territorialities that contribute to transform the complex relationships between humans and the ocean, or possibly between the humans themselves and their approach to administrate and govern the oceans. In a global, regional and local fast-changing context, the ongoing territorial construction of the Pacific Ocean is a synthesis of former practices and representations, and contemporary issues faced by Pacific islanders.

Conclusion

While the Ocean becomes a subject of political and sovereignty claims that tend to redefine the relationships between different countries, islands and their metropole states, the interplay of actors involved in the governance process reveal new strategies which differ from the environment standards of marine protected area. In New Caledonia and French Polynesia, the political use of large-scale management tools appears to be an instrument of development and economic emancipation. As a state member of the Conference of Parties that ratified the Aichi Target, France supports this initiative and must consider this new feature in its political relationship with its overseas territories. Furthermore, the strong and old connections between Pacific Islander and the ocean strengthen the legitimacy of local actors to govern marine territories newly reinvested. In this context, the rise of LSMPAs as a new tool stemmed from conservation models promoted by BINGOs that widely thrive in the global world, appears as a main lever to political, social and cultural changes, far beyond



Figure 7: Lagoon of Ouvea Island, one of six clusters classified Unesco World Heritage site in New Caledonia

Source: Kovacsfi, 2011

the initial environmental purpose. The multiple actors involved at each stage of a LSMPAs implementation and the complex configurations of ocean governance arenas need to pool social science research on this phenomenon and investigate new centres of power shaped by the craze for LSMPAs establishment.

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