



# Rāhui Nui Nō Tuha'a Pae

Proposal for an Austral Islands marine reserve

## Overview

The five inhabited islands of French Polynesia's Austral archipelago—Rimatara, Rurutu, Tubuai, Raivavae, and Rapa—have come together to propose to the central government in Tahiti that a large, highly protected marine reserve be created in their waters. If approved by the government, the reserve could be the largest in the world at a potential 1 million square kilometers.

The marine sanctuary would be named *Rāhui Nui nō Tuha'a Pae*, or "the big rāhui of the Austral Islands," a Tahitian reference to the traditional Polynesian practice of restricting access to an area or resource to conserve it. Establishing this sanctuary would help promote the unique culture and heritage of the Austral Islands far beyond the boundaries of the archipelago—and beyond the waters of French Polynesia.

This issue brief provides an overview of the formal proposal submitted to the government of French Polynesia by the municipalities of the Austral Islands with support from the Federation of the Polynesian Environmental Associations (FAPE), and Pew's Global Ocean Legacy campaign. The recommendations emerged from a series of consultations that included broad public participation throughout the islands, which are home to some 6,800 people. They are intended to help the government—which has jurisdiction over the management and protection of the territory's exclusive economic zone (EEZ)—develop a workable and effective plan to create a marine reserve.



Part of the municipal council of Rapa meet with community members.

The southernmost archipelago in French Polynesia, the Austral Islands enjoy exceptional ecosystems. Because of the islands' isolation and unique climatic and geological characteristics, the waters are rich with life, including many species found nowhere else on Earth. Rapa alone hosts 112 coral species, 150 algae species, and 383 species of coastal fish. The research shows 455 mollusk species living throughout Austral waters, 20 percent of which are found only there. More than 60 pelagic fish species can be found in the open ocean. Austral waters provide homes for three species of sea turtles, 10 species of marine mammals, 14 species of sharks, and four species of rays. The islands have the most diverse array of marine birds in French Polynesia, and the crystal waters off Rurutu are among the best places on the planet to see humpback whales.

Fishing plays a major role in the local economy. More than 1,500 fishermen work in lagoon and coastal waters, primarily using traditional methods to cover local food needs. No tuna boats are based in the archipelago. The longline fishery remains undeveloped, largely because of the harsh weather conditions and the distance from Tahiti. Since 2004, the total fishing effort of Polynesian longline fishing vessels in Austral waters (south of 22 degrees south) has amounted to about 90 tons a year and represents on average only 1.7 percent of French Polynesia's overall catch.

The Austral Islands have a remarkable cultural heritage that includes the continued use of the rāhui, an essential component of Polynesian culture, particularly on the island of Rapa. Raivavae is one of the only Pacific islands where people continue to build traditional pirogues from mango wood stitched together with coconut fiber strings. And local legends say the island of Tubuai represents the head of an octopus, with tentacles reaching to the other Austral Islands.



Humpback whales are seen annually off the coast of the Austral Islands.

## **A time to act**

The world's oceans are in crisis. Nearly 90 percent of global fish stocks are depleted, overexploited, or fully exploited to the point of not being able to replenish their populations.<sup>1</sup> Because of intense pressure from international fisheries, the biomass of bigeye tuna in the South Pacific is down 84 percent from historic levels, while yellowfin tuna populations have declined 62 percent and albacore tuna about 60 percent from their natural levels.<sup>2</sup>

Numerous studies show that marine reserves, within which industrial fishing and mining are prohibited, bring ecological benefits beyond their boundaries. Fishermen often see long-lasting gains because the biomass of coastal and pelagic fish species increases. That boosts the marine population outside the reserve where fishing continues.<sup>3</sup> By ensuring vibrant, healthy waters, marine reserves also can help attract ecotourists and bolster local economies.



Coral reef in the Austral islands.



Ian Skipworth

Around the world, only about 2 percent of the ocean is highly protected; many scientists and the International Union for Conservation of Nature recommend strict protections for at least 30 percent.<sup>4</sup> Over the past decade, many large marine sanctuaries have been created or announced by governments, particularly in the Pacific Ocean. Because of efforts in Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand, Chile’s Easter Island, Palau, Kiribati, and the U.K. overseas territory of Pitcairn, more than 5 million square kilometers have been set aside for protection in recent years. These waters form a vast network of marine sanctuaries.

French Polynesia pledged in 2013 to protect at least 20 percent of its waters by 2020. In 2014, the municipal councils of the inhabited Austral Islands approved a resolution calling for “creation of a large marine reserve in the Australs’ EEZ beyond traditional fishing areas.” The government in Tahiti heard this call and announced plans in November to create a marine protected area there that would encompass about 1 million square kilometers. Numerous policy documents released since mention this objective, including French Polynesia’s Plan on Climate and Energy and the National Assembly’s report on climate change.

## Consultation process

In May 2014, French Polynesia invited Pew to help conduct a detailed study of the Australs’ marine environment. The scientific work, which included the efforts of 30 local and international experts, resulted in a 350-page volume that was compiled and reviewed by Pew and the Institute for Pacific Coral Reefs—Centre for Island Research and Observatory of the Environment (IRCP-CRIOBE).<sup>5</sup> The authors presented the findings at a public conference in Tahiti and at an event on World Oceans Day, June 8, 2015. They also delivered the study to the territory’s government.



Part of the municipal council of Raivavae meet with community members.



Meetings of elected representatives of Rimatara, Raivavae, Rapa, and Tubuai took place in Tahiti in September 2015 to discuss the Austral Islands marine reserve project.

At the same time, the Austral municipalities, Pew, and FAPE consulted with island residents to gather their insights and priorities for a coordinated management strategy. The island municipalities organized 62 meetings with local councils and the public. More than 500 people took part in the process, including elected officials and representatives of fishing, tourism, education, and religious entities.

Members of the public could comment at workshops in each village on objectives for the proposed marine reserve and how it should be structured. The municipalities of Rapa, Raivavae, Tubuai, and Rimatara and part of the municipal council of Rurutu reviewed and endorsed the summary of these consultations, which is included in the full proposal to the French Polynesian government.

In Tahiti, interested parties, including representatives from tuna fishing businesses, government agencies, civic associations, the private sector, schools, and the general public, took part in meetings and events to stay informed and offer their perspectives. As a result, the Austral Islands marine reserve project presented in the official proposal and this summary document is the fruit of a genuine public debate and was born from a participatory and collaborative process.

## Rāhui Nui nō Tuha'a Pae marine reserve proposal

In the extensive series of consultations, the islanders identified four main objectives for the proposed marine reserve. It should:

### 1. Preserve habitats and marine resources for the long term.

The people of the Austral Islands are aware of the richness of their marine environment, but also its fragility. They know that the ocean must be protected so that it can continue to provide sustainable benefits for future generations.

### 2. Manage conflicts over resources.

Austral islanders believe that the proposed marine reserve would help avoid conflicts over marine resources, especially between tuna and coastal fishermen, who sometimes work in the same areas. Industrial fishing would be prohibited in the reserve's waters.

### 3. Enhance the cultural heritage of the Austral Islands.

The people of the Australs are proud of their natural and cultural heritage with its strong ties to the ocean. They want the value of these traditions to be recognized globally, and designation of one of the world's largest marine reserves would help achieve that goal.

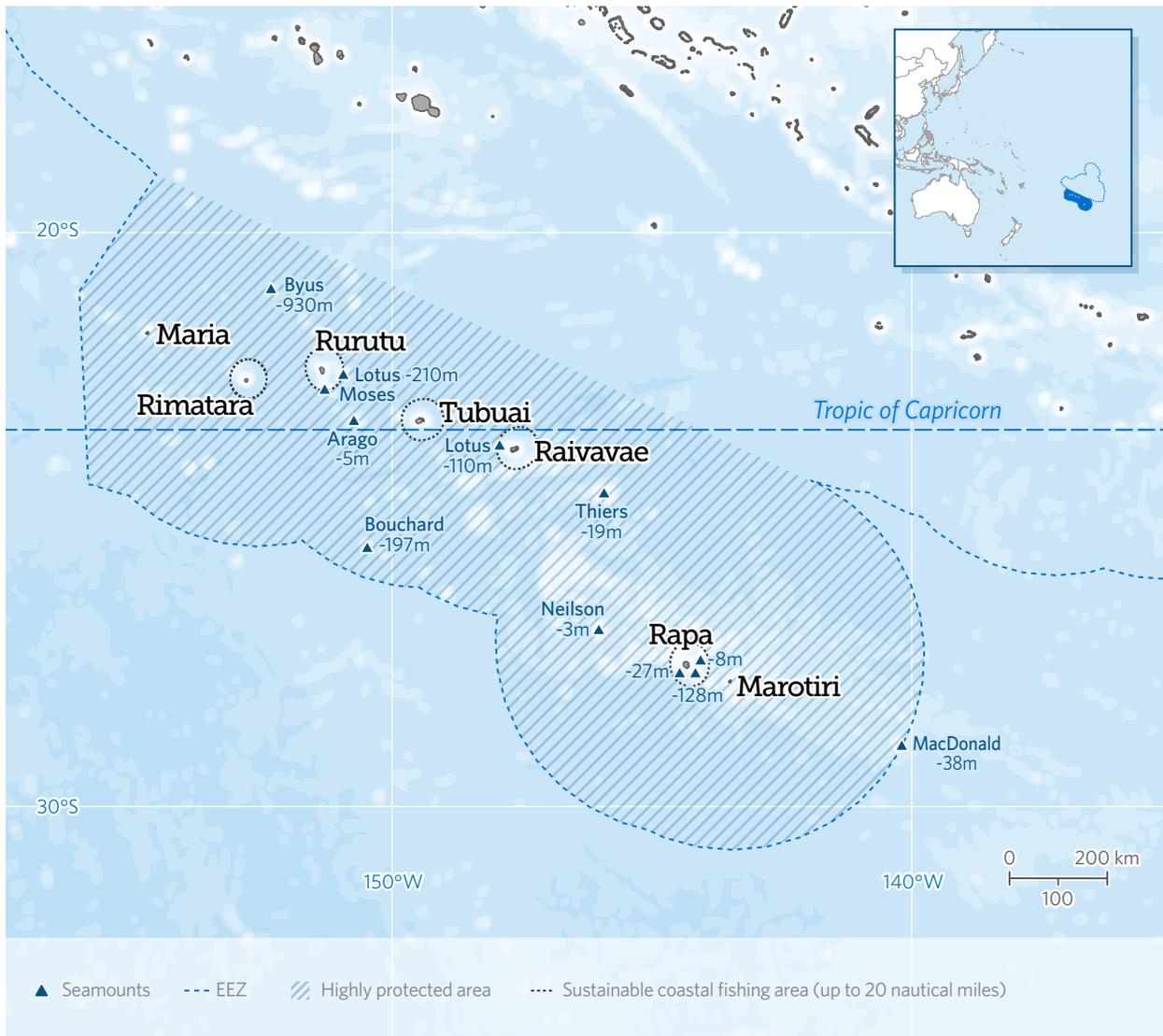
### 4. Raise awareness about the preservation of marine resources.

The Austral islanders believe that the marine reserve could also help raise awareness—in French Polynesia and beyond— about the importance of protecting and conserving marine resources.



The "Motu piscine" in Raivavae.

## Proposed Zoning for *Rāhui Nui nō Tuha'a Pae*



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To meet the stated objectives, islanders say the marine reserve plan should include the following measures.

### 1. Multiple zones.

Under the proposal, a sustainable coastal fishing area would be established up to 20 nautical miles around each island for use by boats under 25 feet (7.6 meters) long. The combined size of these coastal fishing areas would be 24,369 square kilometers, about 5,000 square kilometers per island. Beyond these zones, the islanders want to see the archipelago's waters fully protected. Local fishermen generally do not work in these more distant areas, but they are concerned that intensified fishing there, particularly with deep-freezing boats, could harm their

fishing resources and make them less self-sufficient. In total, the highly protected reserve would cover about 997,727 square kilometers. Combined with the coastal fishing areas, the reserve would extend over 1,022,000 square kilometers, meeting the goal initially set by the government. At this scale, the reserve would be the largest marine sanctuary in the world.

## **2. Sustainable management of coastal resources.**

Within the coastal areas, the islanders have proposed several measures to ensure sustainable management of resources, including restoration of coastal *rāhui* on some islands. For example, the people of Tubuai have proposed protecting 30 percent of the lagoon there, using three coastal reserves—one for each island village.

## **3. Effective governance.**

The proposal calls for establishing a central management or *rāhui nui* committee with representatives from throughout the archipelago, as well as panels from each island or *rāhui* committee to help define the actions to be taken to manage the marine reserve.

## **4. Efficient enforcement of the protected area.**

Monitoring of protected areas needs to be effective to serve as a deterrent to poachers and to realize the full benefits of a marine reserve. The French navy has the authority to monitor French Polynesia's EEZ and carry out an efficient enforcement in offshore areas; creation of a marine reserve should not generate additional monitoring requirements. For the coastal fishing areas, the enforcement requirements would be determined by the conservation measures proposed by each island management committee.

## **5. Enhancement of the natural and cultural heritage and promotion of ecotourism.**

Creation of a large marine reserve would likely boost ecotourism in the Austral Islands. The islanders know the importance of establishing an effective communications and marketing strategy to promote the marine reserve and draw potential economic benefits. They want to create a strong link between the reserve and the concept of *rāhui*. To do that, they propose naming the reserve *Rāhui Nui nō Tuha'a Pae*, or "the big *rāhui* of the Austral Islands," because they consider an open ocean protected area to be an extension of the coastal *rāhui* concept.

## **6. Education of stakeholders through monitoring the status of marine resources.**

The marine reserve would provide opportunities to raise public awareness, particularly among younger generations, about the benefits of sustainable management of lagoons and other marine areas. Recommended approaches include a "school *rāhui*"—coastal protected areas run by the schools—and efforts to get school-aged children involved in activities tied to the scientific monitoring of marine resources.

# **Conclusion**

Conscious of the many threats facing the ocean and the decline of global fishing resources, the communities of the Austral Islands have joined together to seek protections for their waters and to create what could become the largest marine reserve in the world. The islanders want their ocean to remain a sanctuary full of fish to benefit future generations, both on the Austral Islands and across French Polynesia.

Considering the islands' long history with the practice of *rāhui*, this ambitious undertaking would allow the archipelago to maintain its pioneering role in sustainable management of marine resources. It also would help French Polynesia confirm its status as a major actor in efforts to protect the world's oceans.



Marc Montocchio

Striped marlins, often seen around the Australs, chase pilchards.

## Endnotes

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- 5 Bernard Salvat et al., "Environment Marin des Îles Australes Polynésie française" (2015), [http://www.ircp.pf/wp-content/uploads/EnvironnementMarinDesIlesAustrales\\_IRCP\\_CRIOBE\\_PEW.pdf](http://www.ircp.pf/wp-content/uploads/EnvironnementMarinDesIlesAustrales_IRCP_CRIOBE_PEW.pdf).



**Contact:** Tuanainai Narii, mayor of Rapa  
**Email:** [commune-rapa@mail.pf](mailto:commune-rapa@mail.pf)



**Contact:** Maxime Chan, vice president of the Federation of the Polynesian Environmental Associations  
**Email:** [maxime.chan@hotmail.fr](mailto:maxime.chan@hotmail.fr)



**Contact:** Jérôme Petit, Global Ocean Legacy-French Polynesia  
**Email:** [jpetit@pewtrusts.org](mailto:jpetit@pewtrusts.org)  
**Project website:** [globaloceanlegacy.org](http://globaloceanlegacy.org)