Which Environmental Policies for New Caledonia?

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Estienne Rodary

Abstract

Scientists identified the extraordinary terrestrial and marine biodiversity of New Caledonia over 70 years ago. Campaigns to preserve endemic flora and fauna by international NGOs have existed since the 1960s, but established interests lying behind the extractive economy on Grande Terre helped delay effective environmental regulations and actions until the 2000s. The territory still has some of the highest CO_2 emissions per capita in the world. Multi-layered governance is in place, applied through the Convention on Biological Diversity (initiated in 1992), the UNESCO World Heritage listing for reefs and lagoons (2008) and the Natural Park of the Coral Sea (2014). Ecological policies are hampered by the divergence of views on the environment at the provincial and territorial scales and the degree of local participation that is permitted in environmental decision-making. Different resources also fall under different management regimes, and some campaigns target environmental issues alongside social and economic justice issues.

Keywords

Environmental policies · New Caledonia · UNESCO World Heritage · Biodiversity hotspot · Protected areas

2.1 Introduction

New Caledonia presents a mixed picture when it comes to environment. On the one hand, the territory is characterised by exceptional and unique natural habitats. The prevalence of nickel on the main island Grande Terre gives New Caledonia very specific soils that have profoundly shaped living organisms. The remoteness of the islands increases their biological peculiarity, and as other chapters also show, the territory is classified as a biodiversity hotspot, and has the world's highest plant endemism richness (Kier et al. 2009). On the other hand, the main island is profoundly marked by more than one century of nickel exploitation that has brought its share of environmental damage and pollution, as well as profits to the French state and commercial interests. In this context, environmental protection has long been overlooked or undeveloped, particularly where it challenges the mining sector. The importance of New Caledonian biological diversity was known from the 1950s onwards but only officially emerged as a domain worth of political action in the 1990s. Similarly, local authorities did nothing about air quality for decades, even when the French weather agency (Météo France) offered new air quality detectors to cover all French territories in the early 1990s.[1] The first structure in charge of air quality control (Scal'air) was only set up in 2004 and the first measures were actually implemented in 2007.[2]

The turn of the twenty-first century was indeed a crucial moment in the dawn of New Caledonia's environmental policies. There was no mention of environment issues in the Nouméa Agreement signed in 1998, but the three provinces gazetted their own environmental Code ten years later (2008 for the North Province, 2009 for the South Province and 2016 for the Loyalty Islands Province). The end of the 2000s also saw the first local community unrest over environmental conservation, in particular in opposition to the nickel industry. Those movements were an impulse for wider environmental concerns. The island's lagoons were listed in the UNESCO's World Heritage Site in 2008. The subsequent creation of the Natural Park of the Coral Sea in 2014 that covers the entire Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) promoted

E. Rodary (✉)
UMR SENS, French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD), Montpellier, France
e-mail: estienne.rodary@ird.fr

[1] NGO administrative, personal communication, July 2017.

[2] http://www.scalair.nc/scal-air/presentation/historique-du-projet.

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a new image of a territory at the forefront of environmental policies in the Pacific region (Dégremont 2017).

Whether this image was legitimate, and for whom, is an open question. As the title of this chapter suggests, "environment" refers to a set of diverse and contentious issues that have different relevance for different actors. "Environment" is understood here not only in material terms but as a problem of human-environment relationships, both scientific and political in nature.

It follows that environmental problems, as well as the mechanisms devised to solve them, differ according to who is seeing and assessing them. And this is all the more important in profoundly divided territories such as New Caledonia, where an environmental policy may have different meanings and different impacts to the different communities that make up society. To give only one example, New Caledonia ranks third globally in its emissions of CO_2 by person (at 30 t CO_2/person in 2019).[3] But the territory's Gini coefficient is 0.43 (Mathieu et al. 2016),[4] showing strong wealth inequalities, with some producing very little CO_2. New Caledonian communities consume natural resources at very different rates and are also affected differently by the exploitation of those resources. As a result, some are much more willing and able to engage with environmental public policies than others.

Policy analyses show that a "problem" only becomes one when an issue is perceived as such by some stakeholders (Surel 2000). The potential discrepancy between this cognitive construction of a problem and its policy formulation is generally narrowed where the decision-making actors (in particular, the state) are perceived as legitimate. This is, of course, patchy: an environmental problem will not be seen in the same way depending on the positionality of its observers, spatially and socially; what may be a problem for some actors may not be for others. The consequence is that environmental policies are always confronted with two types of tensions. On the one hand, some stakeholders will not recognise the policies put in place, finding them irrelevant or illegitimate. On the other hand, social fragmentation allows certain pressure groups or vested interests to orient environment policies, issues or targets to suit their own interests, rather than the public interest. This observation can be applied to any kind of social context, but it is particularly relevant to post-colonial societies such as New Caledonia, which is still marked by a strong segregationist heritage and deep socio-economic disparities.

This chapter attempts to take this fragmented situation into account. Rather than presenting a mere list of environmental problems in New Caledonia and the policies put in place to address them, it outlines these issues in conjunction with the different scales at which they are set and dealt with. Scalar politics are indeed crucial in New Caledonia, because of the colonial history and the segregation that resulted from it. At the local level, the colonial system, based on European settlement and the creation of "tribal/community reserves" for the Kanak population, generated strong land tenure conflicts that are still tangible today. At the regional level, the creation of three provinces by the Nouméa Agreement (1998) in the wake of the civil war gave the provinces a large degree of political autonomy that sometimes collides with the "territorial" (i.e. New Caledonian) government. Another scale that profoundly shapes environmental policies is the "island" level, where "islandness" brings different effects – both ecological and political – of connection and disconnection. The Pacific region is a further level that moulds New Caledonian policies, in stark contrast to the exclusive relation that New Caledonia holds with France.

This chapter uses these different scales as a way to present the main environmental policies that have been implemented in New Caledonia and to show the processes of fragmentation that are so specific to New Caledonian environmental policies.

2.2 Divided We Feel

The first level where one can see fragmented dynamics in environmental policies is at the local level. Here we will present two examples of such local fragmentation, mining-related environmental policies and nature conservation policies, where, over the last two decades, New Caledonia has seen the emergence of highly differentiated forms of civil society mobilisation (see chapter by Kowasch and Merlin in this book).

The New Caledonian countryside has been transformed by mining activities since the end of the nineteenth century. Nickel mining in particular has had a significant impact on the islands' natural environments, although heavily concentrated on Grande Terre (Richer de Forges and Pascal 2008). In 2008, it was estimated that the total area degraded by soil excavation was about 200 square kilometres, that is, 1.2% of the surface area of the main island Grande Terre. Today, some of these areas are still being exploited, others are abandoned (becoming orphan mines) but their effects on ecosystems persist, particularly because land restoration on ultramafic habitats takes much longer than in less hostile environments. It has been estimated that land restoration on ultramafic rock and soil can take up to 500 years (Losfeld et al. 2015). Opencast mining has very serious environmental

[3] After Qatar, Curaçao, followed by Trinidad and Tobago, Kuwait, Brunei, Bahrain, Mongolia, UAE and Saudi Arabia. Data: http://www.globalcarbonatlas.org/en/CO2-emissions. Accessed 20 April 2021.

[4] See also http://www.isee.nc/emploi-revenus/revenus-salaires/inegalites-pauvrete-revenus-sociaux?highlight=WyJnaW5pIl0=. Accessed 14 September 2018.

consequences, with the destruction of the ecosystems at the mine site, erosion, the dissemination of toxic-rich metal dusts and the pollution of rivers and lagoons (Desoutter and Bertaud 2019). Mining activities in New Caledonia have been increased over the last two decades with the creation of two new large mines and processing plants in the North Province (Koniambo, currently suspended) and the South Province (Goro) (see Chap. 8 by Kowasch and Merlin and Chap. 9 by Demmer in this book). Official figures are not made public, but it is estimated that 150 new hectares have been mined each year since 2009, compared to 50 hectares per year in previous decades. Mining concessions today occupy 300,000 hectares, or 18% of the territory,[5] which also suggests a strong mining growth. This is particular since the establishment of the Goro plant that, thanks to its hydrometallurgy process, can extract nickel from laterites at low levels of concentration.[6]

Despite the importance of the effects of mining activities from the early twentieth century, New Caledonia only adopted strong environmental protection measures with the revision of the 2009 mining code. This code includes a number of regulations, including one that requires the revegetation of mining sites. But those regulations have a limited impact due to the low rate of land restoration and the complexity of recreating ecosystems with species endemism of up to 90%.

It is in the municipalities most affected by extraction activities that antagonism to mining companies has been most prevalent, for example, in Thio, the first mining town (Le Meur 2017), or Mont Dore where the Goro hydrometallurgical plant was built (Merlin 2014). Unrest typically combines identity claims, economic arguments and environmental concerns. In the case of Goro, which has experienced serious and accidental pollution and risk management problems associated with acid ore processing, the mobilisation led to the creation of the Rhéébù Nùù committee in 2002 (see Chap. 8 by Kowasch and Merlin in this book). The action of this grassroot organisation led to the well-known agreement between the mining company and the village communities on sustainable development in the Great South (Levacher 2017). Mines like this one sit at the heart of identity claims, at specific sites where indigenous issues intersect with wage demands, health concerns and environmental issues – all associated with mines. The social movements around the construction of the Koniambo plant had a less obvious connection to environmental issues and were more related to land tenure claims from local Kanak communities (Kowasch 2012). The North Province administration controlled by a pro-independence party devised the North plant as a way to increase the economic revenues of the province, giving it a different status with local Kanak residents. In both cases nevertheless, because Kanak identities are profoundly embedded within a sense of place and history, environmental and economic transformation from mining cannot be disconnected from a holistic change in social relationships and the territorial belongings of Kanak communities.

In other locations, communities can remain distant from mining pollution issues, either because they are far from mine sites or because specific interests impede this type of issue from emerging. The most emblematic case is certainly the Société le Nickel (SLN) plant located in Doniambo, a smelter bordering downtown Nouméa, where air and marine pollution (linked in particular to the backfill works carried out in the harbour and the discharge of pollutant gases) are minimised by the SLN and public authorities to reduce public concern. In this context, a handful of local NGOs venture to expose and oppose the production of air pollution by powerful actors like SLN. One of the main local NGOs, Ensemble Pour La Planète (EPLP), has invested heavily in mobilising against pollution across the territory and has denounced collusion between industry and government that allows heavily polluting activities to continue. EPLP, as a federation of local NGOs, is currently the most dynamic structure in terms of its ability to bring issues to court or to mobilise the media on environmental concerns.

Nature conservation policies have been shaped in rather different ways, because they have involved a wider range of expatriate experts (researchers, civil servants, community activists) and with an under-representation of local people, whether of European origin or Kanak.

It is in this field of conservation issues that New Caledonia has the greatest number of organisations, either local or international. Since the creation in 1965 of the first environmental association in New Caledonia, the New Caledonian Ornithological Society, naturalist organisations have multiplied, and their fields of intervention have also increased, spreading from ornithology to larger issues such as mangrove conservation, land restoration, etc. International organisations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Conservation International (CI, present since 1996) and the Pew Charitable Trusts have in recent years set up branches in New Caledonia and today have a leading role in financing biodiversity conservation policies and managing or monitoring protected habitats or species. The intervention of global NGOs at the local level on the islands is not without friction and controversies. CI's role in New Caledonia is maybe one of the most telling of these tensions, which are largely shaped by questions of belonging and legitimacy. It is active on different topics, such as control of invasive species (see Chap. 3 by Isnard and Jaffré in this book) and coastal management. It is also invested in more localised actions, in which alliances

[5]Magali Reinert, "En Nouvelle-Calédonie, la biodiversité sacrifiée sur l'autel du nickel", 12 October 2016.

[6]Fabrice Colin, Senior Researcher, French Research Institute for Sustainable Development, personal communication, June 2017.

with local communities can be decisive for the success of its projects. In some cases, such as in the Mount Panié Reserve (North Province), CI has been able to strengthen its links with a local association, Dayu Biik, which manages the protected area. It partly funds the organisation, which recently decided to prohibit tourists from entering the reserve and to stop its collaboration with scientists who used to conduct research there. In other cases, such as on Ouvéa Island (Loyalty Islands Province), customary authorities revoked the ability of CI to operate, after they discovered that CI was setting up a trilateral agreement between Ouvéa's authorities, CI and a Swiss cosmetics company that would give the latter bioprospecting rights (anonymous, personal communication). Global NGOs' capacity for action and even their presence in New Caledonia is therefore largely affected by legitimacy issues in a context where environmental issues are closely connected to economic and identity politics.

2.3 Three Provinces and One Territory

The second level of tension in environmental policies is found between the provincial governments and the New Caledonian territory government. The Nouméa Accord helped to reduce political tensions, in particular through the creation of three provinces with large political autonomy. Two of them (North Province and Loyalty Province) are governed by pro-independence parties, and one (South Province) is controlled by the anti-independence party.

The provinces have autonomy over laws and regulations regarding terrestrial and coastal environments, for which each province has its own environmental code. But in this context of provincialisation, divergent philosophies regarding environmental policy orientations and the logic of integration of local populations are emerging (David 2015). The South Province code is, for instance, almost identical to the French code, which is notoriously poor in measures to enable public participation. Comparatively, the government of the North Province has introduced some more elements of community involvement. And the code of the Loyalty Islands Province has reversed the order of priorities between scientific expertise and local expectations.[7] The creation of protected areas there, for example, is only possible on the basis of community initiative. Similarly, new articles of the code that have been voted in 2023 give certain species (and specifically sharks and sea turtles that have special significance in Kanak societies) the status of legal subjects.

There is, therefore, a real move towards decentralisation at the provincial level, with the aim of accommodating different political orientations in New Caledonia. But at the same time, this decentralisation process is confronted with competing logics that seek to frame environmental policy at the territory level. For instance, the management of emblematic and marine species such as turtles (*Cheloniidae* and *Dermochelyidae*) and dugongs (*Dugong dugon*) has justified the creation of countrywide action plans involving local authorities, NGOs, scientists and the provinces, with the rationale that the population of those species range over provincial boundaries. But this does not necessarily mean that all stakeholders participating in the action plans have the same vision about management options for these species. Should the plan target Kanak people that have historically hunted these animals for customary ceremonies? Or should actions be focused on nonprofessional sailors and fishermen in the greater Nouméa region, who constitute the largest anthropogenic pressure on the marine environment? (see Chap. 5 by Sabinot et al. in this book) On these questions, the North and Loyalty Provinces on the one hand and the South Province (generally backed by NGOs) on the other hand have divergent answers even though they are all engaged in the action plans.

These provincial differences also affect other issues of concern. Among them, one of particular importance is the Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) policies developed under the Convention on Biological Diversity (signed in 1992 with the ABS policies adopted in 2010 under the Nagoya Protocol of the CBD). These require any entity wishing to collect and/or use biological resources to obtain prior agreement from communities that own, use or possess associated knowledge linked to these resources. The identification of these communities is in itself a complex subject (Robinson and Forsyth 2016), especially when they straddle different jurisdictions, as with the three provinces. The legal framework is complicated in the New Caledonian case because although the provinces have authority over the use of natural resources, the associated knowledge legally falls under the government of New Caledonia, which has not yet introduced any law or regulation on this matter.

Another important topic has been the classification of the New Caledonian lagoon as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (see Fig. 2.1). This also highlighted the tensions between the levels of government.[8] New Caledonia's nomination had identified, on the basis of ecological criteria, six separated protected marine areas spread over the three provinces. But UNESCO required these areas to be managed by a single structure, explaining that one UNESCO site could not be properly run by three different authorities. This led to the creation of the Conservatory of Natural Areas (*Conservatoire d'espaces naturels; CEN*), which has since been in charge of the management of the six areas.

[7] Délibération n° 2016–13/API of 6 April 2016 concerning the adoption of the environmental legislation of the Loyalty Islands Province. *Journal officiel de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 23 June 2016.

[8] NGO administrative and Government officers, personal communication, October 2017.

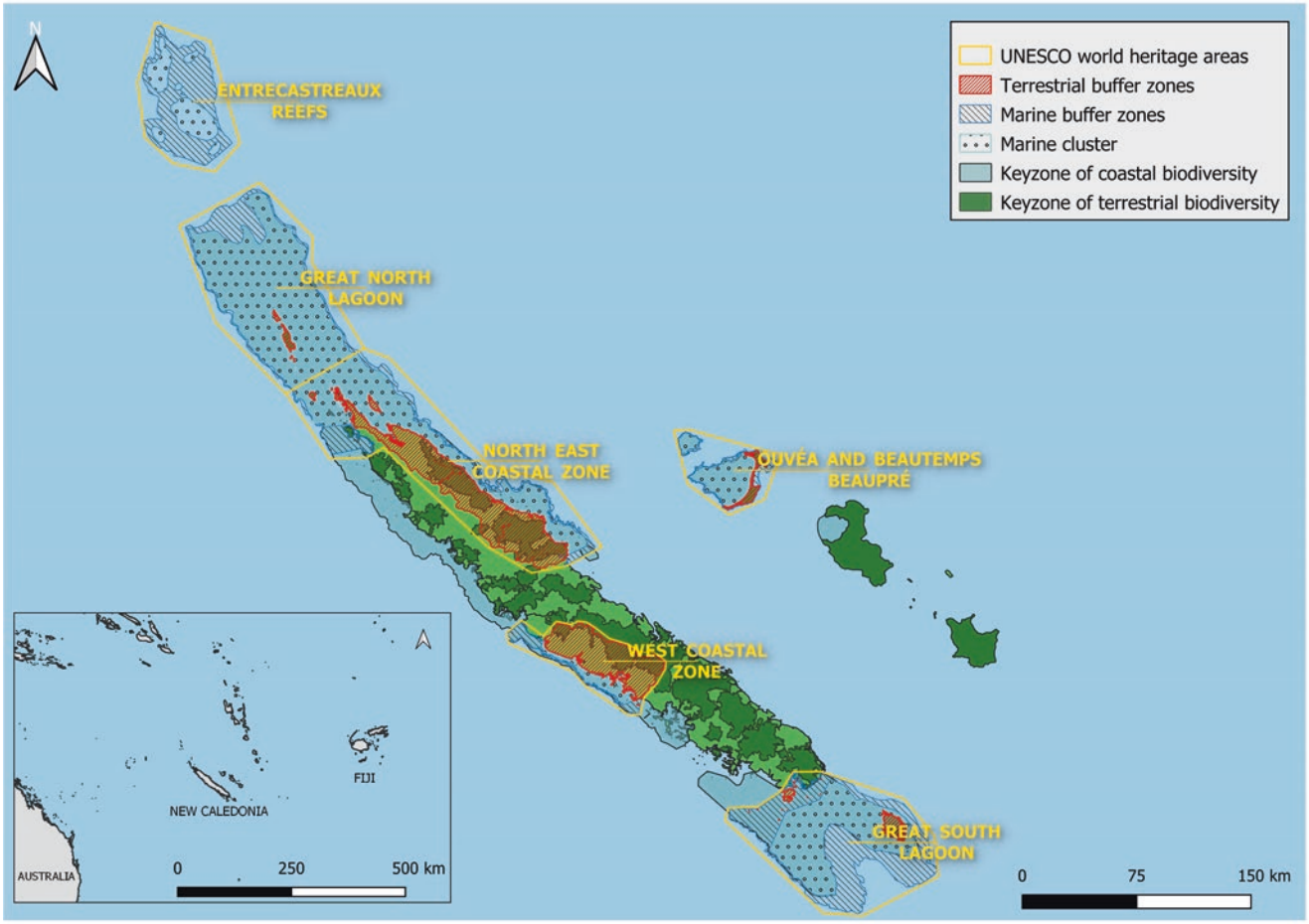

Fig. 2.1 UNESCO World Heritage Sites in New Caledonia. (Source: https://georep.nc/, cartography: Eibl 2022)

In recent years the CEN has broadened its scope by including other domains of action at the country level, including the conservation of endangered dry forests (*forêts sèches*), the battle against invasive alien species, an action plan for dugong and the coordination of the local committee of IFRECOR (French Coral Reef Initiative). According to some inside observers, the CEN is an organisation whose added value lies in its ability to provide coherence in the policies it implements countrywide, an ability that the provinces do not have. For others, on the contrary, the CEN is merely a structure in charge of issues that the provinces do not want to deal with.

2.4 The Island

The third scale concerns the island level, understood as the New Caledonian archipelago in this case. Islands terrestrial habitats are characterised by a strong level of isolation. In this context, the ability to restrict or cordon off remote islands from humans (Dalmas et al. 2016), animals or plants is controlled by a limited number of actors with a disproportionate weight in relation to the entire population. This was illustrated by the cancellation of travel to New Caledonia as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021. Here, ecological dynamics intersected with political and economic strategies to create an "isolationist ideology", even though the materiality of the isolation was undermined by existing global flows and networks that structurally include the movement of goods, people, animals, plants and even biogeochemical elements (such as plastic debris on beaches) that prevent the archipelago from being an isolated space, regardless of political viewpoints and projects (Maes and Blanke 2015).

The fight against invasive species is an issue that illustrates this point. It is widely recognised among biodiversity conservation policy specialists that the introduction of alien species poses risks to native species, in particular for oceanic islands (Beauvais et al. 2006). In practice, however, the current global "melting pot of biodiversity", that is, the global mix of species found on any particular place (Kull et al. 2013) makes it particularly difficult to control movements (natural or anthropogenic) and to clean up a local habitat from external elements.

In general, invasive species management policies must combine strictly ecological factors with technical data on the feasibility of these management methods and even more so with the potential economic or social interests that these species represent. In New Caledonia, the Sunda sambar (*Cervus timorensis*) is emblematic of these cross-cutting issues. Introduced on the island in 1870, the population of this deer species is today around several hundred thousand individuals and spreads over the entire main island, which makes its eradication technically impossible.[9] The species causes extensive damage to forests, leading to increased erosion. As such, it is the subject of an old policy of population control through hunting. A jaw bonus system has been in place since 2008. But the paradox is that deer are now subject of appropriation by Caledonians, in which deer hunting stands as a heritage practice. Deer eradication is therefore not only technically impracticable but also socially impossible, especially since deer hunting largely transcends community divisions and constitutes one of the practices shared by all Caledonians.

At the other extreme, one anopheles mosquito species, a malaria vector, was introduced in New Caledonia in 2017, probably through the importation of exotic plants (bamboo) for the local market. The country had never had a population of this mosquito species and was therefore malaria-free, although the disease is found in nearby countries (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu). Despite the health alert issued early after the mosquito was detected, the measures taken by the authorities have not been able to eradicate the mosquito population. In August 2018, the mosquito was found in different regions of the main island, a situation that makes its eradication extremely difficult. To date the spreading of malaria has been restrained, but there is a risk that New Caledonia will have to introduce health policies to manage malaria in the future, at very high cost, thanks to economic vested interests that broke the isolation policies put in place in New Caledonia (Pol et al. 2018).

2.5 Their Sea of Islands

The strategies deployed by New Caledonian actors in marine environmental policies differ from the terrestrial ones. In the marine domain, more than on land where the material dimension of indigeneity is more obvious, the logic of action at the ocean scale seems self-evident. Ecological connectivity processes are particularly pronounced (Olds et al. 2016), and population movements are historically significant (Hau'ofa 1994). This Pacific scale is nevertheless seen by most New Caledonian decision-makers as a complex level in which the territory is both seeking a regional legitimacy and a French exclusivity.

The role New Caledonia has played in the creation of very large marine protected areas (MPAs) in the Pacific Ocean is a case in point. While big MPAs were almost non-existent before 2010 (except in the form of small coastal marine protected areas) the last decade has seen an explosion of MPAs at the global scale but especially in the Pacific region. In 2023, the Pacific Region nests 21 of the largest MPAs (more than 100,000 square kilometres) that together account for 12.5 million square kilometres (of the 27 million protected worldwide). In this context, the creation of the Natural Park of the Coral Sea in 2014 was part of an oceanic dynamic. It served as a strategic instrument for France (which was seeking to catch up to the Aichi objectives set by the CBD, of reaching 10% of marine areas protected) and for New Caledonia (which saw this park as an important lever for regional cooperation).

The park covers the entire EEZ but not the territorial waters (and therefore not the coastline) and as such affects relatively few stakeholders. But the management committee set up as the main governance body of the park is nevertheless inclusive, bringing together administrative authorities, socio-economic actors, environmental associations and customary authorities. The management committee had to formulate a management plan during the first years of the park and it was finally validated in 2018. But this plan remains very broad and without specific goals and means.

Nine years after its creation, the park is still in a development phase. Its administrative staff is limited (and depends on a small team within the Department of Maritime Affairs), its management means on the ground is non-existent (and depends on other agencies: army, provinces and government) and the management plan (2018-2022) does not provide specific budget or action measures. The park has nevertheless implemented some conservation mesasures in the last years. Several reserves were created in 2018, covering 2.3% of the park's surface area, extended to 10% in 2023. These reserves with high level of protection aim at protecting remote coral reefs and seamounts from fishing and tourism.

The park therefore has a double characteristic that distinguishes it from other environmental measures in New Caledonia. On the one hand, it comprises a very broad governance body associated with an area covering almost all New Caledonia's seas. As such, it is a management structure that can have a say in all actions carried out by public authorities, the private sector and individuals in the maritime domain. The park can serve as a platform for stakeholders to organise and manage activities at sea, thus almost being an instrument of marine spatial planning. On the other hand, the governance of the park is, in practice, restricted to the repre-

[9]François Tron, Head of CI New Caledonia, personal communication, December 2017.

sentatives and/or leaders of the various stakeholders and does not have mechanisms for the participation of New Caledonian populations. The public consultation conducted in 2017 through some 50 meetings throughout the country received only 250 opinions.[10] This lack of participation is compounded by a lack of capacity, both in terms of monitoring and control of the MPA and in terms of public awareness. In short, the park encompasses the whole of New Caledonia's maritime region – stakeholders and spaces – but does not have the capacity to develop further, due to shallow participation mechanisms and lack of resources.

In this context of great uncertainties surrounding the park's long-term funding, the government and conservation NGOs are seeking to position the park in the international project-based funding networks that dominate the world of development aid. To this end, the strategy devised in Nouméa is to present the park as a special asset that distinguishes it from other MPAs and, more generally, from other marine environments in the Pacific. The first element of this rhetoric was forged from scientific data showing that New Caledonia's coral reefs were in relatively good condition at the global scale (Cinner et al. 2018), and suggesting that while "pristine" reefs accounted for only 1.5% of all tropical reefs, New Caledonia alone hosted one-third of them.[11] This information, demonstrating New Caledonia's exceptionality, spread quickly through the media and into political domains. The government has since organised its communication strategy around New Caledonia's ecological wealth and the potential it represents in economic terms (marine ecotourism, advanced maritime industries, etc.), promoting it as a "biodiversity research hotspot".[12] The change from ecological narratives to economic ones is unsurprising, but what is more specific to New Caledonia is the shift in places and scales, where terrestrial biodiversity richness (exceptional but strongly impacted, as shown earlier) is now engulfed by marine biodiversity (important but not exceptional compared to the coral environments of Southeast Asia) (Payri 2018). This aim here is to display New Caledonia as distinctive, compared to its geographical or ecological neighbours. A question is whether this assertion of natural biodiversity richness, boosted by the establishment of the MPA, is part of an isolationist ideology that diminishes regional cooperation and the importance of transoceanic movements.

[10] NGO administrative and *Direction des affaires maritimes* (Department of Maritime Affairs) officer, personal communications, January 2018.

[11] Those specific figures have not been published but publicly presented at the Scientific Workshop of the Coral Sea Natural Park, 25–27 July 2016, Nouméa.

[12] Philippe Germain, President of the Government of New Caledonia, Public conference "Journées de la mer", Cluster maritime Nouvelle-Calédonie, 12 July 2017.

2.6 France at the End?

There are close ties between the strong bond New Caledonia has with France and the limited involvement it has across the Pacific region. A narrative about the unique features of the New Caledonian environment illustrates this. The attachment to France has been considered essential by all governments of New Caledonia over the last three decades and during the onset of institutional process of self-determination (Maclellan 2018). The environmental sector is dominated by French advisors, technicians and scientists, despite the transfer of skills that New Caledonia has seen over the past 20 years. In the maritime domain, while the government of New Caledonia has authority over the exploration, exploitation and conservation of natural resources in the EEZ, France retains powers over the exploitation of "strategic resources", and of policing in all domains, including the control of international vessels and, among them, the "blue boats" that fish illegally in New Caledonian waters.

The power of France's presence in all the oceans of the globe and the size of its global EEZ give it particular power, especially in the South Pacific.[13] As long as New Caledonia remains dependent on France, geopolitical strategies developed in Paris cover the assertion of maritime military capacity, MPAs and their control and the potential to exploit seabed mining resources.

Here, as with other scalar politics presented in this chapter, environmental issues, far from being merely ecological subjects, are heavily dependent on the political strategies and tactics of various New Caledonian actors who play on scales – communal, provincial, New Caledonian, Oceanian and French – like fish in a water column.

Ecological rationality cannot be dissociated from political rationality in the privileging of particular scales of environmental governance. Technical management of environmental issues and outcomes is doomed to failure if the multi-layered political nature of the natural environment of New Caledonia and its waters is not recognised. This is particularly true in the specific context of a highly fragmented society embarked on process of independence.

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Editors
Matthias Kowasch
University College of Teacher Education Styria
Graz, Austria

Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences
Hamar, Norway

Simon P. J. Batterbury
University of Melbourne
Parkville, VIC, Australia

Lancaster University
Lancaster, UK

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