

Customary Usage and Marine Conservation Approaches: Navigating between the Islands of La Réunion and Tahiti

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Abstract

Researchers of all disciplines are taking an interest in the interactions between human and non-human systems since the acceleration of socio-environmental changes, as highlighted by the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Island territories are therefore an asset when it comes to studying this interdependence, since the communities that live there have always found adaptation strategies essential to their living conditions—restricted space, limited resources, geographical isolation, etc. The insular marine environment is a multi-use resource area when considering the diversity of users who interact within it, thus depicting the complexity of interactions between human societies and their environment. In a context where users such as fishermen or tourism providers are directly dependent on ecosystem services (services rendered by nature), it means some human activities start questioning both their social and ecological viability. We present a Grounded Theory approach which cross-referenced the results of ethnographic work carried out in the two insular marine environments, on the islands of La Réunion, France and Tahiti, French Polynesia. This interdisciplinary study falls within environmental social sciences, thus we used the method of gathering qualitative data in triangulation. We conducted semi-structured interviews, extended ethnographic observations over several years (participants and non-participants), and gathered data on social networks. The results show the extent to which the social control by local residents can engage environmental social mediation, but also that local knowledge and marine user consultation mechanisms, when taken into account in the design of natural environment management tools, enable the reduction of conflicts between stakeholders. Clearly, further research will be required to study the adaptation of contemporary societies to ongoing eco-social changes linked to the fructification of the past of island territories and

the local know-how developed there.

Keywords

Environmental Social Studies, Social-Ecological Systems, Insular Viability, Human-Wildlife Interactions

1. Introduction

Island territories provide unique opportunities to study the complex interdependence between human societies and the natural environment. Historically, the inhabitants of these regions have developed innovative strategies to adapt to the constraints of their surroundings, including limited space, scarce resources, and geographical isolation. More recently, island territories have become emblematic of global inequalities. Although they are at the forefront of environmental and climatic changes, their populations contribute only minimally to the global forces causing these transformations, yet they face a disproportionately large share of the consequences. For instance, during the International Climate and Energy Conference held in La Réunion in June 2014, the Islands Declaration on Climate Change emphasized the “*great vulnerability to climate change as island territories, the first to be affected by the combined effects of the globalization of socio-economic exchanges and the increase in environmental crises*”. From a sociological perspective, this statement highlights the disparities between the Global North and South. Vulnerability, in this context, refers not merely to physical exposure, but to the social, economic, and institutional conditions that shape a population’s ability to anticipate, absorb, and recover from environmental shocks [1]. Islands, particularly those in the Global South, face the compounded consequences of globalization and climate change while lacking the structural resources necessary to address these challenges effectively.

This complex interplay between human societies and their environments is particularly salient in insular marine ecosystems, which serve as versatile resource hubs for a wide array of users. Stakeholders such as fishers and tourism operators depend directly on the ecosystem’s resources, and the absence of effective coordination among these diverse activities can generate tensions—not only between different groups of human actors (human-human conflicts), but also between humans and the natural environment (human-non-human conflicts). To address this complexity, we adopt a comparative perspective by combining data from two geographically distant island regions. This approach provides a fertile ground for exploring the dynamics of resource use, governance, and conflict through a plural and context-sensitive lens. Our theoretical framework is grounded in the concept of social-ecological systems (SES), which emphasizes the deep interdependence between human societies and natural ecosystems. This perspective draws attention to interconnected issues such as social and environmental justice, particularly

in historically marginalized or colonized island territories where the uneven distribution of environmental risks intersects with legacies of domination and exclusion [2]-[4]. These concerns are central to the field of political ecology, which emphasizes the entanglement of ecological processes with power, identity, and inequality [5] [6]. Moreover, the SES framework fosters interdisciplinary thinking: social scientists increasingly draw upon biological concepts to understand social change [7], while natural scientists have turned to social theories to better grasp ecological transformations [8]. Taken together, these approaches offer a more holistic understanding of the complex, dynamic, and co-evolving relationships between people and their environments.

To operationalize this framework, we use Grounded Theory (GT)—a qualitative methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss in the late 1960s [9]—which emphasizes the emergence of theory from empirical data. At the same time, we acknowledge the substantial geographical, cultural, and political differences between the two study sites. Our methodology is therefore designed to allow for a differentiated, context-sensitive analysis that respects the specificities of each case. Rather than treating La Réunion and Tahiti merely as comparable overseas territories, we examine the unique conditions and social dynamics of each region. This cross-fertilization of perspectives not only deepens our understanding of insular SESs but also enhances the transferability and adaptability of our methodological approach to other socio-environmental contexts (**Image 1**).

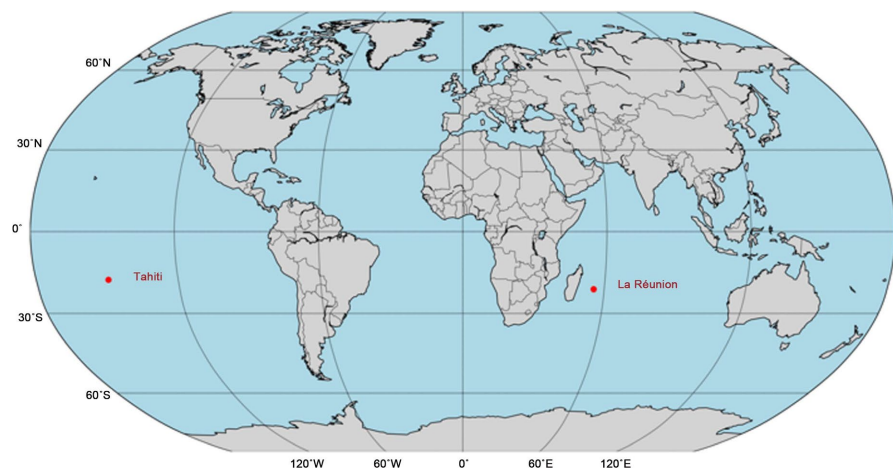


Image 1. Geographic location of the study areas. Source: Pinel, R. (2025).

2. Study Areas

2.1. La Réunion

The island of La Réunion is a French overseas department located in the southwestern Indian Ocean basin. Nowadays, the social context and cultural framework of the island arise from its colonial background [10]. The population of La Réunion is mainly made up of African, Asian, Indian, and European origins, which implies that the island had no indigenous inhabitants prior to colonization. This

cultural diversity is a phenomenon that requires a nuanced approach, as it stems directly from the conditions of colonization, which gave rise to a fragmented, multiethnic society [11]. This complex social fabric, inherited from a history of forced and voluntary migrations, continues to shape contemporary dynamics—particularly in relation to access to natural resources and territorial claims. In recent decades, Reunionese society has witnessed the emergence of conflicts, such as those linked to the shark-human interactions or to the claims of associations advocating for the liberation of the western coastline. These disagreements have sometimes taken the form of identity-based protests. The identity issue often refers to the tension between a dominant culture and a marginalized or dominated one.

We argue that these conflicts of use, centered on the appropriation and regulation of territory and resources, reflect the confrontation of two cultural models, each grounded in distinct normative systems, representations, and relationships to the environment. These models can be understood as vectors of customary systems—that is, locally embedded frameworks of resource management and social organization, grounded in traditional ecological knowledge, informal institutions, and collectively shared norms, often transmitted orally across generations [12] [13]. On one side is the Creole cultural system, rooted in a plural history shaped by slavery, indenture, and creolization, where local knowledge, collective memory, and informal governance mechanisms regulate human-environment relations. On the other side is what we refer to as the Western European system, conveyed primarily by expatriates—mostly French nationals, locally known as “zoreys¹”. This system is characterized by formalized, technocratic approaches to environmental management, based on legal-rational authority, standardized scientific knowledge, and individual property regimes. Rather than being neutral or universally applicable, these frameworks carry specific historical and ideological legacies tied to European colonial expansion and state-building.

After formalizing its French department status, land occupation on the island of La Réunion underwent major transformations. Namely, there was a surge in coastal urbanization, particularly on the western coast. Along this same shoreline, water-based activities such as surfing developed rapidly, thanks to year-round favorable conditions and a diversity of surf spots. Contemporary recreational practices, including surfing [14] and scuba diving [15], have introduced new forms of ocean use that may challenge the coexistence with traditional activities. Indeed, some categories of ocean users, like artisanal fishers, remain directly dependent on natural resources and the stability of ecosystems. Environmental issues—such as fatal shark-human interactions—can become focal points of public concern, especially when repeated incidents trigger media coverage and political responses. In this context, our study focuses on how local communities perceive, experience, and manage risk—particularly shark-related risks—while considering the broader social, cultural, political, and economic dynamics that influence these perceptions.

¹In La Réunion, the creole-speaking term “zorey” refers to people from hexagonal France. Any pejorative or racist intention is absent when we use any of the commonly used terms “zorey” or “creole”.

2.2. Tahiti

Located in the southern Pacific Ocean, Tahiti is the largest island of French Polynesia. With its 1042 km² and 132 km of coastline, Tahiti is a high island of volcanic origin, surrounded by a coral reef along most of its shoreline. Polynesian identity has been shaped by a long history of population movements, migrations, and cultural exchange. In contemporary Tahiti, interactions among Polynesians (Taata Tahiti), “whites” (Popaa), Demis (Afa Tahiti), and Chinese (Tinito) exemplify an ongoing process of cultural hybridization [16].

Building on this sociocultural complexity, marine environmental management in Tahiti—and more broadly in French Polynesia—brings together a wide array of actors whose roles and interests often diverge. These interactions are shaped not only by administrative structures but also by social dynamics. While elected municipal representatives play a central role in decision-making, particularly through communal council deliberations, other key stakeholders such as state agencies (e.g., DIREN² and DRM³), scientific experts, civil society organizations, and local inhabitants are also actively involved. The resulting governance landscape is thus plural and contested.

In parallel with these governance challenges, Tahiti’s marine environment is increasingly impacted by global environmental change. The region has experienced an average temperature increase of +1.1 °C over the past 50 years [17], accompanied by widespread coral reef bleaching. These phenomena underscore the tangible effects of global warming on island ecosystems and local livelihoods. Against this backdrop, our research explores how environmental change is perceived, interpreted, and acted upon by the diverse stakeholders operating in the marine environment.

To illustrate these dynamics, we focus on a case study involving the management of sailboats in the Tahitian lagoon—a long-standing source of social tension. This conflict intensified during the two COVID-19 lockdowns, during which nearly 600 sailboats were accommodated, leading to the saturation of marinas in Papeete and Punaauia. In the post-lockdown period, many boats remained anchored in the lagoons of Faa’a and Punaauia, relying on moorings installed by the Port Authority or on designated anchorage zones within these municipalities. This situation highlights a persistent issue: the lack of adequate mooring infrastructure, which continues to fuel disputes over space and environmental pressure on the lagoon ecosystem.

In this context, our aim is to analyze how environmental changes are understood and addressed by the multiple actors involved in marine governance in La Réunion and Tahiti. We also examine how specific environmental management instruments—particularly when perceived as externally imposed or poorly adapted—can, under certain conditions, exacerbate tensions among users and stakeholders, rather than mitigate them. Finally, these conflicts must be situated

²Institution responsible for environmental management in French Polynesia.

³Institution responsible for the management of the marine environment in French Polynesia.

within a broader conceptual framework that challenges binary oppositions such as local vs. Western knowledge. Rather than fixed categories, these epistemological positions represent overlapping zones of negotiation, contestation, and hybridization. Clarifying these conceptual foundations is crucial for understanding how environmental disputes in island contexts such as La Réunion and Tahiti reflect deeper struggles over legitimacy, authority, and the recognition of multiple knowledge systems. These tensions are further reinforced by the physical and symbolic transformations of coastal spaces over time.

3. Method

Grounded Theory proved to be an essential tool in this research, as it is based on the principle of simultaneous data collection and analysis. This iterative approach facilitates a continuous comparison between the data, its processing, and the theoretical framework, ensuring a dynamic and responsive research process. To strengthen our methodology, we complemented the GT approach with triangulation, employing three distinct tools to enhance the depth and reliability of our analysis.

3.1. Interviews

We conducted semi-structured interviews ($n = 100$), which proved to be highly effective. In the Tahitian context, private matters are either discussed privately or addressed with humor in public [18]. This observation also holds relevance for the Reunionese context, where the sensitive issues examined in our research—such as the shark controversy and (post)colonial dynamics—are best explored through direct, face-to-face interactions. To analyze the interviews, we utilized Atlas.Ti, a qualitative analysis software that streamlines the process while preserving the critical interpretative work essential to qualitative research. Following full transcription of the interviews, we implemented a systematic segmentation process guided by three coding stages outlined in the academic literature [19] [20].

3.2. Participant and Non-Participant Observation

Participant and non-participant observation, as ethnographic tools, allowed us to meet a dual objective: 1) identifying the practicing populations and 2) assessing their perceptions of the management of the environments in which they operate. This approach also provided valuable insights into how users perceive and experience the territory. At the same time, these observations facilitated immersion into local cultures, enabling us to engage with practices related to the marine environment and to analyze interactions and potential conflicts among stakeholders. Crucially, this method captured “behind-the-scenes” dynamics, where behaviors were not influenced by the presence or expectations of the researcher, offering a more authentic understanding of the social and environmental realities at play.

3.3. Digital Ethnography

We conducted a digital ethnography to explore interactions surrounding social

media publications, motivated by the emergence of a new phenomenon tied to the digitization of conflicts. This shift holds particular significance, as socio-environmental debates increasingly take place online, where tensions tend to intensify and crystallize. In addition to providing insights into these digital dynamics, this approach enriched and complemented the findings from interviews. By incorporating this data into our analysis, we achieved methodological triangulation, which helped mitigate the perceptual biases often associated with qualitative research methods.

3.4. Sampling

Given our qualitative approach, we paid particular attention to sampling, as a well-represented population enables us to confirm or challenge the research hypotheses. To ensure this, sampling was conducted at a categorical level, with the aim of creating a representative sample of the population of interest. We adapted an existing stratification model⁴ encompassing four main categories of stakeholders who use or depend on the marine environment and whose activities may impact it. This stratification included 1) the public sector: environmental agents; 2) civil society (non-profit): scientists, elected representatives, and representatives of associations; 3) the private sector (profit): fishermen, tourism operators, and other marine professionals; and 4) the general public: water sports enthusiasts (such as surfers and bodyboarders) as well as citizens with no specific use of the marine environment.

The spatial dimension was also integrated into our sampling strategy, deploying data collection tools in targeted locations such as coastal areas, surf spots, fishing ports, and marinas. Additionally, we interviewed individuals in non-coastal areas to gain a broader and more distant perspective on the objects of study. It is important to emphasize the qualitative nature of this work, which does not seek to represent the opinions of the entire populations of La Réunion and Tahiti. Instead, the value of this approach lies in the diversity and representativeness of the sample, which highlights its relevance and richness.

4. Results

We emphasize the qualitative nature of this study, which is not intended to represent the opinions of the entire populations of La Réunion and Tahiti. Rather, its value lies in the diversity and representativeness of the sample, highlighting the study's relevance and analytical depth.

4.1. Perceptions of La Réunion Marine Reserve (RNMR)

In the case of the RNMR, our findings revealed that interviewees expressed ambivalent views within a context shaped by frequent human-shark interactions within its boundaries (n = 25). Among those with unfavorable opinions, Max, a

⁴Stakeholder Participation Toolkit for Identification, Designation and Management of Marine Protected Areas (RAC/SPA & IUCN-Me, 2013).

fisherman from La Réunion, perceived the reserve as a restrictive measure imposed by the French state. He explained, “*We can no longer go fishing in the marine reserve. If I take my fishing rod and get caught, I have to pay a fine. Back then, you could go to St Leu—that was freedom. Now we have to obey French and European rules*”. Analyzing opinions based on respondent groups provides particularly insightful perspectives. Nearly half (45.5%) of those with negative views were surfers. A common criticism was the perceived inconsistency in regulations: certain activities, such as diving, are permitted in fully protected zones, while others are prohibited. Additionally, some respondents described the reserve as a “larder” for sharks, further intensifying negative perceptions. The reserve’s establishment was often viewed as a top-down decision, as reflected in Max’s verbatim. Conversely, most individuals with favorable opinions were environmental managers (54.5%). A frequently cited argument in support of the reserve was the urgent need to address resource overexploitation, emphasizing the vulnerability of La Réunion’s marine environment, particularly due to its limited lagoon areas.

Case Study: The Shark-Human Controversy

Over the past decade, shark risk management policies have significantly impacted daily life in La Réunion. The ban on swimming outside the conditions specified in the Prefectoral Decree is widely perceived as unjust. Critics argue that by restricting water sports most likely to involve shark encounters, French authorities are effectively shifting responsibility onto individuals, leaving them to face the potential risks of entering the water. In this context, we sought to examine public perceptions of risk management ($n = 43$). The data collected reveal that the vast majority of respondents lack confidence in the current system. Approximately 65% consider it inadequate for ensuring safe access to the water, while over 25% prefer to self-manage the risk rather than rely on official measures. Key criticisms include the high cost of protective equipment, such as nets and traps, and the ban on marketing shark meat due to the presence of ciguatera toxin. This latter issue has been particularly polarizing, intensifying tensions between marine environment users and scientists since the controversy first emerged (**Image 2**).



Image 2. Deterioration at the entrance to the RNMR premises (December 4, 2018) and anti-shark net in Boucan Canot (January, 2019).

Individuals who choose to self-manage shark-related risks have identified specific factors that heighten the likelihood of encounters, such as water turbidity (e.g. **Figure 1**). To mitigate these risks, they adopt precautionary strategies

like staying within the water column or avoiding solitary surfing. René’s observations further reveal how the controversy over shark management intersects with issues of identity. He remarks: “You’ll hear a Creole say, *“You’ll hear a Creole say. The shark only eats Zorey. Yes, maybe because there are more Zorey in the water than Creoles. But then, there’s Creole and Creole—there are Zorey born in Réunion who are Réunionese and who have been attacked. For me, they are also Creoles”*. Another significant issue is the perception among some locals that scientific research findings merely confirm what the local population has long known.

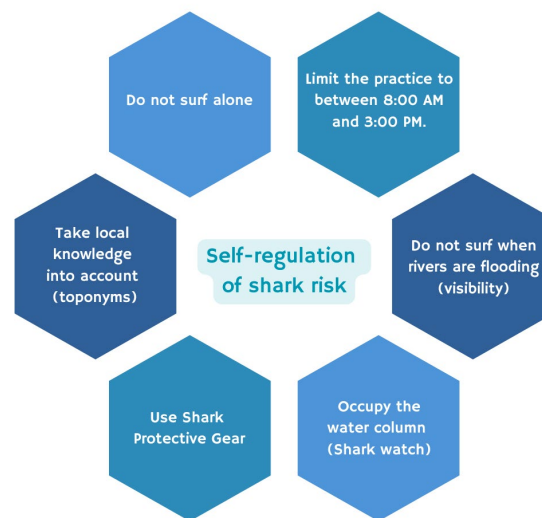


Figure 1. Integrated management strategies for shark risk reduction on Réunion island.

This perception underscores a persistent tension between local knowledge and scientific expertise, highlighting the shortcomings of state-led risk management strategies. These strategies are frequently criticized for lacking negotiation and inclusivity—limitations often linked to top-down governance approaches rooted in colonial administrative practices [21].

4.2. Perceptions of Rāhui in Tahiti

In the Tahitian context, perceptions of rāhui—the Polynesian customary system regulating access to land, lagoons, and natural resources—appear to be remarkably consistent across diverse social groups. Over 70% of respondents (n = 37) expressed a favorable opinion of the system, reflecting its deep cultural and environmental significance. This perception is exemplified by Enoha, who stated: “*Rāhui is respected; it’s a duty. If you don’t practice rāhui and just fish freely, there will be overfishing. And in five years, where will you go to catch your fish? You’ll have to go farther*”. Supporters frequently emphasize the cultural roots of rāhui in Tahitian society and its foundational principle of self-regulation. However, critics often highlight the need for a formal monitoring system, contrasting this with tra-

ditional collective management practices, which were perceived as more effective. Another point of contention involves the process of reopening the rāhui to fishing, known as *avarira'a*, which generates divergent views.

This debate also converges with the integration of rāhui into the French Polynesian Environmental Code under Article LP.1222-1: “*These unwritten rules, applied in a traditional manner, cannot contradict the laws and regulations in force in French Polynesia*”. The classification of rāhui as “traditional” is itself subject to debate, as is the increasing bureaucratization of the practice. This shift can be critically examined through the lens of Allen’s framework [22], which contrasts “face-to-face” societies—characterized by direct human interactions—with “back-to-back” societies, where relationships are mediated by institutions and formalized structures.

Case Study: Management of sailboats in the lagoons of Faa’a and Punaauia

The management of sailboat installations in the lagoons of Faa’a and Punaauia has become a focal point of local tensions. The construction of the international airport in Faa’a previously deprived residents of significant portions of their coastline, and they now contend with an additional source of conflict: the increasing number of sailboats. This situation is widely perceived as an environmental injustice, exacerbating pre-existing cultural disparities. On the one hand, the lagoons are primarily used for activities associated with Western lifestyles, such as recreational boating; on the other hand, they serve as spaces for traditional local practices, including fishing and the use of va’a (traditional Polynesian outrigger canoes) (Image 3).

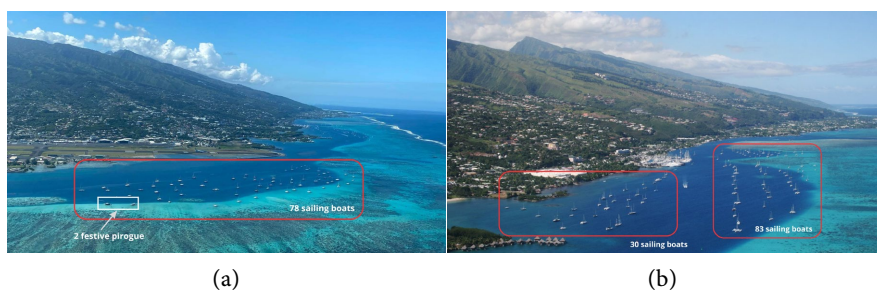


Image 3. Aerial views of the Faa’a lagoon (a) and the Punaauia lagoon (b).

The local opposition to the presence of sailboats in Tahitian lagoons is vividly captured in the words of Timeri: “*Is this what tourists come to see—these sailboats in front of them? I don’t think so. That’s why we’re fighting against these sailboats. Even if they bring money, they have to go. Enough with the airport. This used to be a fishing area—it should be reserved for fishermen. We have to sign a petition; nobody wants to see these boat owners in our larder anymore*”.

This perception reflects broader frustrations with environmental and cultural disruptions. Notably, despite formal inquiries directed to the DPAM⁵, the Port

⁵Polynesian Directorate of Maritime Affairs.

Authority, the ISPF⁶, the Border Police, and Customs, no quantitative data has been provided on the evolution of sailboat numbers in Tahitian lagoons. This lack of information highlights the absence of systematic monitoring by relevant institutions in recent years. Among the primary concerns raised by those opposing the presence of sailboats ($n = 32$), several key issues stand out: Mooring outside designated infrastructure (31.3%); Visual pollution (18.8%); The impact of sailboats on other lagoon users (12.5%) (e.g. **Figure 2**).

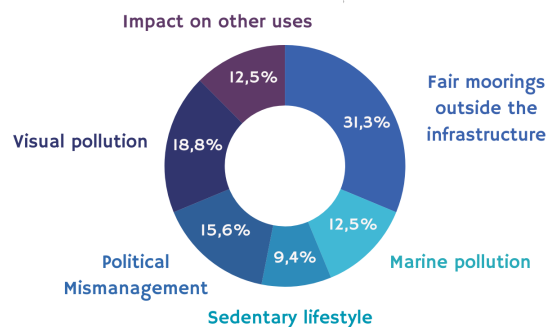


Figure 2. Perceptions of yachting in the Tahitian lagoon.

Furthermore, while the lagoon is officially designated as a common in French Polynesia, some individuals evoke pre-colonial notions of lagoon ownership. Historically, land tenure in Polynesia extended from the mountain peaks to the fringing reef—a concept enshrined in the Tahitian law of 24 March 1852. This traditional view contrasts sharply with modern governance frameworks, such as the legal arrangement no. 2004-34 APF of 12 February 2004, which defines the composition and management of the public domain in French Polynesia.

5. Conclusions

Our findings demonstrate that the success of integrated environmental management depends on recognizing the diverse ways in which populations perceive and conceptualize marine resources. Socio-ethnic indicators emerge as invaluable tools in this process, facilitating the development of management strategies that are not only more inclusive but also better aligned with local needs and cultural contexts. By incorporating stakeholder consultations and addressing the full spectrum of resource uses, it becomes possible to empower local communities to take an active role in determining the modalities of distribution and sharing. This approach fosters greater equity and sustainability by tailoring management practices to the specific socio-cultural and ecological dynamics of the region.

In La Réunion and Tahiti, these dynamics are particularly visible in the contested access to coastal spaces. Our data reveal that local populations perceive a form of privileged appropriation of the shoreline by newcomers, particularly individuals from mainland France who benefit from favorable conditions of settle-

⁶Institute of Statistics of French Polynesia.

ment—often through public-sector mobility schemes. This contributes to rising housing costs in coastal areas and to a growing sense of exclusion among long-established residents, who are increasingly relegated to upland regions. These socio-spatial patterns suggest the emergence of a form of altitudinal segregation, where access to coastal living—and, by extension, to marine resources—reflects broader socio-economic and postcolonial inequalities. Such spatial inequalities must be better integrated into environmental governance if it is to be truly equitable.

In this context, natural resource management must be rooted in negotiation processes, as decision-making is inherently shaped by the interactions among diverse stakeholders. The integration of local expertise, scientific knowledge and the active participation of local populations in environmental governance paves the way for co-management models informed by both contemporary insights and long-standing customary systems, such as the *rāhui*. These models have the potential to enhance resilience and sustainability in island territories, particularly when they take into account the evolving tensions between customary practices and globalized economic pressures. The commercialization of marine resources—whether through shifting fishing practices or the contested consumption of culturally significant species like turtles—further reveals the friction between historically embedded systems and Western normative frameworks.

While our research offers a detailed, context-rich analysis of La Réunion and Tahiti, we recognize the need to extend this inquiry through comparative approaches. Systematic comparison between such territories would contribute to a deeper theorization of human-environment relations in postcolonial island contexts, especially in relation to the coexistence of customary institutions and modern governance models. We therefore call for future research that actively bridges local specificity with comparative island studies. Integrating multiple case studies can help develop a more robust framework for understanding socio-ecological resilience, environmental justice, and knowledge pluralism in insular settings. Historically, inter-island solidarities—particularly in the Pacific—have illustrated the potential of shared learning and cultural resilience. Building on this legacy, enhanced collaboration between island researchers, communities, and institutions may help articulate common responses to global challenges such as biodiversity loss, climate change, and marine resource depletion.

Ultimately, fostering stronger connections between islands—despite their geographical distance—requires not only the technical integration of tools and methodologies (e.g., living labs, transformation labs) but also the political and epistemological recognition of island-based knowledge systems. We argue that integrating the social sciences and humanities into environmental governance is essential for developing holistic, culturally grounded, and sustainable responses. By valuing the local while remaining open to broader comparative dialogues, island societies can strengthen their collective capacity to adapt, transform, and sustain themselves in the face of ongoing socio-ecological change.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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