

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

Located in the southwest of the Pacific Ocean, New Caledonia (20° - 23° S, 164° - 167° E) is part of Melanesia. The country consists of one main island, Grande Terre, surrounded by many smaller islands. Its total land area is 18,576 km² and its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) covers 1,740,000 km². New Caledonia consists of three provinces (Loyalty Islands Province, Northern Province and Southern Province) and thirty-three municipalities. As a French overseas territory with unique status, New Caledonia is currently in a process of self-determination vis-à-vis France which, as part of the Nouméa Accord, transfers its responsibilities to the government and provinces. Most environmental policies have been transferred to provinces.

With a population density of 13.2 people per km² (ISEE 2010), most of the 245,000 inhabitants live in the province Sud (Southern Province), near the capital Nouméa. New Caledonia has several ethnic groups including the indigenous Melanesian people – the Kanak - who play an important social and political role. The Kanak represent about 45% of the population and most of them live on the east coast. Traditional life is organized into tribes and clans. While income-generating activities in town and from mining have spurred migration, the Kanak maintain their relationship with the tribe and the clan of origin. The Kanak tradition nurtures a close link to land and sea from which many still partly depend for cultivated food, game and fish. Kanak culture and beliefs have many customary rules whose purpose or effect is to protect natural resources and culturally important places. These rules, which reflect a traditional attachment to the sustainable use of nature, have been challenged by the socio-economic changes of the last decades.

New Caledonia's economy is mainly based on nickel mining; the mainland has about 20% of the world's known nickel resources. Tourism is the second largest economic sector, while agriculture, fisheries and aquaculture play a significant role, including for subsistence and social life (e.g., trade, gifts) (ISEE 2009). France also provides significant funding

to local governments, especially in areas with fewer economic opportunities, such as Province nord and the east coast.

When Grande Terre split from Gondwana about 80 million years ago and from New Zealand about 55 million years ago (Kroenke 1996), complex tectonic activity resulted in rich ultramafic rocks with high nickel content. This origin stimulated the evolution of an extremely rich and highly endemic biodiversity, leading to the identification of New Caledonia as a biodiversity hotspot (Mittermeier et al. 2004) and as one of the densest regions in biodiversity (Kier et al. 2009), making it a high priority to focus conservation efforts. Out of 3,425 recorded vascular plant species, 2,541 are endemic (endemica 2012); out of 71 terrestrial reptile species, 62 are endemic (Bauer et al. 2000); out of 175 bird species, 21 are endemic (Spaggiari et al. 2007). New Caledonian fresh and salt-waters encompass a remarkable variety of species and habitats including coastal rivers, coral reefs, mangroves and seagrass beds. New Caledonia is home to the largest lagoon in the world (40,000 km²) and includes the longest barrier reef system in the world (1,600 miles), with original reef structures of double or even triple barriers which shelter 457 coral species (McKenna et al. 2011) and 1,695 species of lagoon fish (Fricke et al. 2006). The lagoons of New Caledonia were therefore included by UNESCO on the World Heritage List in July 2008. Because this status requires the preservation of the site's integrity, terrestrial buffer zones were included in order to minimize the impacts of land-based threats to the lagoon. The Mt. Panié massif, where this survey was conducted, is entirely situated within this buffer zone.

In 1950, a 5,400 hectares botanical reserve was designated at Mt. Panié, but without active conservation management. The site has however been regularly visited by hikers and biologists. In 2009, the botanical reserve was reclassified as a wilderness reserve (IUCN status Ib). As part of the establishment of the environmental code of the Province nord, a management plan (2012-2016) was developed by a partnership between Province nord, the indigenous association Dayu Biik and Conservation International.