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Restoration of the Small Basins on the Plateau of Te Mehani rahi

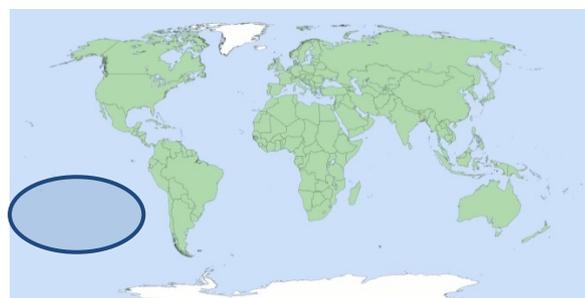
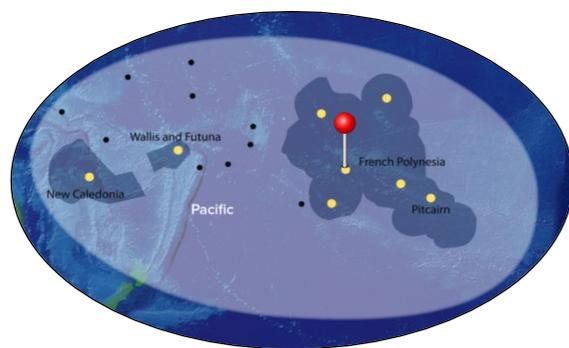
Targeted territory: French Polynesia

Total project budget: 49,662 Euros

BEST 2.0 grant awarded: 49,662 Euros

Duration: January 2018 – December 2018 (12 months)

Lead organisation: Association Tuihana



Background:

The flora of the Te Mehani plateau is still well preserved with only 25% of introduced plant species present compared to the whole island. Of the 65 plants endemic to French Polynesia evaluated for the Regional Red List and present on the plateaus, 51% are threatened with extinction mainly due to competition from 12 invasive plants species.

With a total area of 202 ha, Te Mehani rahi plateau is the largest and, thanks to the easy access from the east and west coast due to two forest tracks, also the most degraded. Two-thirds of its low-lying area is currently covered by three major invasive plants in more or less dense stands: the Rose myrtle (*Rhodomyrtus tomentosa*), the Strawberry guava (*Psidium cattleianum*) and the Cocoplum (*Chrysobalanus icaco*). In the past, actions to control invasive plants have been mainly concentrated at low altitudes on this plateau in densely invaded areas, especially for outreach to schools.

The degradation of the natural vegetation unique to the Te Mehani rahi plateau is a hindrance to the extension of conservatory plantations established since 2010 and is surely a major cause of the regeneration problems of endemic threatened plants observed on this plateau.



Description of the Project:

The project aims to restore the exceptional vegetation of small watersheds (<10 ha in total) at altitudes above 600m on the Te Mehani rahi plateau on the island of Raiatea. Despite being occupied by invasive plants these watersheds still shelter 33 endemic endangered plants including the legendary Tiare Apetahi. The watersheds, located on public land, will be chosen based on the feasibility of controlling the invasive plants and their ease of access.

An initial state of the watersheds will be carried out by two botanists with the support of Raiatea's hiking guides. The inventory and accurate mapping of the flora and vegetation will allow the training of the first two employees of the association. The management of invasive plants will be initiated during these inventories and will continue with 2 small teams of 2-3 people. Control of invasive plants will be done primarily by manual weeding and stump removal, or, if not possible, cutting and herbicide injection.

Strengthening watershed populations into "key species" will be initiated by setting up a "nursery" in situ similar to those in place for Tiare Apetahi on the plateau. These structuring plants will be chosen in consultation with botanists by respecting the regulations and according to the feasibility of their multiplication and the speed at which they grow. At a minimum, monthly monitoring of the nursery will be undertaken. The first plantings may take place at the end of the project.

The project will also help to sensitize elected officials, policy makers, politicians, school officials and the general public to the need to protect the biodiversity of the Te Mehani plateaux and will strengthen the organizational capacities of the association.

Intended results:

- Completion of an assessment of the initial state of the site and the training of technicians in flora and control methods.
- Reduced pressure on the 33 endemic endangered species and their habitat by invasive species.
- Enrichment of structural plants in the habitat of the 33 endemic species threatened with extinction.
- Communication and popularization to promote biodiversity conservation in Te Mehani and Tiare Apetahi plateaus.



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