

ISLANDER PERCEPTIONS OF INVASIVE ALIEN SPECIES IN FRENCH POLYNESIA (SOUTH PACIFIC): THE ROLE OF SOCIO-ECONOMY AND CULTURE

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Islands, often celebrated as natural laboratories for evolution and ecology, provide unique experimental grounds for socio-economic and cultural studies. Biological invasions are widely recognized by the scientific community as one of the main cause of biodiversity erosion and a driver of global change. However, the perception of invasive species may vary at regional and local levels, especially in human societies with different cultures and socio-economical development. French Polynesia, with its 120 tropical oceanic islands (76 being inhabited by a total of 270,000 inhabitants) divided into 5 archipelagos (Australs, Marquesas, Society, Tuamotu, and Gambier), comprises both highly populated and urbanized islands (such as Tahiti) and less populated and very isolated islands (sometimes without airstrips and boat docks) where traditional life style and strong dependence on natural marine and terrestrial resources still persist. During an education and prevention campaign dealing with the 46 alien plant and animal species legally declared invasive in French Polynesia, public meetings were organized in 23 islands with 52 villages, for a total of 2,045 consulted people. Although the number of invasive alien species is not decreasing with island isolation (i.e. distance from Tahiti) and is strongly correlated with population number, our preliminary results show that their perceived status as problematic differs from one archipelago to another, or even among islands in the same archipelago. Perception of invasiveness varied amongst socio-professional categories and age as expected, but also according to the date of species introduction ("indigenization" of old introduced species). One of the crucial challenges in invasive species management is the involvement of local communities in prevention and control efforts, as well as avoiding potential conflicts of interest between different stakeholders in small but sometimes complex insular societies.