

The conservation status of the endemic flora of French Polynesia: la maison brûle (the house is burning) !

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Abstract (max: 300 words):

The native vascular flora of French Polynesia, a French Overseas territory located in the South Pacific and formed by about 120 oceanic islands grouped in 5 archipelagoes (namely the Australs, the Gambier, the Marquesas, the Society and the Tuamotu), comprises about 870 native species including 460 endemic species and 61 endemic subspecies and varieties, i.e. an endemism rate of 62%. Until now, the IUCN Red List (www.iucnredlist.org) recognized 47 threatened species for French Polynesia. A revision was recently conducted with French, foreign and local plant experts and coordinated by the French Polynesian government and the French UICN committee: this report published in December 2015 reveals that 65% of the endemic flora (302 species) is considered threatened, including 119 critically endangered species (CR), 133 endangered species (EN) and 50 vulnerable species (VU), with 6 other endemic species now considered extinct (EX). The highest number of threatened species is found in the Marquesas (131 species) and the Society (110) archipelagoes. The major threats are forest destruction and fragmentation caused by increasing urbanization and fires, and invasive alien species (both plants and feral ungulates) which constitute a direct threat to half (65 species) of the most endangered species. Because of geographic isolation, limited funding and human resources, poor infrastructures, and the paucity of protected terrestrial areas (with ten sites covering about 8500 ha, i.e. 2% of the total land surface), a plant conservation strategy is urgently needed in French Polynesia, and priorities should be defined: we recommend to protect the most critical and irreplaceable taxa (i.e. belonging to the 8 endemic genera) as well as threatened and unique habitats (e.g. remnant semi-dry and mesic forests, cloud forests, high elevation plateaus and wetlands, subalpine vegetation). Conservation of “wild” species should not obliterate the importance of Polynesian introduced plants (“endemic” cultivars) of high cultural value.

Location: French Polynesia (South Pacific)

Taxa: Vascular plants

Keywords (up to 6 keywords) : conservation, endemic flora, French Polynesia