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**NEOCOLONIALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT IN
TAHITI:**

**A case study on the venue for the surfing competitions of the 2024
Olympic Games**

Supervisor: Professor Alberto Lanzavecchia

Candidate: Elpiniki Paisi

Matriculation No: 2106555

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“No contest in this world is worth the destruction of nature”

-Matahi Drollet

Abstract

This thesis critically investigates the neocolonial dimensions of France's ongoing influence over Tahiti, with a focused case study on the environmental and socio-political ramifications of selecting Teahupo'o as the surfing venue for the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. Tahiti, situated within French Polynesia, embodies a complex postcolonial legacy marked by historical colonial abuses, notably nuclear testing and cultural disruptions. The continuity of colonial history appears uninterrupted, as further evidenced by the United Nations' 2013 decision to reclassify Tahiti as a Non-Self-Governing territory.

This research situates the legacy of colonial exploitation within contemporary contexts, revealing how the 2024 Olympic Games functioned not merely as a global sporting event, but as a sophisticated instrument of neocolonial appropriation that exacerbates ecological vulnerability amidst climate change pressures.

The central research question guiding this study is: Do the 2024 Paris Olympic surfing events in Tahiti exemplify a modern form of French neocolonialism, and what are the specific environmental impacts associated with this sporting endeavor? Responding to this question, the thesis aims to augment academic understanding of the power relations between France, a former colonial power, and Tahiti, a semi-autonomous French overseas collectivity (Collectivité d'Outre-mer). Through this case study, the research exposes the persistence of neocolonial dynamics, employing the 2024 Olympic surfing event as a critical lens to interrogate how elite international spectacles can operate as vehicles for sustaining colonial power asymmetries, particularly through environmental exploitation.

The study employs a mixed-methods approach comprising a systematic literature review, qualitative interviews with stakeholders, including local Tahitian community members and global surfing communities, and autoethnographic reflections derived from surf culture. This triangulated approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the intersections between neocolonialism, environmental degradation, and surf culture, grounding the study in both empirical data and lived experience.

The findings articulate a significant dissonance between the scheduled imposition of Olympic infrastructural developments and indigenous Mā'ohi epistemologies, revealing fears among local communities of irreversible damage to reef ecosystems and the social tensions engendered by exclusionary decision-making processes. The research identifies uneven

distributions of environmental risks and economic benefits, which reproduce colonial patterns of dispossession and marginalization. Importantly, the case study illustrates how mega-sporting events, like the Olympics, can serve as a contemporary Trojan horse, cloaking neocolonial control and environmental injustice under the rhetoric of sustainable development and global celebration.

Overall, this thesis contributes substantively to academic discourses on postcolonial studies, environmental justice, and sports sociology by providing concrete evidence and linking neocolonial practices with environmental degradation through the lens of a high-profile international event. It advances the conversation beyond abstract theoretical frameworks by presenting an empirically grounded, context-specific example with profound implications for indigenous sovereignty, environmental governance, and international sporting event ethics. Ultimately, the study calls for critical reassessment of global sporting practices and policy frameworks, advocating for decolonial strategies that center indigenous knowledge and environmental stewardship in host territories.

Key Words: Neocolonialism, Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Environment, environmental justice, French Polynesia, surfing, Tahiti, Paris 2024 Olympic Games, Teahupo'o, Indigenous Rights, Mā'ohi epistemologies, sports sociology.

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Te haamaitairaa nei au i to'u iho māuruuru fārahi atu no te tauturu faahiahia iano au e ta'u haapiiraa, e to'u taatiraa, e to'u mana'o. Te tauturu taua i ta'u mau mana'o i rehi ai to'u ti'a i to'u haapiiraa, e te ho'i maua i roto i te aroha o teie matahani.

Te māuruuru roa atu vau i te mau taata atoa i tauturu mai i te mana'o e te haapiiraa faahiahia e pāpū i te Fānau Tahiti rūnoa nei e te ti'a o Teahupo'o. Te mau paraparau i te feia mātau roa i tae'a iho ai i ni'a ia ua tāpiri mai i te aroha i te ha'ama'uruuru e te ha'amaramaraa o te mau parau o teie fenua.

Te māuruuru nei au i te hoa tā'o faufaa, Tim McKenna, te tūturu hoa pu'upu'u nū'ū, no te haapotoraa mai i te tuhaa utuafare'a e ua horoa mai iā'u i te mauruuru no te haavā'o maitai roa i te hohoa.

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I. Introduction

In the fall of 2023, a random video circulated massively on Instagram through reposts and stories mainly by the surfing community. The video featured a surfer talking about an upcoming destruction of the coral reef in Teahupo'o. This surfer was Matahi Drollet and the topic was related to the summer 2024 Paris Olympic Games. His plea was echoing something familiar; something from Tahiti's long standing colonial past.

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The sound of "Tahiti", in the contemporary Western perception, evokes images of an untouched Eden, where the rhythm of ocean waves and the whispers of ancient 'mana' meld into a timeless tapestry. Rarely has an individual from the Global North contemplated the way in which the common Western unconscious has long cast this place as a location intertwined with visions of an earthly paradise. This thesis stems from this line of thought contextualized by the recent events in Teahupo'o during the summer of the 2024 Olympic Games. Framed as a camera lens, the thesis zooms from a wide-angle shot –a general overview of Polynesia's colonial history– to focus on a specific point of interest: the enduring dynamics of French colonialism in Tahiti, which are revealed through the prism of the 2024 Paris Olympic Games' surfing events held in the small French Polynesian fishing village of Teahupo'o, home to the legendary "Wave of Teahupo'o" –renowned worldwide among surf enthusiasts.

The 'Paris 2024' decision to transfer the Olympic surfing competition thousands of miles from the host city was more than a logistical arrangement; it was a powerful contemporary example of neocolonial dynamics at play. The event transformed the village into a stage for a global spectacle, where the pristine environment and the legend surrounding the "Wave of Teahupo'o" were leveraged to bolster the Olympic brand. Moreover, the Paris 2024 Committee's promotion of its "sustainable" initiatives sought to silence dissenting voices within the local community, which had initially been excluded from crucial consultations regarding their 'sacred' ecosystem. Is this not, after all, the perpetual fate of former colonies –to acquiesce to the mandates of their former imperial centers? Historical milestones long before the 2024 Olympics, such as the nuclear testing, reveal the colonial mindset: never a

genuine attempt to understand Polynesians and their culture, but rather to subdue them and benefit from the island's geopolitical position and resources. In an attempt to bridge the chasm and preserve indissoluble ties, France adjusted the spatial arrangements to replicate the aesthetic of Paris and granted Polynesians French citizenship and rights of political representation and suffrage in French elections. Yet, the restructure of the spatial configuration and the political gestures failed to address a deeper cultural fracture. This sentiment resonates deeply in the worlds of Henri Hiro (1944-1990), a Ma'ohi poet, writer, filmmaker, pastor, and political activist:

“When we greet one another we say, haere mai ra, which means to come to one another without pretense. This phrase makes sense within the framework of our customs, but in urban settings it no longer has meaning. If you take a Tahitian away from the land and put him in urban housing he no longer has the vocabulary to greet his neighbor.”¹

In the pre-Olympic Teahupo'o's setting, this communication gap, underpinned by a fundamental divergence in worldviews, escalated quickly into tensions. The controversy surrounding the construction of the aluminum judges' tower exacerbated in October 2023, rallying a significant segment of the surfing community. The following summer, the Olympic flame's scheduled passage from Tahiti demonstrated that a resolution had been reached. However, the circumstances were too complex to speak of a “happy ending”. While the 2024 Olympic surfing events ultimately proceeded, and the judges' tower was modified to be more reef-friendly –appeasing tensions from a part of the local community– the encounter at Teahupo'o is far from a simple tale of winners and losers. The incident, despite its outcome, illustrates how enduring colonial patterns continue to shape the present. The sublime force of nature –the legendary lethal, but astonishing wave of Teahupo'o– intersected with neocolonial ambitions and ecological vulnerabilities.

Beginning with the notion of ‘Neocolonialism’ the author highlights that a crucial prelude to this study lies in understanding the broader conceptual terrain. In the first chapter, the term ‘Neocolonialism’ is not treated as an abstract label, but as a living pulsating force that subtly governs economic, political, and cultural relations long after formal decolonization. This clarifies the background of the complex present-day entanglements witnessed in Tahiti and beyond. Despite an expanding body of scholarship that investigates neocolonial influences in

¹ Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard* (University of Washington Press, 2011), 23.

diverse global contexts, there remains a persistent ambiguity about how these structures manifest in peripheral territories like French Polynesia, especially when entwined with environmental degradation closely linked to indigenous practices, such as the Mā'ohi surfing practice, which have adapted and reintroduced under European terms, and intersect with major events of cultural significance, such as the large-scale athletic event of the Olympic Games. Tracing the enduring imagery of Tahiti back to the early voyages of Cook and Bougainville, the second chapter reveals how these expeditions established the island's current standing as a paradisiacal exotic locale. Beneath this serene façade, however, lies a layered narrative shaped by centuries of colonial violence and ongoing neocolonial control, which is further exemplified in the third chapter.

The questions guiding this investigation are as pressing as they are profound: How do the 2024 Paris Olympic surfing events in Tahiti encapsulate contemporary forms of French neocolonialism? What specific environmental repercussions accompany this sporting spectacle, and how do they intersect with the social fabric and cultural sovereignty of the locals? In an era acutely aware of climate crises and postcolonial dynamics, unpacking these questions is not only academically vital but an ethical imperative. The pursuit of answers promises to illuminate how postcolonial dynamics extend far beyond mere politics, crawling into the very currents that shape cultural identity and natural heritage.

The research aims to unravel the intricate link that connects three ostensibly distinct variables: 1) surfing, a seemingly innocuous sport often championed by individuals who purport to be environmentally conscious, 2) pervasive neocolonial power structures deeply rooted in contemporary life and often virtually imperceptible (especially when epitomized by mega-sporting events), and 3) environmental degradation resulting of insufficient due diligence within postcolonial contexts. This thesis aspires to contribute meaningfully to critical debates in postcolonial studies, environmental justice, and sports sociology—inviting reflection on a global stage illuminated by the paradoxical glow of the Olympic flame, which for the first time shed light on the murky modern history of neocolonialism amidst the Pacific.

The protagonist of the third chapter is the Teahupo'o Wave itself, framed by everything transpiring both within and beyond the reef. In this context, the preparations for the Olympic surfing events unfold against a backdrop of an insurmountable communication gap between metropolitan France and Teahupo'o locals, a gap that echoes past colonial encounters. Much

like the era of Bougainville, the French neocolonial power, once again tried to instrumentalize Tahitian landscape, feeding with a spectacle the Olympic Games audience and disregarding the intentions of indigenous people. Customs, traditions, and practices – including Mā'ohi surfing- were appropriated and returned altered, adapted to European standards.

In this thesis, a mixed-methods approach is employed including mostly systematic literature review accompanied by semi-structured interviews in Chapter 3. Part of the research is supplementary supported by an autoethnographic approach (Chapter 1, Section 3), weaving empirical data and personal experience into a cohesive narrative. It rectifies a significant oversight in the literature by drawing connections between surfing, neocolonial influence, and ecological decline. Crucially, it demonstrates that ecological destruction is not caused by “surfing” per se, but by its integration into Westernized cultural frameworks –culminating in the third chapter with the inclusion of surfing in the Olympic Games. These frameworks tend to reject surfing’s primordial origins embedded in ritual and reverence for “Fenua” (land) and “Moana” (sea).

Overall, through its multidisciplinary approach, this thesis delves into historical colonization in French Polynesia, political arrangements that paved the path for the transition to neocolonialism, indigenous Mā'ohi epistemologies, and the ambivalent role played by local and international surf communities. These are juxtaposed with environmental concerns related to Olympic Games’ constructions in the pristine coral reef of Teahupo’o. Thereafter, departing from this abstract nexus between neocolonial governance, environmental degradation, and surf culture, the study expertly and meticulously explores Tahiti’s colonial history, navigating between past and present, and ultimately “anchors” in Teahupo’o, thus inviting reflection on the broader implications of how former colonial powers continue to shape peripheral territories –not through overt control, but through subtle infrastructures and narratives that risk erasing both nature and native sovereignty. The study directly engages local voices and immerses in ethnographic insight, to confront the limitations of conventional analysis. This approach centers often marginalized indigenous knowledge within global conversations, unveiling the intertwined spheres of power, identity, and ecological stewardship.

II. Research Background

The literature review of this academic thesis examines the complex and multidimensional nexus between neocolonialism and environmental degradation, focusing specifically on the context of French Polynesia, with Tahiti –and more precisely Teahupo’o– as a case in point, through the prism of the 2024 Paris Olympic surfing events. The review aims to situate this study within the broader academic discourse on postcolonial and neocolonial theories, environmental justice, territorial governance, and sports geography, establishing the intellectual contours and the existing knowledge base relevant to the author’s research questions. By doing so, it critically surveys the literature on the persistence of neocolonial influences in overseas territories², their influence on environmental outcomes, and the socio-political implications of global sporting mega-events imposed on indigenous land. The scope foregrounds the intersection of environmental studies and event management in postcolonial settings, providing a thematic foundation that supports the author’s mixed-methods empirical investigation.

The literature was distributed and studied across four main pillars, beginning with the study of Neocolonialism, as a distinct concept, and culminating in its simultaneous interplay with surf culture and the environment, as outlined not only in the scholarly world, but also in global literature and filmography:

1. Neocolonialism: Conceptualizations and Theoretical Foundations

The concept of neocolonialism provides a critical lens through which the persisting domination of former colonial powers over nominally independent or semi-autonomous territories is examined. Foundational scholarship, prominently theorized by Kwame

² The concept of *overseas territories* broadly encompasses regions belonging to a sovereign state yet geographically separated from its metropolitan area. Specifically, with regard to France, the term “*overseas territories*” (territoires d’outre-mer) remains in use, but with a different semantic application, since it has evolved compared to the past. Unlike in the past, the term no longer refers to a single category with uniform legal status. Instead, it is now employed to describe a diverse range of organizational forms and relationships with France. The term “overseas territory”, along with terms like “commonwealth territory”, “collectivity”, “free associated state”, “special administrative region”, has replaced the word “colony” This shift is intended to avoid the ‘historical weight’ and associated discomfort that the latter would evoke, often making it difficult to discern the relationship between these territories and their distant metropolis, especially when the territories retain a high degree of autonomy. For example, most inhabited dependent territories have their own country codes (ISO), just like independent countries. Consequently, the relationship with the metropolitan power is often ‘revealed’ only during events such as the Olympic Games, FIFA etc. “Outre-mer: des statuts de plus en plus différenciés”, La Rédaction (2022). <https://www.vie-publique.fr/eclairage/19622-outre-mer-des-statuts-de-plus-en-plus-differencies>

Nkrumah, underscores neocolonialism as the continuation of economic and political control via indirect means –leveraging economic dependence, political influence, and cultural pressure rather than overt military or administrative authority.³ This theoretical perspective is extensively supported by subsequent scholars who delineate how contemporary neocolonialism manifests as economic extraction masked by global financial and trade systems, thus perpetuating dependency and inhibiting genuine sovereignty or development.⁴

Contrasting voices, such as those of John Gilley who defends elements of colonialism’s historical legitimacy by emphasizing consent⁵, are critically challenged for neglecting power asymmetries that undermine genuine indigenous agency. This latter argument is reinforced by Lea Ypi in postcolonial legal and political contexts.⁶ Moreover, Nikos Psyrroukis and Walter Rodney situate neocolonialism within the capitalistic global order. In this theoretical framework, ‘dependency theory’ is utilized as a conceptual tool to explain resource flows from periphery to core states and the systemic underdevelopment of former colonies or territories.⁷ This discourse recognizes that for territories (like French Polynesia), formal political and economic integration with metropolitan powers transforms traditional colonial dynamics into “internal colonialism” or neocolonial compacts, perpetuated through intertwined economic, legal, and cultural controls.⁸

2. Neocolonialism and Environmental Degradation

A dominant topic in contemporary postcolonial environmental scholarship is the intrinsic link between neocolonial economic practices and sustained environmental degradation. Empirical case studies on resource extraction (e.g. mining in New Caledonia) clearly exemplify how multinational corporate activities, facilitated by weak governance and inherited colonial spatial arrangements, result in ecosystem destruction, biodiversity loss, and adverse social

³ Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd, 1965), 3-10.

⁴ Eda Hamdun, "The Chinese Model of Neocolonialism in Africa: A Case Study of Angola" (Master’s thesis, Istanbul Commerce University, 2020), 13.

Daniel Aijtink, "(Mis)Understanding Neocolonialism: Why We Fail to Address Ongoing Exploitation in International Economic Relations" (Master's thesis, Utrecht University, 2022), 28-47.

⁵ Ernest M. Oleksy, "A Critique of Bruce Gilley’s 'The Case for Colonialism,'" *The Downtown Review*. Vol. 5. Iss. 2 (2019): 39-52.

⁶ Lea Ypi, "What’s Wrong with Colonialism," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 41, no. 2 (2013): 158-191.

⁷ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972), 30-40.

⁸ Robert Aldrich and John Connell, *The Last Colonies: The End of Empire and the Future of Overseas Territories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Emma Mawdsley, “China and Africa: Emerging Challenges to the Geographies of Power”, *Geography Compass* 1/3 (2007): 405–421.

impacts on indigenous and local populations.⁹ Similar insights are also mirrored in analysis of waste colonialism, where hazardous industrial and electronic waste from developed countries are offloaded to Global South regions characterized by regulatory gaps, thereby externalizing pollution burdens disproportionately.

In overseas territories such as French Guiana and French Polynesia, infrastructural projects linked to metropolitan interests –like the Guiana Space Centre and the nuclear testing program– have created severe environmental and health impacts with transgenerational consequences.¹⁰ The nuclear testing in French Polynesia, in particular, symbolically consolidates the neocolonial paradigm. In this case, strategic geopolitical considerations overrode environmental and indigenous rights, illustrating the interplay between military-industrial aims and ecological violence.¹¹

Tourism as a development pathway is another contested domain. Studies reveal that, although tourism delivers important economic revenues, it often perpetuates environmental harm through resource overconsumption, habitat destruction, and the commodification of nature and indigenous cultures under metropolitan economic agendas. Specific analyses of surf tourism demonstrate the delicate balance between cultural valorization and environmental exploitation, especially in high-value ecotourism and sporting destinations.¹²

3. The ‘Politics of Representation’ and the Indigenous Land in Tahiti

The literature on Indigenous epistemologies and land relations foregrounds the cosmological and reciprocal connection between the Mā'ohi people and their environment. This relational worldview –conceptualizing land (‘Te Fenua’) and sea (‘Te Moana’) as living entities intersecting with human well-being– fundamentally contrasts with Western capitalist and colonial land commodification as argued by both Miriam Kahn and Teresia Teaiwa.¹³ It is well documented how colonial and neocolonial spatial transformation have disrupted these

⁹ “Amnesty International Report 2020/21- The State of the World’s Human Rights”, Amnesty International Ltd (2021).

¹⁰ F. A. Charlier, V. Fatome, F. Bénichou, et al., "A Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of the European Spaceport in French Guiana," *Science of The Total Environment* 538 (2015): 152–162.

¹¹ Florent de Vathaire, Monia Zidane, Constance Xhaard, Vincent Souchard, Sylvie Chevillard, Catherine Ory, Frédérique Rachédi, et al., "Health Outcomes of the Nuclear Tests in French Polynesia." *Inserm Newsroom*, May 15, 2023. <https://presse.inserm.fr/en/consequences-sur-la-sante-des-essais-nucleaires-en-polynesie-francaise/67100/>.

¹² Valentina Robledo, "The Challenges of Sustainability in Surf Tourism Destinations," *Alba Sud*, November 12, 2020.

<https://www.albasud.org/blog/en/1274/the-challenges-of-sustainability-in-surf-tourism-destinations>

¹³ Jacinta Arthur de la Maza, “Now They Say the Land Is Not Ours: On Rapanui Worldviews and Land-Being Relations.” (Master's thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2012): 56-92.

‘indigenous geographies’, replacing them with imposed urban planning, infrastructural projects, and land appropriation that disrespect sacredness and traditional resource stewardship. This is specifically mentioned in A.H. Angelo and Yves-Louis Sage’s “The Principles Governing Mediation in Land Matters in French Polynesia”¹⁴, and Robert Aldrich’s “The French Presence in the South Pacific, 1842–1940”.¹⁵

Significant scholarship documents the physical and symbolic violence wrought by French colonial urban development in Pape’ete and broader Tahiti, along with the legacy of nuclear testing, which created environmental and social traumas. Moreover, the literature underscores how spatial reorganization functions not only to exploit, but to visually and culturally colonize indigenous territories, perpetuating control through ‘invisible’ and infrastructural means. These processes are recognized as critical in understanding neocolonialism as a lived, territorial reality for the Mā’ohi.¹⁶

4. The Interplay among Surf Culture, the Environment, and Neocolonial Dynamics

Early existing literature, such as the “Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life” by William Finnegan, and filmography, such as the “Birth of the Endless Summer” by Richard Yelland, when addresses surf culture tends to portray it as a practice intertwined with the natural environment and possessing elements that resemble those of ritual. However, contemporary literature (surf documentaries, magazine articles, and academic papers) tends to bifurcate between portrayals of surfing as an environmentally conscious practice on the one hand and as a purely commercialized activity perpetuating neocolonial and environmental tensions on the other hand.

The present thesis, from its perspective, acknowledges the philosophical ethos embedded in surf culture’s indigenous Polynesian roots as a spiritual practice deeply connected to the environment, while simultaneously critiquing simplistic valorization of global surf tourism, and competition frameworks that risk marginalizing indigenous identities and damaging fragile ecosystems.

¹⁴ A H Angelo and Yves-Louis Sage. "The Principles Governing Mediation in Land Matters in French Polynesia," *Commonwealth Law Bulletin* 44, no. 1 (2018): 16-24.

¹⁵ Robert Aldrich, *The French Presence in the South Pacific, 1842–1940*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 145-170.

¹⁶ Anaïs Maurer, "Snaring the Nuclear Sun: Decolonial Ecologies in Titaua Peu’s Mutismes: E ‘Ore te Vāvā" *The Contemporary Pacific*, Vol.32, no. 2 (2020): 371-397.

III. Identified Literature Gaps

While existing scholarship offers a rich theoretical understanding of neocolonial dynamics, the aforementioned literature review reveals significant, fragmented gaps concerning the specific nexus under examination –the interaction of neocolonialism with surf culture (when instrumentalized by a global sporting spectacle) that jeopardizes indigenous natural habitat in overseas semi-autonomous territories. The ensuing analysis, therefore, seeks to move beyond abstract theorization to furnish a deeply contextualized, empirically grounded account of the 2024 Olympic surfing events at Teahupo'o as a paradigmatic case that critically addresses these lacunae. These gaps can be categorized into four distinct areas:

1. Limited Focus on Overseas Territories Neocolonial Environmental Politics: While the literature richly analyzes neocolonialism in Africa and Asia, there is comparatively scarce focused analysis on overseas territories of settler colonial powers, particularly with regard to contemporary environmental consequences in relation to metropolis-periphery dynamics. This thesis addresses the aforementioned gap by highlighting the unique semi-autonomous status of French Polynesia and focusing on the case study of the 2024 Olympic Surfing event, filling a notable lacuna that concerns the mediating role of contemporary mega-sport events as new chapters in neocolonial spatial governance and environmental re-engineering.
2. Insufficient Critical Examination of Mega-Sport Events as Neocolonial Practices: Three years after its debut as an Olympic sport at the Tokyo Olympics, the Olympic surfing competition is documented as the first large-scale global sporting event where a discipline was decided by the host city (Paris) to be relocated in a formerly colonized region (Tahiti) that still maintains legitimate ties with the métropole. As a result, although current incidents (such as the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup in South Africa, and the FIFA World Cup in Qatar) have raised academic interest, the academic discourse still lacks detailed investigation into how global sporting events function as extensions of metropolitan power –instrumentalizing indigenous landscapes and cultures for Global North spectacle– in semi-autonomous indigenous contexts (i.g DROMs, COMs, etc.). It is noteworthy the 2024 Olympic surfing competition continues to stand, to this day, the first and only example of its kind, offering an unprecedented case study in this specific field.

3. *Underexplored Intersection of Surf Culture with Neocolonialism and the Environment:* Scholarly literature has, at various times, examined the ways in which surf culture intersects with colonial exploitation patterns, resulting in ecological toll, predominantly in the context of marketization through tourism. However, existing academic approaches often address inadequately the complex negotiations of power, identity, and cultural appropriation in surf-centric places (like Tahiti) within the context of international sport mega-events, given that it is a relatively new phenomenon. The present research aims to fill this void with an integrated, case-specific approach to the 2024 Olympic Games at Teahupo'o, bringing cultural, environmental, and political analysis.
4. *Inadequate incorporation of Indigenous Epistemologies and Views:* Many studies (i.g technocratic sustainability assessments that reduce culture to a manageable risk instead of recognizing it as intrinsic value or Environmental Impact Assessments focusing on "harm reduction", disregarding the broader spiritual connection of the indigenous population with their habitat) marginalize local indigenous environmental knowledge and perspectives, resulting in a skewed representation of territorial impact. This dissertation attempts to foreground the indigenous worldview, positioning it at the core of the analysis of the controversy that unfolded in Teahupo'o regarding the Olympic infrastructure and mainly the construction of the aluminum tower.

Overall, this review reveals a rich, but fragment scholarly landscape, addressing neocolonialism, environmental degradation, Indigenous territoriality, and surf culture, while exposing significant gaps regarding the intersection of these dimensions within the framework of contemporary Olympic mega-events. The research moves beyond abstract theorization, furnishing a deeply contextualized, empirically grounded account of the 2024 Olympic surfing events in Teahupo'o as a paradigmatic case. By integrating theoretical critiques of neocolonialism with environmental impact assessments and indigenous voices, this study crucially advances understanding of how neocolonial logics continue to shape environmental justice struggles in overseas territories, contributing to emergent interdisciplinary debates on the socio-environmental consequences of global sporting mega-events in postcolonial settings and offering vital insights and pragmatic pathways for more equitable and sustainable futures.

IV. Thesis statement

The selection of Teahupo‘o in Tahiti as the 2024 Olympic surfing competition site demonstrates the conflicting elements of global sustainability discourse. While marketed as a celebration of diversity, global sport and ecological harmony, the event constitutes a form of neocolonial appropriation that instrumentalizes Mā‘ohi land, identity, and ecology for a ‘metropolitan spectacle’ with distant economic and symbolic agendas behind it. The narrative of sustainable development hides the process of using indigenous territories for profit-driven spectacles that utilize sport and cultural heritage as tools of image laundering. The physical alterations –resulting from the installation of Olympic structures– function as components of a century-old historical system of silence infrastructural and epistemic violence which destroys natural integrity while displacing indigenous epistemologies. Carried out with limited local consent and uneven distribution of risk, this project repeats the extractive patterns of colonial history, now masked by the pop novel terms of sustainability and development.

V. Research Questions

1. The main question of this study seeks to answer: Do the 2024 Paris Olympic Surfing events in Tahiti exemplify a modern form of French neocolonialism? In which ways and what are the specific environmental impacts?

Secondary research questions examine:

2. What are the specific environmental risks associated with the Olympic surfing facilities in Teahupo'o? How have local Tahitians and environmental groups responded to the Olympic project? Did Paris 2024 make efforts to involve the local population (through consultations, actions to facilitate their participation during the Olympic Games, or even by changing plans following local resistance etc.) and what conclusions can be drawn about the power dynamics between metropolitan France and its territories?
3. How does the historical legacy of French colonialism in French Polynesia provide the context for contemporary neocolonial practices, particularly in relation to environmental degradation?
4. What is the true nature of surf culture? Does it operate as an environmentally protective force, rooted in a philosophical ethos that promotes a deep connection with nature? Or, has surf culture, corrupted by commercialization, instead served to perpetuate colonial patterns, disregarding local cultures and ecosystems in regions that have evolved into popular big-wave destinations?

This thesis aims to address a series of interconnected questions, with the overarching goal of analyzing the 2024 Paris Olympic surfing events in Teahupo'o a. The study's central inquiry, which will be examined in the final chapter, seeks to answer the critical question: To what extent the 2024 Paris Olympic surfing events in Tahiti serve as a case study for modern French neocolonialism and what is the environmental cost of the project? To provide the necessary context, the thesis begins by addressing secondary questions. Before reaching the

main question, an earlier chapter explores the origins of the French presence in the Pacific focusing on how the historical legacy of French colonialism in French Polynesia –through spatial alteration, nuclear testings, and tourism infrastructure- provided fertile ground for contemporary neocolonial practices, particularly in relation to environmental degradation.

Furthermore, in the final chapter –which serves as the culmination of a progressive line of reasoning- the author answers the question of how the local community and environmental groups have responded to the Olympic events. This analysis is conducted against a backdrop of certain environmental risks associated with the Olympic surfing facilities in Teahupo'o and it, also, examines whether Paris 2024 made genuine efforts to involve the local population in the project. The findings will ultimately allow for conclusions to be drawn about the power dynamics between metropolitan France and its overseas territories.

Last but not least, it is worth noting that, while the analysis revolves around the case study of the Olympic surfing events in Tahiti, the author, in the first chapter, lays the foundation for their line of reasoning by delving into the complex nature of surf culture itself. Based on personal experiences, lived stories, and observations, the author attempts to answer the critical question: Is surf culture an environmentally conscious movement, grounded in a philosophical ethos that fosters a profound bond with the natural world? Or, has surf culture, compromised by commercialization, become a vehicle for perpetuating colonial patterns, thereby marginalizing local cultures and ecosystems in areas that have been transformed into premier big-wave destinations?

VI. Hypothesis

This thesis claims that there is a strong connection between neocolonial power structures and environmental degradation in post-colonial semi-autonomous territories. The author particularly aims to examine this link in Tahiti, an overseas territory of France. This examination will be conducted through the lens of the world's biggest sporting event: the Olympic Games.

VII. Conceptual Framework

The concept of ‘*Neocolonialism*’ will be the leading theory in the conceptual framework of the present thesis and it will be examined in relation with the environment, particularly in Tahiti. Notably, the theory of ‘*Internal Colonialism*’, despite its apparent relevance, is rejected as not applicable to this specific context. The later framework was primarily developed by theorists and analysts to interpret the predicament of oppressed groups within the confines of their own nation-states, essentially serving as an analytical tool for dissecting the structural inequalities and systems of oppression that persist within national borders, particularly those affecting racial, ethnic, or regional minorities.

Many African American intellectuals and activists, such as W.E.B Du Bois, have utilized such concepts to describe the situation of their community emphasizing that they constitute a “nation within a nation”.¹⁷ Similarly, the Mexican sociologist Pablo González Casanova used the term to analyze socio-economic relations in Mexico, where the indigenous population and rural areas are exploited by the central state.¹⁸ However, French Polynesia is not an “internal” region of France in the same way a metropolitan region (e.g. Brittany) is, nor do its inhabitants face the characteristics of discrimination seen among African Americans (a better example of this would be the paradigm of the French *banlieues*¹⁹). Instead, one could argue that this case represents more of an example of imperfect decolonization, closer to the characteristics of ‘*Neocolonialism*’.²⁰

Although the concept of ‘*Internal Colonialism*’ does not precisely reflect the relationship between the metropolitan France and its overseas territories and collectivities –given their

¹⁷ Walter Rucker, ““A Negro Nation Within the Nation”: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Creation of a Revolutionary Pan-Africanist Tradition, 1903-1947”, *The Black Scholar* Vol. 32 No. 3/4, BLACKS AND THE UNITED NATIONS (2002): 37-46.

¹⁸ Pablo González Casanova, *Internal Colonialism and National Development*. (Mexico City: National University of Mexico, 1965), 27-37. Accessed October 8, 2025.
<https://www.scribd.com/document/499217835/Gonzalez-Casanova-1965-Internal-Colonialism-and-National-Development>.

¹⁹ The term refers to the French suburbs, known as *banlieues*, which are often characterized as dysfunctional urban areas. They are primarily inhabited by populations of immigrant background, largely from North and sub-Saharan Africa, and are marked by severe socioeconomic issues including poverty, unemployment, crime, and social marginalization.

[Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008), 1-30.]

²⁰ Lorenz Gonschor, “Mai te hau Roma ra te huru: The Illusion of “Autonomy” and the Ongoing Struggle for Decolonization in French Polynesia”, *The Contemporary Pacific* Volume 25, Number 2, University of Hawai‘i Press Center for Pacific Islands Studies (2013): 259-296.

substantial autonomy and the vast geographical separation from the mainland- the leader of the Kanak people in New Caledonia, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, notably coined the term ‘colonisation française de l’intérieur’ (French colonialism from within) to articulate the specific conditions faced by Kanak people, demonstrating a conceptual evolution of the theory that moves beyond the standard model.²¹ However, the author of this thesis prefers to follow the traditional interpretation of the two theoretical frameworks (‘Neocolonialism’ and “Internal Neocolonialism”), utilizing ‘Neocolonialism’ as the theoretical foundation for the present study.

²¹ Isabelle Leblic, "Vous avez dit 'rééquilibrage' et décolonisation? Retour sur les débats en Nouvelle-Calédonie" (What about “Balancing” and Decolonization? Return over 40 years of institutional comings and goings versus Colonialism and Sovereignty), *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 147 (2018): 181-197. Accessed October 8, 2025. <https://journals.openedition.org/jso/pdf/9649>.

VIII. Methodology

The research for this thesis employs a mixed-methods approach. It combines a comprehensive review of existing literature with qualitative data collection to first address the complex overlapping relationships between surf culture, neocolonialism, and the environment, and second, the interconnection between the Paris 2024 Olympic surfing events, neocolonialism in Tahiti, and environmental degradation in the surrounding area. This methodological framework was designed to create a robust and nuanced analysis, drawing on both theoretical foundations and empirical testimonies.

Secondary research

The primary methodology involves a *systematic literature review* including the collection and analysis of existing material, such as academic writings, research studies, scholarly papers, books, and environmental studies on the coral reef. Moreover, the study incorporated a wide array of journalistic material, such as articles from newspapers and magazines, which provided contemporary insights and public debates surrounding the topic under investigation. This primary data was essential for building the theoretical framework, establishing the historical context of French presence in the Pacific, and critically engaging with broader academic discourse on neocolonialism and environmental concerns.

Primary research

To supplement the secondary research, *qualitative data* was gathered through two distinct streams of inquiry: 1) *interviews* (for the purposes of the 3rd Chapter, interviews were conducted with 10 individuals in accordance with the guidelines of the ‘Research Integrity Code’ of the University of Padua) and 2) *personal encounters* via an autoethnographic approach (section 3 of the 1st Chapter includes quotations and exchanges drawn from the author’s informal discussions with members of the global surfing community. The interlocutors’ identity has been withheld, as these exchanges constitute friendly conversations and not protocol-driven, formal interviews). This data served a dual purpose –they contributed to the foundational understanding of surf culture itself in the first chapter and provided the core empirical information for the case study analysis in the final chapter respectively.

Regarding Chapter 3, which focuses on the case study of the Olympic surfing events in Tahiti, data was collected through *semi-structured interviews* (online interviews and questionnaires) with a diverse range of participants. The interviewees –a total of 10 including local Tahitians, Teahupo'o residents, and stakeholders related to the event- offered a multifaceted view of the project's impact. They were approached through various online platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook groups, Couchsurfing, and applications, where a "passport mode" feature was utilized to virtually geo-locate the author in Tahiti enabling direct access to the perspective of people on the ground.

As regards the 3rd Section of Chapter 2, it is based on the method of *autoethnography*. This approach weaves together the author's own lived experiences and observations from travels to renowned surf destinations with the qualitative data which gathered from in-person encounters with surfers. The synthesis of personal narrative and empirical research provided an experiential dimension to the understanding of surf culture.

In this section, which delves into the complex nuances of surf culture and its sub-communities, an analysis of relevant surf-related documentaries and films was also used to provide invaluable insights into the lived experiences and philosophy of surfers, adding a vital human dimension to the academic inquiry. The cinematic material accompanied with personal testimonies served as a valuable tool for gaining a deeper understanding of the various facets of surf culture and its broader cultural and environmental implications.

Overall, this study, by combining the theoretical insights from the literature review with the experiential and interview-based data, seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play in Tahiti, moving slightly beyond to encompass broader concerns regarding the interplay among neocolonialism, the environment, and certain features of surf culture. The methodology ensures a holistic perspective, blending macro-level analysis of power structures with micro-level insights from individual experiences.

IX. Limitations in research

Geographic Limitations

A notable challenge encountered during this phase was the significant geographic distance from the research field (French Polynesia). This spatial separation complicated the process of securing interviews, and, even more so, of ensuring a well-balanced representation of viewpoints on the aluminum tower and its construction, including those who supported and those who opposed it. The hindrance of direct engagement with local population made the recruitment of Tahitian participants particularly difficult; many potential respondents either did not reply to email communications or prematurely discontinued contact due to the inconvenience caused by the time difference, thereby limiting the sample size and diversity of local voices available for analysis.

Of the approximately 40 individuals approached, including members of the environmental organization VAO'O Teahupo'o and the Église Protestante Ma'ohi, only 10 responded and signed the consent form. These participants, whether currently residing in Teahupo'o or having relocated, as well as long-term residents with over a decade of experience in the area, provided invaluable testimonies ensuring that the analysis was grounded in firsthand perspectives.

Temporal Proximity

A further limitation arose from the contemporary nature of the case study in question. The research began a few months after the conclusion of the 2024 Olympic Games events at Teahupo'o and was completed the following summer. This temporal proximity to the events meant that limited body of academic literature was available. Consequently, the 3rd chapter of the thesis, which examines the Olympic surfing competitions in Teahupo'o and the related developments, had to rely primarily on non-academic sources. These included journalistic articles, press releases, official announcements from relevant authorities and stakeholders and qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews with locals. This methodological choice necessitated by the lack of scholarly publications on such recent events, ensured that the analysis was grounded in the most current available information.

X. Contribution of this Research

This thesis aims to contribute to academic relevance by increasing knowledge about the relations between France (a former colonial power) and Tahiti (a former colonized and today semiautonomous French territory), as illustrated against the backdrop of the 2024 Olympic surfing events in Teahupo'o. This case study is utilized as a lens to expose the enduring neocolonial relationship between metropolitan France and a specific COM (Collectivité d'Outre-mer). By focusing on a high-profile international event, this research highlights how such ventures can, even unintentionally, serve as a modern vehicle for perpetuating colonial power dynamics attached with particular environmental issues in host areas. Ultimately, this work contributes to the broader academic discourse by providing concrete evidence of the link between neocolonialism and environmental degradation, moving the conversation from abstract theory to a tangible example with significant implications for both local communities and global governance.

Chapter I

Neocolonialism, the Environment, and the Surfscape

This chapter explores the concept of neocolonialism, a term that describes the persistent influence and control exerted by developed nations over formally independent, developing countries. Neocolonialism, despite constituting an evolutionary form of its predecessor, colonialism, presents significant differences. One could argue that it is a less visible, and, at the same time, a more refined form of raw, barbaric traditional colonialism. While traditional colonialism relied on direct military and political rule, neocolonialism operates through more subtle, indirect means. The first section of this chapter will trace the origins of this phenomenon, examine its foundational theoretical framework, and illustrate its contemporary expressions in the global landscape. In the second section, it is examined the intricate link between neocolonial practices and their profound environmental impacts, particularly concerning resource extraction and land use, global waste trade, non sustainable tourism, and climate change. Finally, this analysis will weave together these themes to reveal how ‘surf culture’, as it has spread across the globe, has navigated and, at times, perpetuated neocolonial and environmental tensions. By exploring the cross-cultural tapestry of surfing, the author, drawing on personal experience, aims to understand and explain how surfing, a seemingly recreational activity, is intertwined with issues of power, identity, and ecological stewardship.

1.1 Defining and Analyzing Neocolonialism

*«Oh! What magic and mental turmoil there was during my childhood in the simple word “the colonies,” which, at that time, denoted in my mind every faroff tropical land with its palm trees, enormous flowers, Negroes, animals and adventures. Oh, “the colonies!” How can I describe everything that stirred in my head at the very sound of that word!» - Pierre Loti*²²

Defining Neocolonialism

Neocolonialism can be defined as the practice of using economic, political, cultural, or other type of pressure to control or influence other countries, especially former dependencies. The relation that is created between these countries recycles old colonial patterns and resembles the past colonial dynamics, but in this case the dominance is continued implicitly; while old-fashioned colonialism is retreating, neocolonialism, camouflaged into economic and political policies, replaces it as a subtler, more dangerous form of domination.

The first official definition of neocolonialism was formulated at the third All African People's Conference called the 'Resolution on Neocolonialism', describing it as “the survival of the colonial system in spite of formal recognition of political independence in emerging countries which become the victims of an indirect and subtle form of domination by political, economic, social, military or technical means”.²³

The term gained prominence in the post-World War II era when European colonial powers began to grant formal independence to their colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. While traditional colonialism started -in some respects- coming to an end around 1950's and 1970's, this expiration was limited in name and form, and former colonies continued to be exploited in terms of methods and purposes.²⁴ A plethora of the newly sovereign states, despite their political liberation, remained economically dependent on their former colonizers. This is where the very core of neocolonialism lies: in the fact that even though a

²² Pierre Loti, *Le roman d'un enfant*, (1890): 71-72.

²³ Third All African Peoples' Conference, "Resolution on Neocolonialism", Accra, Ghana, December 1958.

²⁴ Eda Hamdun, "The Chinese Model of Neocolonialism in Africa: A case study of Angola" (Master's Thesis, Istanbul Commerce University, 2020): 13-14.

state is theoretically independent and possesses all the outward trappings of international sovereignty, in reality its economic and political system are externally directed.²⁵

The primary architect of this definition was Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, who in his seminal work "Neo-colonialism: the last Stage of Imperialism", argued that a new form of exploitation had emerged. He contended that former colonial powers and other developed nations maintained control by leveraging their economic might to extract resources and influence policies, effectively blocking the genuine development of newly independent nations.²⁶ Simplifying the conceptualization of neocolonialism, one can argue that neocolonialism practically means power without responsibility for those who practice it, exploitation without compensation for those who suffer from it. In colonialism, colonial power had to explain and legitimize its actions abroad. This does not happen with new colonialism, which is why neocolonialism can be considered as more dangerous than the classical one.

One example of the emerging new form of colonialism was that of Cameroon, where after the political independence from France, Cameroon remained dependent on certain negotiations on matters of defense, foreign policy, technical assistance, and finance. Because of French monetary policies during colonization, Cameroon remained tied in a fixed parity of 50:1 to the French franc, "automatically granting the French government control over all financial and budgetary activities".²⁷

Although the definition of neocolonialism was originally a term used to describe the economic dependence of African states on former European colonial powers, nowadays it could also apply to cases irrelevant with the former colonial past. China, for example, is one of these cases. China, as a recently developed country, has no history of colonialism in Africa and its relationship was initially based on South-South solidarity. However, the rapid rise of Chinese power and the methods it employs in the region (such as investments, loans, and

²⁵ Kwame Nkrumah, *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd, 1966), 3-10.

²⁶ Kwame Nkrumah, *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd, 1965), 7.

²⁷ Daniel Aijtink, "(Mis)understanding Neocolonialism: Why We Fail to Address Ongoing Exploitation in International Economic Relations" (Master's thesis, Utrecht University, 2022): 6.

infrastructure) may create a new form of dependency, thus renewing the debate on neocolonialism in the context of contemporary relations.²⁸

Drawing a parallel, another particular case in the neocolonial framework is represented by the overseas territories, which they never granted an absolute independence. In this case, the neocolonial dynamic operates differently. As the political ties to the former colonial power were never formally severed, the non-sovereign territories, although having a degree of political autonomy, they maintained economic and administrative structures deeply integrated with –and often subservient to– the metropolitan power.



*Figure 1: Photo of the French overseas territories.*²⁹

²⁸ Eda Hamdun, “The Chinese Model of Neocolonialism in Africa: A case study of Angola” (MA Thesis, Istanbul Commerce University, 2020): 28-47.

²⁹ Aris Androulakis, “Special Feature: Dependent Territories Around the World”, *Geografikoi* (November 2024). <https://www.geografikoi.gr/exartimena-edafi/>.

Overseas Departments and Regions (DROM) 1) French Guiana (South America) 2) Gouadeloupe (Caribbean) 3) Martinique (Caribbean) 4) Réunion (Indian Ocean) 5) Mayotte (Indian Ocean)	Administration: Full integration into the French Republic, same legal status as the departments and regions of mainland France. They are subject to French law, though some adaptations are possible. They are integral part of the EU, the Eurozone, and the Schengen Area (with some exceptions for Mayotte and Réunion). Citizens: Equal rights with the French citizens (voting rights and representation in the French National Assembly). Autonomy: Limited autonomy/limited scope of local measures.
Overseas Collectivities (COM) 1) French Polynesia (Pacific Ocean) 2) Saint Martin (Caribbean) 3) Wallis et Futuna (Pacific Ocean) 4) Saint Pierre et Miquelon (North Atlantic)	Administration: These territories have their own laws and institutions, regional parliaments and governors. The French government has limited jurisdiction, mainly in areas of defense, currency, and justice. Citizens: considered as French citizens. Autonomy: Greater degree of autonomy than the DROMs. Their status is defined by Article 74 of the French Constitution.
Sui Generis Collectivity 1) New Caledonia	This category has a unique, special status established by the Noumea Accord of 1998, and is granted the power to decide about its future (absolute or partial independence) through referendum.
French Southern and Antarctic Lands (TAAF) 1) Adélie Land (Antarctica) 2) Crozet Islands 3) Kerguelen Islands 4) Île Amsterdam and Île Saint- Paul 5) Scattered islands in the Indian Ocean	Administration: These territories have a unique status and are administrated directly from France Citizens: These lands are largely uninhabited, with the population consisting mainly of military personnel, scientists, and support staff.

Figure 2: French Overseas Territories.

Historical Context and Theoretical Foundations of Neocolonialism

The roots of neocolonialism are deeply intertwined with the decolonization movement of the mid-20th century. As African and Asia nations fought for and won their independence, the old colonial system, based on direct rule, became untenable. However, this transition did not sever the unequal power dynamics established during centuries of colonial rule. The new independent states often inherited economic structures designed to serve the interests of the colonial power, with economies centered on the export of raw materials at low prices.³⁰

When looking at the colonial map, one can notice how the Second World War shaped the contemporary neocolonial order. After the Second World War, Germany and Italy had lost and therefore faced sanctions, Spain had been weakened due to internal turmoil, while Britain and France, while being among the victorious states with US support, had suffered economic

³⁰ "Colonialism, Decolonization, and Neo-Colonialism," in Sociology, LibreTexts, accessed August 7, 2025. [https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Introduction_to_Sociology/Sociology_\(Boundless\)/16:_Economy/16.02:_The_Transformation_of_Economic_Systems/16.2K:_Colonialism_Decolonization_and_Neo-Colonialism](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Introduction_to_Sociology/Sociology_(Boundless)/16:_Economy/16.02:_The_Transformation_of_Economic_Systems/16.2K:_Colonialism_Decolonization_and_Neo-Colonialism)

setbacks. Mapping the post Second World War landscape, a keen observer cannot help but emphasize a very important, critical element: At the Berlin Conference in 1885, the USA did not have any colonies. It seemed that the U.S. would not be willing to accept the new world balance of power. Consequently, the US would either enjoy the same colonial advantages as other countries or find other methods that technically enable this.

Neocolonialism, emerging as a new world order, primarily was to fragment the former large unified colonized territories into a series of smaller states that lacked the ability to develop independently, and consequently had to rely on the old imperial power for defense and even internal security. Furthermore, with the end of classical colonial period, Europe's sole dominance over the colonies also came to an end and many global players began to keep the third world countries dependent on them with new ways of domination.

According to Denis Altınbaş, the colonial dissolution process had more to do with the Europeans' "humanness" than it did with the independence struggles. Since it had grown costly for the Europeans, this process had inevitably disintegrated. There were undoubtedly benefits from the colonies, but given the failing economies and the difficulty of maintaining the post-war costs of the established systems, the colonial owners believed it would be more advantageous to use their money on their own lands, taking into account the deteriorating economies.³¹

Neocolonialism hand in hand with capitalism

As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o points out, colonialism gave rise to European capitalism.³² Loomba also mentions that without colonialism the transition to capitalism would not be occurred in Europe.³³ The developments in the globalization of the economy since the 1960s have caused economies to overlap and integrate like bricks on the wall.

In his 1980 book 'Neocolonialism: The Anatomy of the Contemporary World', a treatise on the symbiotic relationship between neocolonialism and capitalism, Nikos Psyrroukis, examining neocolonialism in relation to capitalism, adopts as foundation of neocolonialism the theory first articulated by Lenin in 1920, which bifurcates the world into two distinct categories of nations: the 'oppressed nations' (constituting the vast majority of the world's

³¹ Eda Hamdun, "The Chinese Model of Neocolonialism in Africa: A case study of Angola" (MA Thesis, Istanbul Commerce University, 2020), 13.

³² Nesrin Değirmencioglu, "The Bondage of 'Independent' Nations: Neo-Imperialism in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*," *DTCF Journal* 64, no. 1 (2024): 99–123.

³³ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 4.

population) and the ‘oppressor nations’ (characterized by “colossal wealth and formidable military power”). This Leninist dichotomy of humanity into oppressor and oppressed nations aligns perfectly, according to Psyroukis, with the division into the “capitalistic world of development” (the metropolis) and the “capitalistic world of un-development” (the periphery). The ‘nation-oppressor’, representing the metropolis, primarily serve as the embodiment of global capital, while the ‘oppressed nation’, located in the periphery ³⁴, fundamentally represents the global labor force.³⁵

The economic dependency emerged as a central pillar of neocolonial theory from its early stages. As early as 1972, scholars like Walter Rodney analyzed how colonial exploitation had crippled African economies, leaving them vulnerable to systematic foreign control. Furthermore, he argued that the economic systems established by colonial powers were not merely inefficient, but were designed on purpose to prevent the industrialization and self-sufficiency of African nations –a framework closely linked to the ‘Dependency Theory’, that emerged in the 1950s in response to Modernization Theory and the free-trade policies originating from the West.³⁶ According to the ‘Dependency Theory’, the underdevelopment of the “periphery” is not the failure of internal policies, but the result of exploitation by the center; more specifically, the resources flow from a “periphery” of poor and undeveloped countries to a “core” of wealthy states, maintaining unequal power dynamics. ³⁷ Neocolonialism itself could be seen as the main mechanism that perpetuates this dependent relationship in the post-colonial era.³⁸

The role of ‘consensus’ in neocolonialism

Bruce Gilley, defending (neo)colonial relations, claims that colonialism was subjectively legitimate since in many cases, the indigenous people either did not resist the colonizers or

³⁴ According to Johan Galtung’s well-known ‘center-periphery’ model (which is analyzed extensively in his 1971 *Journal of Peace Research: “A Structural Theory of Imperialism”*), the world consists of Center and Periphery nations, and each nation, in turn, has its center and periphery, which means that not all the inhabitants of core countries benefit from and participate in the exploitation of periphery countries, nor does it mean that all the inhabitants of periphery countries are victims of exploitation.

³⁵ Nikos Psyroukis, *Neocolonialism: The Anatomy of the Contemporary World*, (EPIKAIROTHA, 1980), 368-369.

³⁶ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, (London and Dar-Es-Salaam: Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications and Tanzania Publishing House, 1972. Reprinted 2011 by Black Classic Press), 28-50.

³⁷ Economic Commission for Latin America, *The Economic Development of Latin America and Its Principal Problems*, (United Nations Department of Economic Affairs. Lake Success, New York, 1950), 1-2.

³⁸ "Colonialism, Decolonization, and Neo-Colonialism," in Sociology, LibreTexts, accessed August 7, 2025. [https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Introduction_to_Sociology/Sociology_\(Boundless\)/16:_Economy/16.02:_The_Transformation_of_Economic_Systems/16.2K:_Colonialism_Decolonization_and_Neo-Colonialism](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Introduction_to_Sociology/Sociology_(Boundless)/16:_Economy/16.02:_The_Transformation_of_Economic_Systems/16.2K:_Colonialism_Decolonization_and_Neo-Colonialism)

collaborated with them. It is therefore, according to Gilley, that “Western and non-Western countries should reclaim the colonial toolkit and language as part of their commitment to effective governance and international order”. However, historical evidence of the resistance to colonization by indigenous populations would suggest the opposite. Gilley seems to merely cherry-pick examples of agreement by individuals as an indication of local population, but his argument that colonized populations upheld for colonialism is not grounded in the agreement of indigenous people as a whole.³⁹

A response to Gilley’s argument had already been given four years prior –in what appeared to be a dialectical relationship of statement and counter-statement by Lea Ypi, who argued that consent, in the cases when it was given by colonized people, is an “imperfect proxy for tracking an agent’s will”.⁴⁰ In short, Lea Ypi highlights that consent given under a colonial condition could be anything but genuine, since colonized people are -in the most cases- powerless to emancipate themselves, acting under economic, military or political pressure, or simply lacking alternative options. Their “consent” cannot be interpreted as a free will result, but rather as a result of unequal power dynamics. Thus, while Gilley argues that (neo)colonialism was based on consent, Lea Ypi’s analysis highlights the centrality of power inequality as a defining feature of colonial domination.

Seen through the “given consent” lens, one could examine the example of overseas territories. In many cases, they were given the opportunity for full independence, but they chose to remain officially bounded to the metropolis through bonds of attachment that could be described as anything but equal. Could one really talk about consent here, or is it a deeper relationship of dependency built upon the legitimization⁴¹ of early colonialism and rooted in centuries of colonial operation in these areas?

The case of French Guiana serves as an example. This overseas department and region of France, situated on the northeastern coast of South America, has maintained its status as an integral part of the French Republic since the 17th century. While political movements have,

³⁹ Bruce Gilley, "The Case for Colonialism", *Third World Quarterly*, published online September 8, 2017.

⁴⁰ Lea Ypi, “What’s Wrong with Colonialism”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2013): 158-191.

⁴¹ According to Okoth-Ogendo, colonialists used their own national legal systems to justify the expropriation of land belonging to indigenous communities. An example of this is Britain’s 1890 Foreign Jurisdiction Act, which stated that any land with no settled form of government naturally belongs to the British empire. This law was followed by the British government declaring their African colonies to have no settled forms of government and extending their rule and appropriation of entitlement to these lands. Similar legal mechanisms in other European countries led to the allocation of African lands and commons to colonial settlers. Settlers were often given freeholder interest, 999-year leases, and other forms of leasehold.

at various junctures, advocated for greater autonomy or outright independence, the electorate has consistently reaffirmed its preference for continued political integration with the métropole. This electoral outcome is frequently attributed to the tangible socioeconomic advantages and robust public services derived from its constitutional affiliation with France, thereby underscoring the intricate interplay between economic dependency and the manifestation of received political consent within such post-colonial contexts.⁴²

Contemporary Expressions of Neocolonialism

Neocolonialism, nowadays, manifests in a variety of complex and often subtle forms. Rather than being exclusively a domain of former colonial powers, it constitutes a broader phenomenon involving multinational corporations and consortia, international financial institutions, international and private funds, various aid and development programs, commercial practices (forms of unequal shopping, dumping, patronage, bad cargo practices etc.), and global geopolitical competition.

The most prominent form of contemporary neocolonialism is financial. As a head of a former colonized state that gained its sovereignty, Kwame Nkrumah came to realize that the former colonial powers rather than maintaining direct internal control, they began to aid the development of former colonies while exerting influence through the “invisible management” of powerful financial institutions.⁴³

Nkrumah’s realization aligned with the broader manifestations of neocolonialism identified and condemned by the third All African People’s Conference. These manifestations included the establishment of puppet governments, the deliberate political fragmentation of states, and crucially, “the economic entrenchment of the colonial power before independence and the continuity of economic dependence after formal recognition of national sovereignty”.⁴⁴ This could be conceptually translated into the following schema: Developing countries are often burdened with foreign debt, which grants international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank substantial leverage. In exchange for loans, these institutions frequently impose Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that require countries to privatize state-owned industries, reduce social spending and, open their markets

⁴² “Indigenous Peoples in French Guiana”, IWGIA, accessed September 10, 2025. <https://iwgia.org/en/french-guiana.html#:~:text=French%20Guiana%20is%20an%20overseas,of%20France%20in%20South%20America.>

⁴³ Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965), 3-25.

⁴⁴ Third All African Peoples' Conference, "Resolution on Neocolonialism", Accra, Ghana (December 1958).

to foreign competition. Critics argue that these policies often dismantle domestic industries, increase inequality, and solidify economic dependency.⁴⁵

Transnational corporations, also, play a significant role in perpetuating neocolonial dynamics. They often invest in developing nations to exploit cheap labor and natural resources, with the majority of profits being repatriated back to the home country. While these investments can bring jobs and infrastructure, they can also lead to environmental degradation, suppress labor rights, and create a ‘resource curse’, where countries rich in natural resources remain poor due to corruption and foreign extraction. The exploitation of cobalt in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, is a widely cited example of how demand for modern technology fuels neocolonial practices.⁴⁶

Furthermore, neocolonialism operates on a cultural and political level. The dominance of Western media, ‘consumer culture’, and educational systems can lead to a form of cultural imperialism, where indigenous traditions are marginalized. In addition, geopolitical competition -such as the strategic investments of powers like China and the US in Africa- can be viewed through a neocolonial lens. These engagements, often framed as mutually beneficial partnerships, can lead to new forms of dependency and political influence, with state’s foreign policy and internal governance being swayed by external interests.⁴⁷

In the special case of non-sovereign territories, neocolonialism is more evidently translated into economic and political integration. More specifically, in territories like Tahiti (part of the French Polynesia) or the British overseas territories, the economic systems are often heavily reliant on subsidies and aid from the metropolis, coupled with an economy geared towards serving the metropolitan interests, such as tourism. These features create a dependency that makes genuine economic diversification and self-sufficiency difficult. Moreover, the political landscape is, also, shaped by this unequal relationship, since the metropolitan power often retains control over key areas like defense, foreign policy, and monetary systems, while locals are often granted citizenship rights and benefits, which in turn reinforce a ‘sense of belonging’ and minimize the calls for full independence. This dynamic creates a “neo-

⁴⁵ Jürgen Zattler, “The Effects of Structural Adjustment Programmes Intereconomics”, Verlag Weltarchiv Volume 24 Issue 6 (1989): 282-289.

⁴⁶ Siddharth Kara, *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2023), 20-100.

⁴⁷ Annika Amtenbrink, “Neo-colonial Dynamics in Africa: A Comparative Study of China, Russia, and France: An Assessment of Economic, Political, Cultural, and Military Engagement as a Form of Neo-colonialism” (Bachelor Thesis Malmö University, Faculty of Culture and Society (KS), Department of Global Political Studies (GPS), 2024).

colonial compact” where benefits of continued association outweigh the claim for sovereignty. Scholars have seen this model of unequal power dynamics as a form of “internal colonialism” according to which the metropolitan power continues to extract resources and influence policy, not from distance, but from within the political and economic structure itself.⁴⁸

The policies of the European Union can also be seen as an extension of neo-colonial ties, specifically as regards to overseas territories of EU member states, such as the French and Dutch islands, which are part of the EU’s “Outermost Regions” (OMR) or the “Overseas Countries and Territories” (OCT). This status, although it provides access to EU funding and markets, it, also, imposes EU regulations and economic policies often not suitable for the local context. On top of that, in most cases this integration further entrenches economic dependency on the metropolitan markets and reinforces the administrative and political ties to the former colonial powers, rather than fostering independent development.⁴⁹

A clear example of a relevant neocolonial dynamic is the structure of the French Overseas Territories (Territoires d’ Outre-mer–TOM), which they have the right to elect local assemblies and maintain some administrative autonomy, but their economies are fundamentally linked to France. The application of French and European laws is translated to a local economic policy largely dictated from Paris and Brussels. This economic reliance, combined with a cultural affinity fostered through media and education, creates a strong link to the metropolis. This relationship is often viewed as a ‘trade-off’, meaning that in exchange for economic stability, social services, and political representation in France, these territories cede a significant degree of their economic and political sovereignty.⁵⁰

A more contemporary and often overlooked dimension of neocolonialism, functioning as an ‘innocent’ hidden form of exploitation, is ‘green colonialism’, the practice where environmental projects and policies, primarily initiated by developed nations of the Global North, perpetuate exploitative and unequal power dynamics in the Global South. This phenomenon is inextricably linked to neocolonialism as it employs environmental concerns as a new pretext for economic and political control. A prominent example of this paradigm is

⁴⁸ Robert Aldrich and John Connell, *The Last Colonies: The End of Empire and the Future of Overseas Territories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴⁹ András Lőrincz, "The Importance of the Outermost Regions for Strengthening EU Foreign and Regional Relations." Conference paper from the International Conference on The EU as a Global Actor, European University Institute, CVCE (2011).

⁵⁰ Robert Aldrich and John Connell, *The Last Colonies: The End of Empire and the Future of Overseas Territories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

the global push for renewable energy and electric vehicles. This transition fuels a massive demand for minerals like lithium, cobalt, and rare-earth elements, which are predominately mined in countries of the Global South. This often leads to the displacement of indigenous communities, environmental degradation, and perpetuation of resource extraction economies that almost exclusively benefit multinational corporations from the North, thereby replicating historical patterns of asymmetrical power relations.⁵¹

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, communities are forcibly evicted from their homes and farmland to make way for expanding industrial cobalt and copper mines. Similarly, the implementation of “green” initiatives, such as establishing vast conservation areas or carbon offsetting programs, can result in land grabbing and disenfranchisement of local population, effectively recreating colonial dynamics of land ownership and control. Such practices maintain a global hierarchy where the environmental costs and burdens of the ‘green’ transition are outsourced, allowing industrialized nations to sustain their high-consumption lifestyles while shifting the negative externalities to less powerful countries, predominantly in the Global South.⁵²

Last but not least, the “passport privilege” also functions as a form of soft neocolonial power exercise related to control of global circulation. The global mobility regime, largely designed by and for citizens of wealthy Western nations maintains a global hierarchy. A powerful passport from a former colonial power (e.g. the US, UK, France etc.) grants its holder visa-free access to most of the world, whereas a passport from a formerly colonized nation may only allow travel to a handful of countries, often within the same region. At the same time, the visa application process itself can be a tool of neocolonial exploitation; countries in the Global North often charge exorbitant fees to applicants from the Global South. This not only perpetuates racialized barriers, but also generates a significant revenue for the already wealthy nations, while placing a financial burden on individuals coming from developed or developing countries. On top of that, the restrictive visa policies for scholars, artists, and professionals from the Global South to travel for research, conferences, or work. This not

⁵¹ Frank Sejersen, "Green colonialism." Environmental Humanities Glossary. University of Copenhagen (Department of Arts and Cultural Studies). June 29, 2025. Accessed October 8, 2025. <https://artsandculturalstudies.ku.dk/research/art-and-earth/environmental-humanities-glossary/green-colonialism/>.

⁵² Amnesty International. "Energy Transition." Amnesty International. Accessed September 12, 2025. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/climate-change/energy-transition/>.

only limits their personal opportunities, but also stifles the free exchange of ideas, keeping knowledge production and academic discourse centered in the Global North.⁵³

⁵³ Sam Cranston, 2023. "Infrastructures of Migration and the Ordering of Privilege in Global Mobility." *Migration Studies* 11, no. 2: 330-352. Accessed October 8, 2025. <https://academic.oup.com/migration/article/11/2/330/7043158>.

1.2 The Link between Neocolonialism and the Environment

Neocolonialism, as a concept which describes the continuation of economic and political control over former colonies, developing countries, or places with a sui generis status of autonomy (like the French overseas territories), is deeply intertwined with environmental degradation. By shifting the focus from direct rule to more insidious mechanisms of control, this form of domination has a profound and often devastating impact on the environment of the Global South. More specifically, the relationship between neocolonialism and the environment is characterized by the continuation of colonial-era patterns of exploitation, where natural resources ‘change hands’ and environmental burdens are disproportionately shifted to less powerful nations. This dynamic manifests in various forms, from the extraction of raw materials to the export of waste and the development of exploitative tourist models, all of which contribute to ecological damage, biodiversity loss, climate injustice, and in worst cases forced displacement.

Resource Extraction and Land Exploitation

First and foremost, one of the most significant ways neocolonialism drives environmental decline is through the relentless pursuit of resource extraction and land exploitation; Multinational corporations from the Global North often operate in the global South under favorable conditions, which are most of the times facilitated by local elites or through debt-for-nature swaps that benefit foreign interests, leading to large-scale mining, logging, and monoculture agriculture. The vast areas of Amazon rainforest being cleared for logging and livestock breeding to supply markets in the Global North is a prominent example of this ongoing cycle of resource extraction.⁵⁴ But besides Amazon, there are also numerous instances of exploitative practices, such as the promotion of single-commodity exports, like coffee in Latin America⁵⁵, or the exploitation of minerals like cobalt and coltan in the

⁵⁴ Charles Barber, “Organized Crime in The Amazon: A Growing Threat to the World’s Greatest Tropical Rainforest”, World Resources Institute (July 2025). <https://www.wri.org/insights/nature-crime-amazon-deforestation>

⁵⁵ "Πικρό μείγμα: Η συγκλονιστική πραγματικότητα πίσω από τον καφέ στη Λατινική Αμερική." Ethos & Empathy (April 24, 2018). Accessed October 8, 2025. <https://ethosandempathy.org/2018/04/25/pikro-migma-i-siglonistiki-pragmatikotita-piso-apo-ton-kafe/>

Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has led to extensive deforestation and soil erosion.⁵⁶

Nigeria's oil extraction is another well-known instance of resource exploitation. Shell, among other multinational corporations, has operated in the Niger Delta region for decades. This extensive oil extraction has resulted in thousands of spills, which have contaminated water sources, destroyed agriculture and fisheries, and adversely affected the health of local communities. According to a report by Amnesty International and the Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development (CEHRD), the pollution persists, with companies failing to effectively clean up the affected areas.⁵⁷

A compelling example of the promotion of specific commodity crops for export, which in turns create monocultures, destroys biodiversity, and undermines local food security, is the palm oil production in Southeast Asia. The expansion of palm oil plantations in Indonesia has led to the deforestation of tropical rainforests, which are habitats for endangered species, such as the orangutan. But it is not only the animals that are in jeopardy due to operation of companies, which benefit from the low land prices and a lack of stringent regulations, but also the people (especially local farmers), who are often enforced to displacement. Cases like the aforementioned prove that the consequences of this kind of practices do not stop to damage of natural habitats and clearing of biodiverse forests, but exceed to displacement of indigenous populations, who are the stewards of these lands and threatening of countless species with extinction.⁵⁸

Transferring to overseas territories, a case in point regarding their exploitation by the metropolitan motherland is that of New Caledonia. Nickel mining in New Caledonia, an overseas territory of France, has severe environmental consequences, since nickel mining companies, such as Eramet, cause extensive destruction of forests and soil, leading to erosion and water pollution with heavy metals. This pollution affects the coral reefs, which are part of UNESCO's World Heritage site, and destroys the traditional food sources of the indigenous

⁵⁶ Amnesty International, "This is what we die for: Human rights abuses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo power the global trade in cobalt." (19 January 2016). Accessed October 8, 2025. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr62/3183/2016/en/>.

⁵⁷ Amnesty International, "No clean up, no justice: Shell's oil pollution in the Niger Delta", Amnesty International Ltd (2020).

⁵⁸ Ely Susanto, Nanik Lestari, Maharano Hapsari and Krisdiyatri, "Driving Factors of Deforestation In Indonesia: A Case of Central Kalimantan", *Journal of Government and Politics* 9(4), (2018).

Kanak population. However, these environmental impacts, besides considered as the price of economic development, are often overlooked by the central government in Paris.⁵⁹

Another overseas territory affected by the neocolonial practices of its mother-metropolis, France, is French Guiana. The Guiana Space Centre is a prime example. While its operation boosts the economies of France and Europe, its construction and operation have significant environmental impacts; Rocket launches release chemicals into the atmosphere, a fact that contrasts with ESA's (European Space Agency) claims that effects are limited. Furthermore, the construction of the Centre and the subsequent urban development lead to deforestation and habitat destruction in the region –which is rich in biodiversity- leaving the local communities marginalized by decisions made by the metropolis.⁶⁰

The Global Waste Trade

Another example of neocolonial practices, that contribute to environmental degradation, is the 'exportation' of pollution and hazardous waste to developing nations, often referred to as "waste colonialism". In this case, wealthier nations export vast quantities of their waste, including hazardous electronic waste (e-waste) and plastic to countries of the Global South, under the pretense of recycling. This happens as a consequence of less stringent environmental regulations and weaker enforcement mechanisms, which make these countries attractive for industries that produce significant amounts of pollution. For instance, the textile industry, dominated by companies from the global North, often outsources its most polluting processes to countries in South and Southeast Asia. The untreated discharge of chemical dyes and other toxins into local rivers and water sources has devastating effects on local ecosystems and public health.⁶¹

Similarly, the illegal dumping of electronic waste from the global North in places like Ghana and Nigeria, the so called 'e-waste dumping', shifts the environmental and health burden of the Global North's consumer culture onto countries that lack the infrastructure to manage it

⁵⁹ Sydney Black, "Nickel and Dimed: The Green Metal Gamble in New Caledonia", Harvard International Review (May 2024). <https://hir.harvard.edu/nickel-and-dimed-the-green-metal-gamble-in-new-caledonia/>

⁶⁰ Luca del Monte & Luigi Scatteia, "A socio-economic impact assessment of the European launcher sector," *Acta Astronautica*, 137 (2017): 482-489.

⁶¹ Alice Newton, "New Research on Electronic Waste Reveals a Growing Environmental Problem Exported to Developing Countries." Future Earth, June 2, 2021. Accessed June 30, 2025. <https://futureearth.org/2021/06/02/new-research-on-electronic-waste-reveals-a-growing-environmental-problem-exported-to-developing-countries/>.

safely, perpetuating a form of environmental injustice.⁶² Throughout the years, places like the Agbogbloshie, have become notorious for receiving discarded electronics from Europe and North America. This area in Ghana is one of the world's largest electronic dumpsites. Tons of old computers, mobile phones, and other devices from the Global North end up there. According to a report by the United Nations Environment Programme, the local populations, including children, burn the waste to recover metals, exposing themselves to highly toxic substances, such as lead, mercury, and cadmium. The informal and unregulated processing of this waste by local communities –often involving burning- releases highly toxic fumes and heavy metals into the soil, air, and water, leading to severe public health crises and long-term ecological damage and, at the same time, externalizing the environmental costs of consumption by placing the burden of cleanup and health risks on the most vulnerable populations.⁶³

Tourism

While tourism industry is often promoted as a source of economic development, it can also be a vehicle for neocolonial exploitation and environmental degradation. This occurs when foreign corporations and investors control the tourist infrastructure, from hotels and airlines to tour operations, with little benefit remaining for local communities.⁶⁴

In popular tourist destinations, visitors' demands place immense strain on local resources. For instance, in Greek islands and Hawaii, large-scale resorts consume vast amounts of water and electricity at the expense of local communities who face water restrictions during droughts. Tourism development can also lead to the destruction of natural habitats, such as coral reefs, through pollution and coastal development. This model of tourism commodifies local lands and cultures, concentrating profits in hands of external actors while leaving the 'host country' environmentally damaged and economically dependent.⁶⁵

⁶² Andzelika Serwatka, "The Global Waste Trade: Unveiling Waste Colonialism in Southeast Asia", Boym Institute, published 2024.

<https://instytutboyma.org/en/the-global-waste-trade-unveiling-waste-colonialism-in-southeast-asia/>

⁶³ Deepti Singh, "Unveiling the E-Waste Management Scenario at Agbogbloshie, Ghana." (Master's thesis, University of Padova, 2024): 12-25.

⁶⁴ Paige Edwards, "Re-Imagine Paradise: The Impacts of the Illegal Annexation of Hawai'i & Tourism as a Neocolonial Enterprise." *SMU Journal of Undergraduate Research* 9, no. 1 (2025): 5-40.

⁶⁵ Li Cohen, "Hawaii is 'on the verge of a greater catastrophe,' locals say: Water crisis worsened by tourism and contamination." CBS News (April 10, 2024). Accessed October 8, 2025.
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hawaii-water-crisis-climate-change/>.

Similar examples of unequal relations are particularly evident in numerous overseas territories that serve as resort appendages of Global North hinterlands. For instance, the British Virgin Islands and Turks and Caicos in the Caribbean are suffering from the consequences of neocolonialism, having been transformed into tourist havens. The massive influx of tourists leads to increased pressure on natural resources; the construction of hotels and infrastructure destroys coastal areas, mangrove forests, and wetlands; the waves and landscapes are sold as commercial products; water consumption and waste production increase dramatically, burdening the islands already vulnerable ecosystems; and activities, like boating and diving can cause irreparable damage to coral reefs.⁶⁶

Climate change

Furthermore, given that climate change is primarily driven by the industrial activities of wealthy nations and disproportionately affects developing countries that are less prepared to handle the repercussions, can be seen as an outcome of neocolonial practices that harm the environment and burden the Global South. In a significant acknowledgement of this reality, the ‘Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’ (IPCC) included the term “colonialism” in its 2022 report for the first time in over three decades. This inclusion signals a growing recognition among climate scientists that colonial legacy remains both a historical factor and a contemporary catalyst for the climate crisis.⁶⁷

Kenya’s water shortage and drought serve as a powerful illustration. Like many other African countries, Kenya experiences frequent and prolonged droughts, which threaten its food security and lead to forced migration. Ironically, Kenya’s contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions is minimal, yet the effects of climate change in this part of the world are devastating.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Wendy Sealy, “From Colonialism To Transnationalism: The Neo-Colonial Structure Of Caribbean Tourism”, *Journal On Tourism & Sustainability* Volume 1 Issue 2 (2018).

⁶⁷ Nikhil Nityanand Bhandikeri, “Rethinking Environmental Degradation: The Colonial Legacy and Modern Challenges.”, University of Sheffield School of Geography and Planning (2024).

⁶⁸ IPCC, “*Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*”, the Working Group II contribution (2022.)

1.3 A Cross-Cultural Tapestry of Ripples: Surf Culture, Neocolonialism, and Environmental Encounters

This section alone sees the author move away from the third-person narrative and transition into a first-person voice, a necessity dictated by the autoethnographic methodology employed. The section is born from years of deep personal engagement with local communities and foreign surfers in some of the world's most renowned surfing havens, as well as in places where the existence of surfing communities might be unexpected: Indonesia, Madeira, Portugal's mainland, Morocco and the Netherlands (where the North Sea surfers meet). Each place, with its own distinctive identity and history, demonstrates how over the years, the surfing community has at times inadvertently served as precursor to neocolonial practices, as seen in Indonesia, and at other times actively campaigned for environmental protection, as was the case in the Madeira Islands. Central to the narrative is the surf culture's complex entanglement with neocolonialism and environmental concerns, which sometimes intersect and other times stand alone. My research is not merely an academic exercise; it is a culmination of countless conversations, shared meals, and firsthand experiences alongside the individuals who call the Ocean "home", both locals and travelers. Through these enduring personal connections, I've gained an intimate understanding of the unique interplay between global surf culture and the ordinary life of local populations. At the end of almost every trip, the same thoughts arose: "Is there a discrepancy between the self-identified environmental awareness and social activism of surfers, and their actual lifestyles?" This chapter aims to merge these trends, along with records derived from cinema and literature, offering insights gleaned directly from the heart of these vibrant communities where surfers from all around the globe converge to experience the thrill of monumental Ocean waves.

Den Haag, the COVID years

The beginning of the lockdown found me on the shore of Scheveningen, on a vast coastline covered by dense fog that -despite being a far cry from the commercialized stereotypical imagery (palm-fringed, sun-drenched beaches with crystalline azure waters, vibrant sunsets, and an array of brightly colored floral swimwear) promoted by the surf industry- was plenty of longboards and people in thick 6/5 mm wetsuits, hoods, boots, and gloves, engrossed in discussions of wave forecasts and swell charts. In this setting, where the lockdowns, curfews,

and social distancing measures of the city seemed to dissolve on the water's edge, I was first introduced to the surfing practice and philosophy of the North Sea surfers (who share many common characteristics with their Nordic counterparts). This unexpected encounter, initiated an epistemological shift in my understanding of surfing culture.

«One might think we are here because, you know, with the lockdown, we've got nothing better to do...but actually, all this COVID stuff just give us more time with the sea», a Dutch surfer once told me. "I don't miss the sunny coastlines. The cold-water experience is overwhelming».

Conceptualizing 'surfing' as a discrete culture, defined by its own styling conventions (in fashion, the 'surf style' translates into lightweight, simple, and functional clothing –oversized boardshorts, t-shirts, hoodies, sweatshirts, and hats- with an emphasis on colors inspired by nature and the ocean), music ('surf music', with its echoing electric sounds, is exemplified by bands such as 'The Beach Boys' and 'Jan and Dean', whose lyrics characteristically celebrate themes of sunshine, the ocean, and a carefree lifestyle, solidifying the genre's association with an idealized version of coastal leisure and youth culture), specialized terminology (with words like 'gnarly', 'kook', 'shoobie'⁶⁹, and 'wipe out'), and distinct lifestyle (a more unhurried tempo of life, accompanied by a profound connection to the natural world), then it follows that North Sea and Nordic surfers constitute a subculture -shaped by the imperatives of a cold-water environment- within this broader cultural framework.

⁶⁹ Although the word 'shoobie' is used by many surfers to refer to tourists who wear socks with their flip-flops or shoes on the beach, the term already existed as slang –at least in NJ. Back in the day, tourists used to carry their lunches in old shoe boxes at the beach, hence the term 'shoobie'.
https://allthetropes.org/wiki/Rocket_Power



Figure 3: November 26, 2020. Scheveningen Beach. Surfers getting ready to catch the first morning wave. (photo taken by the author).

As a Dutch surfer with ties to the Nordic surfing community told me during a brief chat on the beach: *«If you're not from around here, you'd probably never decide to go surfing in the North Sea or the Baltic. Why would you do that? It seems kind of crazy. I'm not sure if it's because of the dominant narrative: boards, mojitos, tropical beaches...I think when people think of surfing, they automatically picture more tropical destinations...Personally, I think of Hawaii. But still, we are living proof that you don't need sun and palm trees to go surfing».*

Surfing in the North Sea is a profoundly spiritual endeavor, bearing a striking resemblance to the ritualistic customs of the ancient Polynesians, who pioneered this practice. In the cold waters of European north, the 'ritual' is connected to the preparation, which goes beyond just waxing a surfboard. It extends to the attire, that resembles a kind of modern armor, a man-made extension of the body's will to withstand the low temperatures. Subsequent to the ritualistic preparation, a state of 'osmosis' with the elements of a fragile and cold ecosystem ensues, wherein the natural elements are not limited to heavy waves, but also encompass freezing temperatures, wind, an infrequent, choppy swell, and frequently extreme weather conditions such as thick fog or even snow. In this case, the quality of a surfing session is fundamentally contingent not upon the surfer's individual skills, but upon the harmonious interplay of natural forces.

A Nordic surfer described the experience of the cold sea on her instagram account as follows: *«The cold strips everything away. The ego, the worries, all the noise. What is left is just you and the water».*

A common sight of surfers with a board rack on their bicycle, cycling to the beach for a session, in coastal communities like Scheveningen offers a compelling case study of the symbiotic relationship between an integrated, daily nature of the practice and a profound ecological consciousness, reflecting a localized and sustainable approach to the sport.

«Because of the unique landscape and weather conditions, we're often forced to travel long distances by car. Lately, we've been trying to cut back on that. The same goes for flying», told me a Dutch surfer, while analyzing his efforts to reduce individual carbon footprints. *«Additionally, the thick neoprene wetsuits we use are made from materials that are harmful for the environment. I strongly believe that if we take action as (surfing) community, we will be able to find alternatives in the future...maybe wetsuits made from recycled materials».*

This naturalistic and sustainable orientation is not without a historical precedent in the development of surfing culture in Northern Europe. The history of the North Sea and Nordic surfing is not a tale of colonial exploration. Surfing as a practice brought from individuals who traveled to France, Australia and the US, and saw the potential in their home waters. The development of spots like Klitmøller in Danmark, known as “Cold Hawaii”, was not the result of tourism board's marketing campaign, but the organic growth of a dedicated local community. This grassroots origin story reinforces the notion that the culture of surfing in the communities surrounding the Baltic and North Sea was an internal creation, rather than an external imposition, as was the case in places of the Global South (e.g. Indonesia).

«It's really just a small community of locals here (referring to surfers). If you are a surfer in The Hague, I guess you know all the surfers in the Netherlands. There is no such thing as surf tourism here and the government isn't really pushing for any of this, either. I mean, there would be opportunities, especially since being connected with nature is, like, a huge trend lately even in countries with no nature –all that weird stuff came out of the lockdowns...But, it's just different here!», told me a Dutch surfer.

The development of a surfing (sub)culture in Northern Europe, within a localized context, solidified an approach that, along with the intense environmental advocacy inherent to the practice, is also characterized by the absence of “wave-commercialization” practices

observed in countries with lower standards of living and weaker economies. This distinct surf community constitutes a localized, environmentally educated, grassroots movement, where the surfers are residents of the place, and their connection with the ocean is not exploitative, but rather one of intimacy and coexistence.



However, while my personal engagement with Northern European surfing communities suggested a high degree of environmental awareness, a study published on September 16, 2021, presented a contradictory finding. Based on quantitative data (of 251 surfers in Norway), as well as qualitative ones (six interviews), the research reveals a significant incompatibility between their stated environmental consciousness and their actual lifestyle, which is characterized by frequent air travels to surfing destinations and substantial consumption of surf equipment.⁷⁰

The serendipitous encounter with a Dutch surfer during the summer of 2025 served as a catalyst for engaging more deeply with this study's findings, which cast serious doubt on the environmental ethics and sustainability awareness of surfers hailing from Northern European nations. This interaction prompted a comprehensive reassessment of my existing perspectives.

⁷⁰ Tommy Langseth and Adam Vyff, "Cultural Dissonance: Surfers' Environmental Attitudes and Actions", *Frontier in Sports and Active Living Section The History, Culture and Sociology of Sports* Volume 3 (2021).



Figure 4: A Dutch surfer photographed by the author (with mobile phone) in Bali. Summer of 2025.

The surfer in *Figure 4* candidly discussed with me the overall expenses incurred during his trip, highlighting that the travel costs alone for a surfer and their board from the Netherlands to Indonesia range between 850 and 1300 euros. This financial burden notably surpasses the average monthly income of a local Indonesian resident, which stands at approximately 12,500,000 Indonesian Rupiah –or roughly 790 euros according to current exchange rates. The conversation particularly emphasized the complexities associated with transporting a shortboard on a low-cost airline from the Netherlands to Bali, where surfboards are classified as checked luggage and are subject to strict size and weight restrictions. Airlines typically limit surfboard length to a maximum of 230 cm, posing challenges for longboarders whose boards often exceed this length, and carry-on transport options are unfeasible due to safety regulations. Furthermore, some budget carriers may require oversized boards to be shipped as cargo, further escalating both the cost and environmental impact of such surf trips.

Madeira, February 2023

‘Basso Profundo’ is the ninth chapter of the novel “Barbarian Days: A surfing Life” by William Finnegan. In this chapter, W. Finnegan –after years of travelling to catch waves all around the world– is now a 40 year-old married man that finds himself in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean –in the Madeira Islands.

“We made our first trip in November, 1994. Madeira was a shock to the senses –sheer green coasts, tiny cliff-hugging roads, Portuguese peasants studying our boards suspiciously, waves surging heavily out of deep ocean. [...] There didn’t seem to be any other surfers around”⁷¹.

The evocative power of this passage inspired me to travel to Madeira in the fall of 2023. On February 16th, I was already on the north coast, off a village called Ponta Delgada, at a small hostel owned by Italians.

However, I had overlooked a particularly significant factor; Finnegan’s novel published in 2015, chronicling the period of 1994-2003, back when Ponta Delgada was a long-hand pointbreak on the north coast of Madeira. Before 2003 the wave was a perfect freight-train barrel that could hold billows of ten feet or more, but by the time I landed on the island, a concrete pier was already built to protect an empty swimming pool, changing largely the shape of the wave, which had been depicted as unique by Finnegan.

⁷¹ William Finnegan, *Barbarian Days, A Surfing Life*, (US: Penguin Press, 2015), 393-396.



Figure 5: Ponta Delgada around the late 1990s, before the construction. Photo: Will Henry.



Figure 6: Ponta Delgada. Instead of peeling all the way through, the wave crashes into the pier after about the first 20 meters. Photo: Al Mackinnon.

The example of Ponta Delgada is not the traditional case. In most instances throughout the modern history of surfing, one can observe a local community adapting to the demands of surf tourism. In this particular case, circumstances differed considerably. The government that approved the plans (and similar sanctions such as constructions along the Portuguese coastline) did not consider surf tourism at all (perhaps due to its limited presence in Madeira). Conversely, the needs and interests of surfers were entirely circumvented. It was, in fact, the surfers themselves who actively campaigned to restore this pristine natural coastline. A Portuguese movement—the ‘Salvem O Surf’⁷² including ‘Madeira Nucleus’, a specific group within the movement, which is focused on the island of Madeira—was set up, in response to similar incidents, to preserve surf spots and address the “renaturalization of the coastlines that have been abused”.

The surfing history of Madeira has documented as a short one. Gibus de Soultrait, a French journalist and big-wave surfer, was the first person to ride Jardim do Mar in 1977, reporting how the people of Jardim had never seen or heard of surfing before: “When I stood up on my wave, they finally discovered what surfing meant.” Gibus treasures the memory of that first trip: “The experience I shared with the people of Jardim do Mar in 1977 will always remain with me as a lifelong souvenir. For me, Madeira was a dream come true.”

In the following years, only a negligible number of surfers visited the area. They all kept the secret well hidden for themselves. Nearly everyone was still largely unaware that there were any waves on Madeira, until, in 1994, an article came out in *Surfer Magazine* shook the global surfing community. Images of Ross Williams and Evan Slater surfing massive, crystal waves on an Atlantic island were displayed. According to the article, the island was home to what was perhaps the world's best big-wave pointbreak.

After reading the piece, Will Henry, a photographer and surfer from California, traveled to Madeira in 1995 describing Jardim do Mar as “a village that was made to be put on postcards.” The same year, Portuguese surfer and journalist João Valente visited Madeira for an extended trip which himself later called “the highlight of my life as a surfer”.

⁷² According to the organization’s official presentation on its website, ‘Salvem O Surf’ (SOS) is an NGO founded in 2002 with the aim of protecting and preserving the Portuguese coastline by lobbying decision-makers involved in coastal construction projects. <https://sossalvemosurf04.wixsite.com/salvemosurf>

In February 2023, Madeira's coastline, once celebrated in novels and surfing magazines as a natural wonder, resembled a construction site. This dramatic landscape alteration was the result of a coastal engineering initiative launched by the Madeiran government in the early 2000s. By the completion of this initiative, several world-class surf breaks had been entirely destroyed or severely damaged.⁷³

«In our modern history, we never had to deal with colonizers. We were the colonizers ourselves!» my Portuguese surfer friend and now inactive member of 'Salvem O Surf' told me laughing, *«However, we have to deal with a totally disrespectful government. O INIMIGO É ELES (the enemy is them)!»*



Figure 7: Lugar de Baixo around 2003, in the middle of the building program. Photo: Will Henry. (The image depicts a surfer “washed ashore” amidst a construction site –comment by the author)

⁷³ Tony Butt, “Reviving a Once-Exploited Surf Spot in Madeira”, Patagonia, 1 June 2017. https://eu.patagonia.com/gr/en/stories/madeira-bringing-back-the-dream/story-31825.html?srsId=AfmBOopV1p2TfCDIOMj18J3QVG9qt_NGTtahLswlxlXyPKJ65KNvy75

Nazaré, March 2023

Leaving the captivating Madeira behind, my journey continued to mainland Portugal. Just like autumn yielded to spring, Ponta Delgada faded into distance as I headed for my next destination, Nazaré –a place singularly renowned for a unique feat of nature: the world’s largest wave.



Figure 8: Nazaré, March 16, 2023. Captured by the author with a Lomography camera

Nazaré is located somewhere central on the Portuguese Atlantic-facing coastline. The northern shore of Nazaré, Praia do Norte, was a place that no one visited, especially the villagers, who for hundreds of years had made their living from fishing. The inhabitants of Nazaré had learned to respect the big wave, which they call "Big Mama"; it could not be otherwise. In this particular spot on the globe, the waves are "different" due to a peculiarity of nature⁷⁴: heavier, more powerful, and more unpredictable than anywhere else on the planet. A few surfers were aware of Nazaré and its waves, but they had an obstacle to face: They did not know how to ride them.

Everything changed in the '90s when jet skis began to be used in Hawaii for approaching big waves. In 2010, a surfer from Hawaii, now 57-year-old Garrett McNamara, heard about Nazaré and decided to see it for himself. The following year, he surfed a 23.77 meter wave, breaking the world record and earning a spot in the Guinness Book of World Records.⁷⁵ Ever

⁷⁴ The area where Nazaré is located was geologically formed approximately 150 million years ago, during the Jurassic period. It was at this time that the small geological "anomaly" that makes it so unique was created: large waves are formed when water abruptly moves from a very deep point to a very shallow one. This is why most of them are found on islands like Hawaii and Tahiti.

⁷⁵ "Garrett McNamara breaks world record", Drift Europe (November 2011). <https://www.driftsurfing.eu/index.php/archives/8689.html>

since November 1, 2011, Praia do Norte became a global spectacle. Surfers began flocking to the village, with an increasing number attempting to break the world record. In 2013, Brazilian surfer Maya Gabeira nearly drowned under a 22-meter wave.⁷⁶ Australian champion Ross Clarke-Jones was thrown onto the rocks and only survived by managing to climb a 30-meter vertical cliff before the next wave hit.⁷⁷ In 2017, the Brazilian Rodrigo Koxa raised the record to 24.38 meters⁷⁸, while on October 29, 2020, Portuguese surfer António Laureano broke the record for the tallest wave ever "tamed" by a human in Nazaré. The wave was 30.9 meters high and was seen and photographed by NASA's Landsat 8 satellite.⁷⁹ (Laureano's record was not recognized, as the wave was not officially measured by the relevant federations).

«It's a surfing Disneyland here...These waves are not for cooks», told me the Portuguese surf instructor who took me to the spot.

What it is extremely extraordinary about this wave is that places where such waves break are typically in the middle of nowhere, amidst of one ocean or another. However, when in Nazaré, one can have vacation, swim at the beach just a few dozen meters away, eat some “francesinhas”, and then—even if just visually—confront the power and majesty of nature.

«It's not just a simple wave. It's The Wave. If you want to surf go to Matosinhos, Ericeira, Cascais...But if you really want a thrilling natural experience stay here.» (personal communication with a Greek surfer during the author's travel in Nazaré)

At the edge of Nazaré, on top of a cliff, stands the old fort of São Miguel Arcanjo, built in 1577, and a lighthouse from which visitors can see the surfers and the waves. The Cliffside fort, which is under the jurisdiction of the Portuguese Ministry of Defense, opened to the public in 2014 and received 40,000 visitors that year. In 2019, that number rose to 335,000.⁸⁰ Two years later, major fast-food chains, specifically McDonald's and Burger King, commenced operations on June 17 and September 30, respectively.

⁷⁶ Derek Rielly, “An Interview With Maya Gabeira About Drowning At Nazaré”, STAB (Accessed on September 20, 2025). <https://stabmag.com/news/an-interview-with-maya-gabeira-about-drowning-at-nazare/>

⁷⁷ Marcus Sanders, “Watch: Ross Clarke-Jones Gets Rocked at Nazare”, Surflife 4 (February 2018). <https://www.surflife.com/surf-news/watch-ross-clarke-jones-gets-rocked-nazare/19748>

⁷⁸ “Brazilian surfer Rodrigo Koxa breaks wave world record - BBC News”, BBC News, Director Unknown. Youtube Video, 00:41 (May 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdLOiZugeqA>

⁷⁹ “Monster Waves of Nazaré”, Earth Observatory (February 2022). <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/149486/monster-waves-of-nazare>

⁸⁰ Carla Mauricio, “Securing a tourism future for the Town and County of Nazareth”, TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY- DESTINATION SUSTAINABLE STORIES (2021).

As evidenced, life did not change only for the surfers who discovered the potential of this tremendous wave, but also for the local community itself. The area began to attract the interest of tourists, who visited to watch the large waves and the surfers amidst them. In the modern history of Nazaré, one can observe a small fishing village dramatically transformed in almost a decade into a tourist hub, with surfing being the driving force behind this change.

«It's silly to go back in time and think, “why did Nazaré change?”. Nazaré evolved, it managed to keep up with the times...So why should we still be talking about fishermen in the 20th century?» (personal communication with a Portuguese friend, Anonymous)

In 1960, it was estimated that fishing was the occupation of 54% of the active population. In 2011, only 4.6% of the employed population had their occupation as fishing or agriculture in Nazaré, while 76.1% worked in trade and services.⁸¹ The current image of the village, which openly invites the surf industry, is a sharp contrast to its former identity as a community centered on fishing.



Until few years prior to the rise of big-wave surfing, the closest this village had come to public recognition was through photographs from a visit by Stanley Kubrick. The world-renowned director had been to Nazaré and captured the daily life of the fishing community that lives by the Wave.

⁸¹ Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias. 2016. "Riding the Nazaré Wave: linear version." YouTube video, 15:27. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/2I6ei9JVLJ0?si=k4XwQzBKcPjeiWpa>



*Figure 9: Photograph by Kubrick Stanley, 1948.*⁸²

The case of Nazaré illustrates how the discovery and commodification of a natural phenomenon can reshape a community. The advent of big-wave surfing tourism, catalyzed by foreign surfers like Garrett McNamara breaking world records, transformed a fishing village into a global spectacle and tourist hotspot. While Portugal is located in the global North, one can observe neocolonial dynamics intersecting with surf industry and local ecosystems even here. Nazaré's surge, largely driven by foreign capital and media attention, led to economic and social shifts away from traditional fishing toward tourism, service industries, and surf related businesses. At the same time, the travel required for surfers and spectators to get to Nazaré, often by air, contributes to a high carbon footprint, contradicting the purported admiration and respect for nature by those who travel to see the giant wave up close.

⁸² "Living with the waves: In a village in Portugal, nature and people surpass themselves", CNN Greece (May 2022). <https://www.cnn.gr/style/psychagogia/story/312719/zontas-me-ta-kymata-s-ena-xorio-tis-portogalias-fysi-kai-anthropoi-xepernoyn-toys-eaytoys-toys>

Imsouane, November 2024

The reveal of Imsouane was an unexpected gift during my annual visit to Morocco, bestowed by a local taxi driver. My usual itinerary centered on Essaouira and Tanghazout, established serf meccas whose crowded line-ups had, over time, diminished their charm. A quest for solitude and untapped waves became paramount.

The local's counsel pointed me toward Imsouane, touting it as the ascendant surfing Eden. Yet, upon arrival, the actual landscape was a striking paradox: what I encountered resembled more a vast construction site than a quiet place.

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It all started in 1966, when Bruce Brown's film "The Endless Summer" showcased pristine African waves to the world, ushering in a brand new era.⁸³ Despite Africa's indigenous wave-riding heritage, the modern sport of surfing largely arrived via Western influence in the 20th century. By the mid-20th century, surfing was taking hold in diverse parts of Africa, introduced mainly by Western travellers and colonial residents.⁸⁴

⁸³ Bruce Brown, director. *The Endless Summer*. Bruce Brown Films, 1966. (1 hr., 35 min).

⁸⁴ "History Of Surfing In Morocco And Africa," Waverick (March 26, 2025). Accessed October 9, 2025, <https://www.waverick.com/articles/morocco/history-of-surfing-in-morocco-and-africa/>.

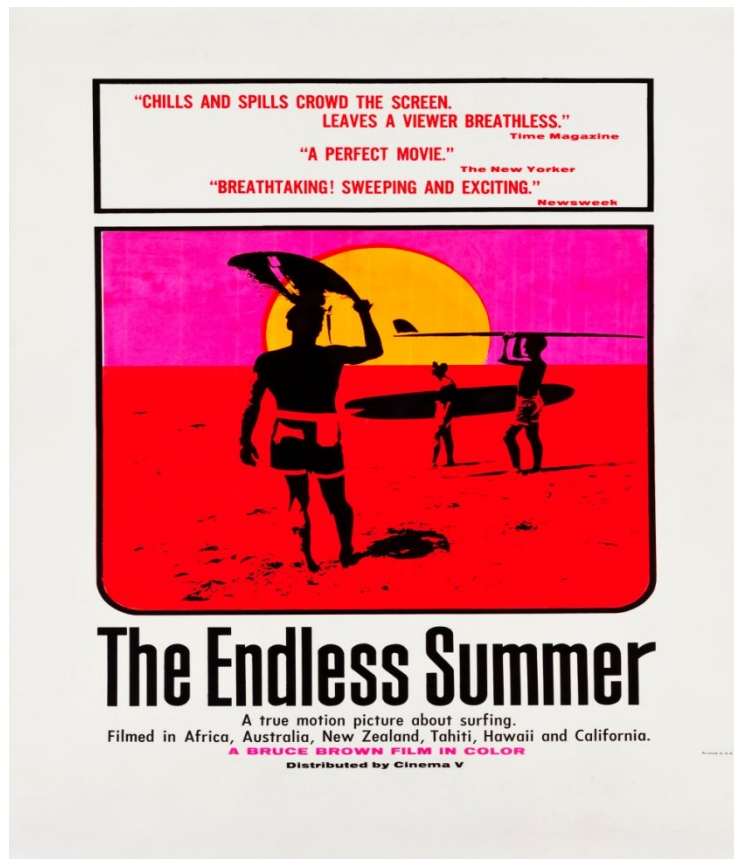


Figure 10: Poster for Bruce brown's The Endless Summer (1966)

Morocco's surf history exemplifies the broader African experience: ancient wave-riding was not documented here, but modern surfing took root mid-20th century thanks to foreign influence. The first modern surfers in Morocco were likely American servicemen stationed at the Kenitra military base in the early 1960s. These surfers sparked Morocco's surfing revolution.⁸⁵ Beyond the lure of cheap "*Atay B' Nana*"⁸⁶, Morocco also offered inexpensive, high-quality waves comparable to other budget destinations. Consequently, American servicemen were soon succeeded by European travelers. In this way, Moroccan coastline served a similar function for European surfers as Indonesian islands did for their Australian counterparts.

The surfing season in Morocco lasts from October to March. The village of Imsouane represents the latest frontier in Morocco's surfing-driven development. Originally a tranquil

⁸⁵ Giacomo Abrusci, "Surfing Morocco's Waves and Embracing its Rich Traditions." *SEVENSEAS Travel Magazine* (Issue 103), December 2023. Accessed October 9, 2025. <https://sevensseasmedia.org/surfing-moroccos-waves-and-embracing-its-rich-traditions>

⁸⁶ The traditional Moroccan mint tea.

fishing community located 55 miles north of Agadir and 60 miles south of Essaouira, the name Imsouane translates to "the drinking mouth," referencing the river-fed bay that absorbs the swell from the Atlantic Ocean. Historically, small huts were constructed into the rocky cliffs by Berber fishing families, reflecting the village's traditional livelihood. What started off as a hippie destination in the sixties has now transformed into the main winter destination for most European surfers.⁸⁷

Over recent decades, Imsouane has attracted a global community of surfers drawn by its unique coastal geography and wave patterns. Surfing activity in Imsouane began to increase significantly approximately twenty-five years ago, although limited infrastructure—in particular, the absence of electricity and running water—confined early surfers primarily to hardy campers. Nevertheless, the wave's accessibility and surf-friendly characteristics ensured that the location gradually gained attention beyond local knowledge. Throughout the past decade, the town has undergone substantial transformation, coinciding with the wave's rise to international prominence within the global surfing community. Consequently, numerous surf schools, camps, and homestay accommodations have emerged to accommodate the growing demand.⁸⁸

Morocco's surf industry is now one of the largest in Africa. Still, compared to global giants, Morocco's surf economy is small. For perspective, the global surfing industry is valued around \$4–5 billion USD⁸⁹, and the surf tourism market around \$50–65 billion per year (pre-pandemic)⁹⁰. Morocco's share of that is modest but growing. With major hotel chains opening surf resorts (e.g. Hilton in Taghazout) and airlines adding direct routes to surf zones.⁹¹ In 2023, the regional government announced exploitation initiatives as a means to more aggressively enter the global surf industry and claim a competitive spot among premier surfing destinations. However, governmental plans to dredge the bay met with opposition

⁸⁷ "Morocco: Surfers and Artists against Insta-Gentrification," YouTube video, ARTE.tv Culture February 1, 2024, 10:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwxfZFSS9eQ>.

⁸⁸ Ben Mondy, "Local Homes Threatened in Town at Leading Edge of Morocco's Surf-Inspired Development." *The Inertia*, January 19, 2024. Accessed October 9, 2025. <https://www.theinertia.com/surf/local-homes-threatened-morocco-development/>.

⁸⁹ Statista, "Surfing- statistics and facts," Accessed October 10, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/topics/9833/surfing/>.

⁹⁰ Leon Mach and Jess Ponting, "Establishing a pre-COVID-19 baseline for surf tourism: Trip expenditure and attitudes, behaviors and willingness to pay for sustainability," *Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights* 3, no. 1 (May 2022). Accessed October 10, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annale.2021.100011>

⁹¹ "History Of Surfing In Morocco And Africa," *Waverick*, March 26, 2025, accessed October 9, 2025, <https://www.waverick.com/articles/morocco/history-of-surfing-in-morocco-and-africa/>

from the local surfing community, while studies from the same year estimated that over 100,000 surfers arrive annually in Imsouane.⁹²

The increasing influx of board-carrying visitors has clearly created a pressing need for expanded infrastructure, particularly in terms of accommodation facilities. However, the primary concern lies not only in the growth itself but in the manner in which this development is being executed. As the demand from surfers has exceeded the available supply, large corporations supported by the government have moved decisively to bridge this gap, raising concerns about the scale and impact of such interventions on the local community and environment.⁹³

«I'm not against big projects, but I really feel like we gotta save and keep a few special places that we have along the coast authentic, cultural, charm(ing) villages,» Moroccan CT surfer Ramzi Boukhiam posted on Instagram.

Opponents of the recent development highlight the example of Tifnit, another Moroccan fishing-turned-surfing village, where bulldozers rapidly demolished residents' homes and businesses with minimal warning. Comparable events have been witnessed in Tamraght, Taghazout, and Aourir –areas located south of Anchor Point.⁹⁴ These incidents form part of the larger Taghazout Bay development project, a \$1 billion initiative covering approximately 615 hectares with 4.5 kilometers of coastline near Agadir. The project includes nearly 2,000 residential units, luxury hotels operated by international brands such as Hyatt Regency and Hilton, beachfront cafes, open-air restaurants, beach clubs, a three-mile beachfront promenade, and sports facilities including golf, tennis, surf, and soccer academies. This development constitutes a central element of the Moroccan government's Vision 2020 strategy to enhance tourism by redeveloping key zones nationwide.⁹⁵ The press release came

⁹² Ben Mondy, "Local Homes Threatened in Town at Leading Edge of Morocco's Surf-Inspired Development," The Inertia, January 19, 2024. Accessed October 6, 2025. <https://www.theinertia.com/surf/local-homes-threatened-morocco-development/>

⁹³ "Morocco's Surf Tourism Boom: Growth, Controversy, and the Future of Coastal Development," World Tourism Forum, September 24, 2025, accessed June 9, 2025, <https://live.worldtourismforum.net/news/morocco-surf-tourism-boom-growth-controversy-and-the-future-of-coastal-development>.

⁹⁴ Ben Mondy, "Local Homes Threatened in Town at Leading Edge of Morocco's Surf-Inspired Development," The Inertia, January 19, 2024. Accessed October 9, 2025. <https://www.theinertia.com/surf/local-homes-threatened-morocco-development/>

⁹⁵ Taghazout Bay Eco-Tourism," Construction21, accessed October 9, 2025, <https://www.construction21.org/espana/city/ma/taghazout-bay-eco-tourism.html>

with a statement that the country aimed to increase its slice of the worldwide surf tourism cake, estimated to be worth \$3.1 billion by 2026.⁹⁶

While Taghazout Bay development project was promoted as sustainable, it simultaneously faced considerable criticism and legal challenges from watchdog groups and local communities for its negative socio-economic and environmental repercussions. The Moroccan Association for the Protection of Public Property (AMPBP) filed a lawsuit alleging misconduct and irregularities linked to the project, including suspicions of mismanagement of public funds, unauthorized demolitions, and violations of urban planning regulations. AMPBP condemns the rapid demolitions that displaced many residents and businesses with minimal warning, intensifying local opposition and raising concerns over the social and environmental impacts of the rapid urbanization under Taghazout Bay's development.⁹⁷

«Legislative adjustments were introduced in 2029... They further increased state control and restricted the traditional rights and autonomy of Amazigh communities over their territories,» explained S., a political activist and member of the organization 'Moroccan Douars,' which is dedicated to protecting Morocco's indigenous communities (typically comprised of a cluster of huts surrounding an open area).

For further understanding of the aforementioned escalation, it is worth noting that Morocco has not adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which obliges governments to protect the rights of indigenous peoples and, importantly, to consult with them on projects that may affect them. Additionally, the government has not ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 169, which requires governments to ensure indigenous peoples' participation in decision-making, protection of land ownership, preservation of culture, access to education and employment, and protection from discrimination.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Ben Mondy, "Local Homes Threatened in Town at Leading Edge of Morocco's Surf-Inspired Development," The Inertia, January 19, 2024. Accessed October 6, 2025. <https://www.theinertia.com/surf/local-homes-threatened-morocco-development/>

⁹⁷ Moroccan Watchdog Group Files Lawsuit Over Taghazout Bay Tourism Project Scandal, H24infos, February 20, 2020, accessed October 9, 2025, <https://en.bladi.net/moroccan-watchdog-group-files-lawsuit-over-taghazout-bay-tourism-project,65081.html>.

⁹⁸ IWGIA. "The Indigenous World 2023: Morocco." International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), March 24, 2023. Accessed October 10, 2025, <https://iwgia.org/en/morocco/5058-iw-2023-morocco.html>.

A petition⁹⁹ and *GoFundMe* page have been set up to try and stop the demolition and development. "The proposed demolition will not only erase a significant part of the characteristic charm of Imsouane but also displace many residents who will lose their livelihoods," said the petition. "These are people whose lives are intertwined with the very fabric of Imsouane, their homes and businesses form an integral part of what makes this town special."¹⁰⁰



The history of Imsouane, similar to that of Nazaré, reveals a markedly more violent form of development catalyzed by the surf industry with the full endorsement of the local government. This progression reflects the intense pressures and transformative impacts of commercialized surf tourism on traditional coastal communities, often resulting in displacement, demolition of heritage structures, and profound socio-economic upheaval.¹⁰¹ According to Sam Bleakley, a renowned longboarder, filmmaker, and broadcaster, the recognition and visibility that the local and international surfing community has brought to this location necessitate that these stakeholders be granted a meaningful voice in discussions with both authorities and developers concerning future plans («The local and international surf community put this place on the map and must have a voice with authorities and developers in these plans»¹⁰²).

«*Al Maghreb*¹⁰³ means sunset» told me Ayoub, a local surfer, as he was guiding me toward the beach. He continued, pointing toward the coastline as the Moroccan red sun dropped into the ocean: «*Here families gather at the end of the day during Ramadan, just before sunset, to break their fast*».

On the morning of January 17, 2024, demolition works started, overshadowing this sacred Ramadan ritual in Imsouane. Approximately one month prior to Ramadan, governmental authorities, supported by bulldozing machinery and paramilitary forces, intervened in local communities with less than twenty-four hours' notice, executing large-scale demolitions to

⁹⁹ <https://www.change.org/p/halt-the-demolition-of-imsouane-s-coastline-and-town-in-24-hours> (the link for the petition)

¹⁰⁰ Surf Jur, "Crisis in surf town Imsouane: A Battle Against Demolition for Mega Resort Development," Surf Escape, January 20, 2024, accessed October 9, 2025, <https://www.surf-escape.com/crisis-in-surf-town-imsouane/>.

¹⁰¹ Aldar.ma, «مشهد صادم ومؤثر..شاهد عملية هدم منازل بقرية تغنيت السياحية» YouTube video, 2:40. December 28, 2023. Accessed October 9, 2025. <https://youtu.be/t3uYQa198fI>

¹⁰² Ben Mondy, "Local Homes Threatened in Town at Leading Edge of Morocco's Surf-Inspired Development," The Inertia, January 19, 2024. Accessed October 9, 2025. <https://www.theinertia.com/surf/local-homes-threatened-morocco-development/>

¹⁰³ 'Morocco' is called Al Maghreb in Arabic.

facilitate the construction of a luxury resort complex by Akwa Group, a government-backed entity.¹⁰⁴

Recently, the coastal town of Imsouane has witnessed the inauguration of multiple international hotel brands, including Radisson, Fairmont, Riu, Hyatt Regency, and Hilton. Preliminary observations suggest that occupancy rates at the major hotel establishments have been relatively low. This scenario may serve as an experimental case to assess whether surfing tourism can act as a catalyst for broader, mainstream tourism development. Regardless of the outcome, the advent of surf tourism has irrevocably altered the local economic structures, social dynamics, and geographical configuration. Such transformation would likely not have been possible without the proximity of high-quality right-hand surf breaks.

Although the global surfing community's discovery of Imsouane initially celebrated its pristine waves, this newfound attention has also ushered in the bulldozers of neocolonialism, sanctioned and propelled by local authorities. A tragic irony emerges when one considers that the very waves –once untouched and alluring to rugged surfers– now serve as a backdrop to violent urban restructuring and the forced displacement of local populations. This phenomenon occurs within the broader context of Morocco's ongoing development and social tensions, especially as the country prepares to host part of the 2030 FIFA World Cup in the southern city of Agadir. In this vein, the Moroccan government is actively preparing to attract football fans to neighboring villages during the tournament.¹⁰⁵ Globally, Morocco stands, alongside Bali, as a leading hotspot for this type of unchecked surfing-driven development, raising critical questions about the costs of such rapid economic transformation.

¹⁰⁴ Wiji Surf, "Save Imsouane! The Pearl of Moroccan Surfing," Wiji Surf, February 2, 2024. Accessed October 9, 2025. <https://www.wiji.surf/en/blogs/notizie/save-imsouane>.

¹⁰⁵ African Business. "Ambitious Agadir Aims for World Cup Boost." African Business, July 8, 2025. Accessed October 9, 2025. <https://african.business/2025/07/trade-investment/ambitious-agadir-aims-for-world-cup-boost>.

Indonesia, Summer 2025

“Morning of The Earth”¹⁰⁶ opens with nature awakening on the southern tip of Bali. The lens acutely focuses on the horizon, where the colors of the sky blend with those of the sea. For the next shot the camera shifts methodically to each element of nature, one by one: the rhythmic breaking of waves upon the shore, the intricate patterns of foam imprinted on the sand, the gentle rustling of arboreal foliage stirred by the breeze, birds soaring in the morning sky, and a lone surfer. This surfer harmoniously coexists with nature’s unfolding awakening, present as an intrinsic part of a transcendental mosaic, from which they could not be removed without disrupting the cosmic balance. An undercurrent of anticipation pervades the scene. Although there is no immediate action, only the camera panning across the natural landscape, all elements of the natural environment appear to await a singular event: the surfer’s engagement with the inaugural morning wave, akin to a ritualistic overture that initiates the diurnal cycle in Bali.

All this is set chronologically around 1972, when the first Australian surfers started discovering Balinese Waves, according to the A. Falzon’s film.

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The 2025 dry season finds me in Uluwatu, sitting at a beachside canteen on Bali’s southern tip. The surrounding area features a plethora of similar canteens and beachfront venues, varying in their adherence to traditional ‘warung’<sup>107</sup> aesthetics, with some of them bearing resemblance to dining establishments commonly found in Europe. The presence of upscale beach bars, specialized ‘Surf Instruction Academies’, and ‘Gojek’<sup>108</sup> services facilitating tourist transportation is notable.

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<sup>106</sup> ‘Morning of The Earth’ is a 1972 Australian surf film directed by Albert Falzon. The film portrays surfers living in spiritual harmony with nature, making their own boards (and homes) as they traveled in search of the perfect wave across Australia’s north-east coast, Bali and Hawaii. The movie is regarded as one of the finest of its genre and noted as recording the first surfers to ride the waves at Uluwatu on the very southern tip of Bali and so bringing Bali to the attention of surfers around the world, which marked the beginning of Bali as a major tourist destination. (source: IMDb)

<sup>107</sup> A ‘warung’ is a type of small family-owned business often confused with local food consumption. Over time, the semantic shift of the term ‘warung’ appears to have extended beyond foreign visitors, now being embraced by locals as well. As of 2025, many Indonesians commonly use ‘warung’ to refer to grocery stores and restaurants. However, older generations of Indonesians largely continue to use ‘warung’ to denote small convenience shops (retails, eateries, cafés), often located in the front room or a stall within a family home.

<sup>108</sup> ‘Gojek’ refers to an Indonesian mode of transport, which today primarily serves tourists. It is a platform that facilitates the on-demand summoning of a scooter (in most cases), typically within close proximity, to transport individuals to their intended destinations.

*«It is used to be like that...»* Louis explains to me glancing quickly at my computer screen, where the film ‘Morning of the Earth’ is still playing. Louis is a local who works at the canteen in the evenings and teaches surfing to tourists in the mornings. “It is not the surfers’ fault that it changed” he continues, showing me the coastal landscape. *«They (surfers) discovered the place. They started coming. Then others came too. They piqued the interest of investors. My homeland is so beautiful, like paradise; everyone wanted to come».*



**Figure 11:** Uluwatu in 1972. Picture taken from the opening scene of the film “Morning of the Earth” by director Albert Falzon.



**Figure 12: Uluwatu, July 2025. Photograph taken by the author with a mobile phone at the location of figure 10 (above), depicting the change in coastline from pristine and untouched landscape to an overcrowded tourist hotspot over the past five decades.**

*«In Indonesia, we have never had a surf culture as part of our tradition. I would say we are more afraid of the sea, despite being an island nation! My mom lives in Mount Batur and has never swum! You are Yunani (“Greek” in Indonesian languages)...do you have a sea in your country?»* (This passage documents an informal interview conducted at a local ‘warung’ with Eva, a 40-year-old indigenous single mother. The exchange was initiated when her 6-year-old son approached me evidently drawn by the presence of my surfboard).

While Indonesia is today a surfing Mecca and has developed its own vibrant surf culture, this culture does not originate from ancient traditions and rituals. It is a relatively recent introduction that evolved through tourism. More precisely, surfing, as we know it today, was introduced to Indonesia, specifically Bali, by American and Australian surfers. Although Indonesia was colonized by the Portuguese and, subsequently, the Dutch, these ‘powers’



appear to have exerted minimal influence on the development of the Indonesian surf culture, and they never leveraged the surf industry as a form of soft power within the archipelago.

The first known surfer in Indonesia was the American Bob Koke in the mid-to-late 1930s, who began surfing on Kuta Beach in Bali.<sup>109</sup> He opened a hotel that became a hub for the early surfing community. The development of surfing in Indonesia was then slowed down due to World War II and Indonesia's struggle for independence. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, Australian surfers reintroduced and further developed it.<sup>110</sup>

*«Crazy how (Uluwatu) becomes not even surfers here, right? 70% is like mainstream tourism, muscle guys...I think surfing attracts the girls and then the girls attract the muscle guys»,* as stated by K., a local Indonesian surf instructor, who further stated that he is the sole surfer in his six-member family. He self-taught surfing as an adolescent in Seminyak beach around fifteen years ago, recognizing the activity's potential to provide him with "a well-paid profession and attractive women from around the globe". "I only teach foreigners" he added. *«The locals here aren't really interested. The ones who are, they just teach themselves. But they almost never do it just for fun. Surfing here is expensive if you compare it to our money.»<sup>111</sup> That's why I don't teach locals. But then again, the locals don't really come to learn anyway».*

*«You see this place?»* my Gojek driver inquired, gesturing towards the Seminyak coastline, presently replete with commercial establishments from which loud American pop hits of the 2000s emanate. The adjacent beach was similarly densely full of Caucasian surfers, who were congesting the pipeline through recurrent collisions. *«This was empty the past years!»* he added. *«We are lucky because all these people come to see our place! Many Indonesians made business here, in the coast. Some (businesses) are not ours, but we work in them and we can live our families –we marry from a young age».*

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<sup>109</sup> Phil Jarratt, "Bali's First Surfers- Tracking the tumultuous dawn of the surf age on Bali.", The Surfer's Journal, May 2023.

<https://www.surfersjournal.com/editorial/balis-first-surfers/>

<sup>110</sup> Unknown director. History of surfing in Bali. SURFER, 2013.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=py2\\_WORByfo&t=29s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=py2_WORByfo&t=29s)

<sup>111</sup> The cost of a surfing lesson in Indonesia, particularly in Bali, which is the most popular destination, varies depending on the type of the lesson: Group lessons are generally the most economical, ranging from approximately IDR 200,000-500,000 (12-30 euros) per person for a two-hour session, whereas 1-on-1 lessons are the most expensive, starting from IDR 600,000-950,000 (18-57 euros) for a two-hour session. These prices gain significance when compared to the daily earnings of a local resident. For instance, the daily earnings of a Gojek rider –representing one of the most common and reportedly profitable occupations in Indonesia- typically reach IDR 100,000 (approximately 6 euros) for eleven hours of work per day.

The sun dips below the horizon and surfers slowly emerge from the ocean. Most of them are Australian and European. The Europeans, in particular, have spent hours, perhaps even days, in cramped transatlantic flights and bustling international airports. I am one of them.

*«Everyone here carries their own ideas, their own mindset, their own culture. It is strange, one comes from so far away, and instead of getting to know a new place, they expect to find what they left behind. I am not talking about everyone, of course. But I see people who came here expecting to eat what they are used to. They find the food here spicy, the beaches unorganized...»* (excerpt from my conversation with Patrick, a novice Dutch surfer I met at Padang Padang beach in Southern Bali).



The summer of 2025 coincided with the demolition activities at Bingin Beach. The activities started around July 21, 2025, with the government citing violations of spatial planning laws, building regulations, and environmental laws. Many businesses in that beach had been operating for years, some even before modern spatial laws were enacted and represent locals' sole source of livelihood. Businesses like "Kelly's Warung", a beloved gathering place for surfers, were among those being demolished.

Throughout the dry season, there were strong rumors circulating that the demolitions were paving the way for large-scale resort development or beach clubs, with some speculating about the potential privatization of the beach and 'wave'.

Surfers from all around the world stood by the local community, posting on social media, signing petitions, and raising awareness to "Save Bali's Bingin Beach Community from Forced Demolition". Kelly Slater, a prominent world-renowned surfer, specifically stated: «Awful to hear and see that the beachfront at Bingin in Bali has been bought up and all the local eateries and other businesses will be demolished to make room for some kind of beach club and not sure what else? Bali has been completely mishandled and ruined by foreign interests in recent years».<sup>112</sup>

*«They reckon us surfers kicked off the whole tourism thing on the island. And yeah, maybe we did...Our laid-back lifestyle, just cruising with nature...probably was pretty good advertising. Personally speaking, I don't feel crook about what is going down in Bali today.*

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<sup>112</sup> Jason Lock, "Bingin Has Been Stormed, Businesses and Homes Demolished", Wavelength, 21 July 2025. <https://wavelengthmag.com/bingin-is-being-demolished/>



*But I am here to fix things!»* an Australian mid-aged surfer told me, while protesting against Bingin demolitions.

As of today (August 2025), the demolitions are actively underway.



**Figure 13:** Denpasar, Surf trip of Summer 2025: Jama Indika Vendanta, a young surf influencer, poses with his cousin in the backyard of his father's property, which caters to tourist surfers as a 'homestay'. Captured on Lomography film camera by the author.

## **Summary**

This chapter laid the theoretical groundwork for neocolonialism, elucidating how economic, political, and cultural dominance persists through indirect mechanisms despite formal decolonization. Complementing this framework, it incorporated autoethnographic reflections on surf culture. These insights from lived experiences illuminated the symbolic significance of surfing beyond mere sport, positioning it at the intersection of neocolonial dynamics and environmental stewardship. Situated within key postcolonial theories and concluding by establishing surf culture as both a site and a lens, the chapter framed the complex power dynamics essential to understanding France's ongoing influence in Tahiti. Building on this foundation, the following chapter provides a detailed historical overview of French colonial and neocolonial practices in the Pacific, illustrating particularly how in French Polynesia these practices have been intimately linked to the physical environment.

# Chapter II

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## *Mā'ohi Nui (Polynésie Française)*

### **2.1 A Historical Overview of the French Presence in the Pacific Ocean**

Chapter 2 critically examines the enduring French colonial and neocolonial interventions in Polynesia, with a specific focus on Tahiti, tracing the historical trajectory from early symbolic domination through the “politics of representation” to tangible spatial and ecological transformations. This chapter is divided into two key sections: The first section of the chapter explores the beginnings of French colonization in the Pacific, revealing how the colonial presence was initially shaped and perpetuated through narratives and imagery designed to construct a mediated perception of Polynesia that legitimized and facilitated control over indigenous lands and peoples. In this case, the “politics of representation” not only shaped European imagination, but also paved the way for successive overlays of domination. This section concludes by transitioning from colonialism to neocolonialism through the path of international jurisprudence, subsequently handing off to the second section, which emphasizes the neocolonial relationship between the colonizers and the Mā'ohi homeland via territorial and environmental interventions. While these interventions began with extensive spatial reconfigurations that replicated metropolitan France’s imprint in the Pacific, including urban planning policies that altered the indigenous landscape and disrupted traditional relationships with land (“Te Fenua”) and sea (“Te Moana”), they ultimately culminated in extreme ecological violence, epitomized by the nuclear testing program that devastated both environment and community.

This chapter serves as a precursor to Chapter 3, linking historical continuum with contemporary phenomena, such as the 2024 Olympic Games surfing events in Teahupo’o (which is examined in the third and final chapter). More precisely, Chapter 2 demonstrates

how France's influence over Polynesia's land has been relentless and adaptive. Each phase of "land appropriation" that the reader encounters in this chapter reflects a pattern of ceaseless exploitation, constrained only by international legal frameworks, reinforcing the image of France as a persistent colonizer and exploiter of the indigenous Mā'ohi environment. Overall, this chapter situates French multifaced interventions within a broader neocolonial prism of territoriality and environmental appropriation that extends from the colonial past into present-day realities.

### 2.1.1 The beginning of the colonization of Tahiti and how it was served by the “politics of representation” (18th-20th Century)

*“Superior races have a right over inferior races. They have the duty to civilize the inferior races”*  
- Jules ferry<sup>113</sup>

In contrast to the traditional colonialism of the past, European colonial occupation in the late eighteenth century begins to change form and approach, and in many cases it is no longer strictly associated with violence. It is “the politics of representation” and the creation of stereotypes that nowadays play the most crucial role, something that might well be seen as a transitional stage between colonialism and neo-colonialism.

The rivalry between France and England became more intense in the middle of the 1700s, drawing from their orientation towards ocean exploration. After the long conflict of the Seven Years War and under the threat of the imminent loss of the North American colonies, it was now the crucial moment for France to use its naval power in order to establish new realms of global dominance. It was a period when, acquainted with the Scriptural allusions of an earthly Eden, a plethora of Europeans dreamed of a simple life, in balance with nature.<sup>114</sup> At the same time, as previously uncharted territories were mapped and the world seemed ever smaller and more accessible to European eyes, the unquenchable need for exploration grew.

French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville arrived in Tahiti in 1768, almost a year after the British captain Samuel Wallis, the first European to set foot on the Island while seeking to discover “terra incognita”.<sup>115</sup> Bougainville reached Tahiti without knowing about Wallis's previous landing, because of the vast expanse of the Pacific and the remoteness of the islands. Vladimir Kapur argues that although “Wallis may have beaten Bougainville to the discovery of Tahiti, it was Bougainville’s account of the island that played a role in shaping a powerful myth of Tahiti that was to haunt the Western imagination for centuries”.<sup>116</sup>

Bougainville tried to describe the Polynesian reality in European terms, so that it would be more understandable and accessible. In other words, it would be easier to “conquer”, both in

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<sup>113</sup> Jules Ferry, Speech from the French National Assembly, Paris (July 28, 1885).

<sup>114</sup> Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard*, (University of Washington Press, 2011), 32.

<sup>115</sup> William H. Davenport, “Tahiti and the South Sea Legend” *Expedition Magazine* 11, no. 4 (July, 1969):12-15.

<sup>116</sup> Kate E. Bauer, “*Translating Paradise: Louis- Antoine de Bougainville and the Myth of the Nouvelle Cynthère*”, *The Mirror- Undergraduate History Journal*, (2017): 144.

the sense of understanding and in the sense of physical conquest. Following this pattern, he deliberately omitted to mention anything he did not understand or he thought could not be understood by Europeans. One of these “omitted” realities was the practice of surfing, which was first mentioned by the crew of English explorers, notably Joseph Banks, John Hawkesworth and William Anderson).<sup>117</sup>

Renaming the island was the first mild form of colonial imposition. However, Bougainville did not choose a random name. Following a common colonial habit of that period, he named the island New Cythère (New Cytheria) after the birthplace of the Greek goddess Aphrodite, the goddess of love, setting the precedent for a continuous reproduction of stereotypes based on mythological and classical references, which have accompanied Tahiti from then until today<sup>118</sup>.

*“These people breathe only rest and sensual pleasures. Venus is the goddess they worship. The mildness of the climate, the beauty of the scenery, the fertility of the soil everywhere watered by rivers and cascades, everything inspires sensual pleasure. And so I have named it New Cythera (the island of Aphrodite)”. -Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, 1767*

As Kate E. Bauer stated: “Bougainville denied Tahiti any form of cultural particularism and instead translated what he saw into the European paradigm of classical and biblical mythology [...]. Although he recognized that the island was known by the name of Tahiti amongst its inhabitants, Bougainville nonetheless provided his own nomenclature that fit within the Western European paradigm of biblical and classical mythology”.<sup>119</sup>

But it was not only the narrative of Bougainville that made Tahiti “the depository of European dreams and expectations”, but also the fact that this new discovery in the middle of the Pacific coincided with the depiction of a terrestrial paradise that Rousseau had vividly described a few years earlier. This coincidental circumstance created a fertile ground suitable to welcome the upcoming European colonial presence. Specifically, fourteen years before Bougainville’s arrival in the island of Tahiti, namely in 1754, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote the “Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité parmi les hommes”

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<sup>117</sup> “The Island of Tahiti 1769-1797- The Contact Period May 1769”, Tahiti and Surfing - Where it All Began, Hōrue, A special issue by REVATahiti, (2024): 50-51.

<sup>118</sup> Philippe Despoix, “Naming and exchange in the exploration of the Pacific: On European representations of Polynesian culture in the late XVIII century.” In *Multiculturalism and representation*, University of Hawai‘i Press, 5.

<sup>119</sup> Kate E. Bauer, “Translating Paradise: Louis- Antoine de Bougainville and the Myth of the Nouvelle Cynthère”, *The Mirror- Undergraduate History Journal*, (2017): 144.

(Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Men), a widely respected piece on the "noble savage" and the origins of societal corruption. As Miriam Kahn expertly interprets, Rousseau depicted an exquisite image of the origins of humanity, where everyone lived in equality and in harmony with the natural world. The utopia that Rousseau had described encouraged Europeans to seek out a place where they might test his beliefs-both ethical and philosophical.<sup>120</sup>

The earliest images of Tahiti, deeply influenced by vague imperialist ambitions and undefined philosophical speculations long before any European had ever set foot on the island, were now confirmed through the narratives of Bougainville's lived experiences. In 1772 the explorer published the "Voyage autour du monde", feeding Europeans with more images and information regarding his very own "Garden of Eden" <sup>121</sup> full of "beautiful women with uninhibited manners".

From the very beginning, in his narratives he compared local women with European women:

*"Les pirogues étaient remplies de femmes qui ne le cèdent pas pour l'agrément de la figure au plus grand nombre des Européennes, et qui, pour la beauté du corps, pourraient le disputer à toutes avec avantage"*<sup>122</sup>.

[The canoes were filled with women who do not prioritize the beauty of figure admired by most Europeans and who, regarding the beauty of their physique, could compete against all with advantage.]

The use of the terms 'ne céder à' and 'disputer' implies a parallel between Tahitian women and those of Europe, between the familiar and what resembles the familiar but remains exotic. Giving a tangible analogy interspersed with vivid imagery, Bougainville reflected a typical Western perception of femininity that was digestible for the Europeans, and at the same time appealing.

However, the first reports of Bougainville did not refer so much to the seductive charm of local women and the idyllic natural environment as to the unpleasant experiences the crew had to face at the beginning. The Tahitian custom of "stealing" was quickly reworked in

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<sup>120</sup> Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard*, (University of Washington Press, 2011), 32.

<sup>121</sup> Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard*, (University of Washington Press, 2011), 33.

<sup>122</sup> Louis- Antoine de Bougainville, *Voyage autour du monde*, (1771), 225.

subsequent versions of his publications in such a way as to seem negligible in comparison to the “goddesses, nymphs, noble savages and the beauty of the landscape”.<sup>123</sup>

Nevertheless, Bougainville was not the only one who aestheticized Tahiti. Captain James Cook, who visited the island three times between 1769-77,<sup>124</sup> is said to have taken with him several artists, who portrayed the place according to Rousseau's ideas about humans coexisting peacefully in a landscape of unparalleled beauty. Some of the most famous paintings of that era were actually depiction of the island. The most popular ones are the “Oaitepeha Bay, Tahiti” by William Hodges<sup>125</sup> and the John Webber's ‘Portrait of Poedua, the Daughter of Orio’, which depicts a Tahitian woman, bare-breasted and exoticized, who was forcibly taken and held captive in order to serve as a model for the painting. Created not as documentation but as ornament, the portrait was destined to decorate European living rooms, turning it into a consumable fantasy. The abduction of Poedua, foreshadowed very early on that the Europeans had not arrived in peace simply to explore and admire this unknown civilization-out of cultural curiosity. The next examples were not long in coming.<sup>126</sup>

Bougainville, in addition to the iconoclastic narratives that left Polynesian reality to the imagination of Europeans, proceeded to more tangible actions. In 1769, the French explorer, in an effort to bridge the two distant “worlds”, but more importantly to introduce Europeans to Tahiti, brought with him to Paris a young Tahitian native named Aotourou. The young man became immersed in the French culture: he learned to dress in the latest French fashion, with velvet jackets and silk shirts now becoming part of his daily routine. He met prominent personalities becoming acquainted with the high society, developed a remarkable taste for opera, had multiple relationships with women in Paris, including sex workers, and generally seemed adapted to life in the French city, moving around easily and spending money. Bougainville had French lessons given to Aotourou, but Jacob Rodrigues Pereira, who examined him later, concluded that the Tahitian phonetic system to which Aotourou was used, allowed him to pronounce only a few consonants and none of the nasal vowels. After a year in Paris, where he was treated as an exhibit, raising controversy over Bougainville's

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<sup>123</sup> Jarich G. Oosten and Pieter Van De Velde, “Henri J.M. Claessen Constructing the Early State The Rise of a Research Programme.” *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 150, no. 2 (1994): 23.

<sup>124</sup> Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard*, (University of Washington Press, 2011), 34.

<sup>125</sup> William Hodges, “A View taken in the bay of Oaite Peha [Vaitepiha] Otaheite [Tahiti]” (‘Tahiti Revisited’), Royal Museum Greenwich. Accessed on October 30, 2025. <https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-13872>

<sup>126</sup> Jon Webber, “Poedua [Poeatua], daughter of Oreo, chief of Ulaietea, one of the Society Isles”, 1785, Museum of New Zealand. Accessed on October 30, 2025. <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/1130277>

decision to take him away from his “paradise on earth”, Aotourou began to feel nostalgic for his home and decided to return. He died on the way back from smallpox.<sup>127</sup>

French Polynesia, just like other European colonies, served as “Western observation laboratory”. The dominant question of that period was: To what extent could a “savage” integrate into Western culture by metabolizing all those characteristics that contradict his own “nature”? But even more, behind this question lay the need of the Western colonialists to know whether they could ultimately survive in the “biblical paradise” they had dreamed of together with the “uncivilized” natives who were an integral part of that place. There was only one way for this to occur; the “barbarians” had to be civilized.

Although there is much literature on the way the Westerns treated the “savages”, almost no source refers to the way the native colonized populations “envisioned” European culture during the initial encounters between these two “worlds”. One of the few documented cases of the latter case is the example of Aotourou, who followed Bougainville voluntarily and became the first Tahitian to visit Europe. Aotourou’s transportation and supposed metamorphosis fit in perfectly with the dominant theories of the period regarding geography, climate, human adaptability, and civilization stages. In the Pacific (and with Pacific Islanders in Europe), these notions were tested since Tahiti and Europe were viewed as representatives of distinct geographies, climates, historical eras, and capacities for civilization. But Aotourou’s experiment failed, since the fate of any real Polynesians who ventured Europe (there is also the example of Omai in England) was invariably tragic. They were doomed to become fallen idols, unable to live up to their advance billing.<sup>128</sup>

Several years later, Ousmane Sembène, a filmmaker from another French-ruled country, Senegal, would say “Europe is not my centre”<sup>129</sup>, but it was still too early for the Tahitians – in terms of their history as colonized indigenous- to be led to such a conscious saying. Their acquaintance with the colonialists was still very recent at that time. At first sight, they had not perceived Europe as their centre, but on the other hand they seemed completely subjugated without any effort of resistance towards the European rule. Similarly, it was correspondingly early for the Europeans to understand anything that did not resemble their own aesthetics and culture, so they initially tried to transfer the Polynesian way of life –at least as far as they

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<sup>127</sup> Niel Rennie, *Far-Fetched Facts: The Literature of Travel and the idea of the South Seas*, (Oxford, 1998), 109-140.

<sup>128</sup> Lynn Festa, “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Tahitian Jouissance”, *Romance Quarterly* VOL. 54, NO. 4 (2007): 305- 321.

<sup>129</sup> Ousmane Sembène, interview on *Caméra D’ Afrique*, 1983



understood it- to their own “home” (both metaphorically and literally); Tahitian-style terraces were designed for cottages, “Polynesian” wallpapers<sup>130</sup> became fashionable and “South seas” lakes were built in landscaped facades.<sup>131</sup> Far enough away from the Pacific Ocean, people of an entirely different culture were imitating Polynesian life by infiltrating the Polynesian lifestyle, as they knew it from Rousseau’s books and Bougainville’s narratives.

At the same time, the concept of the “unspoiled savage” took on a new reality with the imperfect knowledge of primitive Polynesians. There, in Tahiti, lived an exotic race of “naïve people” in a generous tropical environment and free from oppression, excessive toil, and sustained worry but mainly free from the Christian regulation of morality. These attractive islanders had been spared the burden of original sin. This, of course, could not be tolerated; religious enlightenment had to be communicated. The exotic depictions about Tahitians, which were at odds with Christian beliefs, resulted in the arrival of British Protestant and French Catholic missionaries in Tahiti, in 1797.<sup>132</sup>

As recorded in some of the early accounts, the missionaries seemed to be impressed by local practices such as surfing. James Wilson, who landed the first English missionaries in Tahiti for the evangelization of the island, recounts in his journal that sliding with small boards on the waves seems to offer them the greatest pleasure: “In this sport they are very skilled and this excites them, especially as the wave is extremely high and breaks with impressive violence. They practice it for hours together until they are tired [...] if a shark enters among them, they surround it and force it to shore, and if it escapes, the Tahitians continue to surf without fear”. However, as was the case with a multitude of other indigenous practices associated with idol worship and loose morals (often due to the naked appearance of the natives), although it is not explicitly documented, it is inferred that surfing was probably targeted by the Evangelists.<sup>133</sup>

The French missionaries did not receive a warm welcome from the Queen Pomare IV. However, similarly with the English missionaries, they were determined to change the

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<sup>130</sup> Anna Johnston, “Europe’s Other? Academic Discourse on the Pacific as a Cultural Space.” In the *Cambridge History of the Pacific Ocean*, edited by Anne Perez Hattori and Jane Samson, Cambridge University Press, (2023): 70-97.

<sup>131</sup> Gavan Daws, *A Dream Of Islands: Voyages of Self Discovery in the South Seas*, Mutual Pub Co, 1991, 11.

<sup>132</sup> Niel Gunson, *Messengers of Grace: Evangelical missionaries in the South Seas 1797-1860*, (Oxford University Press, 1978), 407- 423

<sup>133</sup> Unspecified Author(s), “The Island of Tahiti 1769-1797- The Contact Period May 1769”, *Tahiti and Surfing - Where it All Began*, Hōrue, A special issue by REVATahiti,(2024): 50-51.

Tahitian traditions and customs, paving the way for a solid colonial bulwark.<sup>134</sup> Between 1820-1830 and during the French-English competition for the possession of new colonies, a French consul named Jacques-Antoine Moerenhout, was appointed to the Tahitian Queen Pomare. While the Queen was away in 1842, Moerenhout organized the local pro-French chiefs into signing a petition asking Tahiti to become a French Protectorate. This milestone marks the start of formal French control.<sup>135</sup>

For three whole years (1844-47), the Tahitians resisted French rule with armed guerilla warfare. In 1880, following the abdication of King Pomare V, successor to Queen Pomare IV, France annexed Tahiti and transformed it from a protectorate to a colony. King Pomare V was persuaded to sign a proclamation donating ‘Tahiti and dependences’ to France with ‘all the guarantees of property and liberty’ for Tahitians. In January 1881 Tahitians learned that the French Parliament had ratified the annexation. The former protectorate was now given the new name of Établissements Français d’Océanie (EFO), and Tahiti (including all of its five archipelagoes: the Society, Austral, Tuamotu, Gambier, and Marquesas islands) officially became a French colony.<sup>136</sup>

After Tahiti –once a “figment” of French imagination– became a French colony in 1880, it received massive migratory flows from Europe and elsewhere. Although it served as a refuge for political exiles and criminals in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was an increase in settlers when the French government began to encourage French nationals to live and start businesses on the island. French citizens, for years nurtured with images and narrations of a distant paradise, now made up the majority of the foreign population by 1890. As a result, the French government began to implement measures aimed at integrating Polynesians into French culture, including «forcibly removing children from their homes to attend French schools», eliminating traditional Polynesian practices and beliefs, and imposing the French legal and linguistic system. This period of colonization brought significant changes (information provided to the author through online communication with the local Tahitian, Marie-Claire S., June 2025).

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<sup>134</sup> Miriam Kahn, “*Tahiti Intertwined: Ancestral Land, Tourist Postcard, and Nuclear Test Site*”, *American Anthropologist* (2000): 12.

<sup>135</sup> Denise Fischer, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics*, (Australian National University Press, 2013), 19-27.

<sup>136</sup> Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard*, (University of Washington Press, 2011), 39-42.

Paul Gauguin, whose name has been associated with French Polynesia, left for Tahiti in 1891 stating that he wanted to escape “civilization”. When he reached Tahiti, Gauguin was essentially attempted to seek a new place where white authority was absolute, as revealed in retrospect by his life and art.<sup>137</sup> Shortly after Gauguin’s arrival in Tahiti, King Pomare died. Gauguin described the ‘royal end’ (Arii matamoe) with mourning for the past. According to the artist, this specific loss was not simply the passing of a monarch, but was fundamentally symbolic of the eradication of the last vestiges of customs and the ascendancy of the “civilized people.”<sup>138</sup> What Gauguin –and many other Europeans at the time– seemed not to realize was that hundred years of Western influence had already altered the Polynesian culture long before the death of the last Polynesian king. ‘Tahiti Nui’ had moved far away from what Wallis, Bougainville and Cook had initially attempted to understand. As Marcel Proust has written in *À la recherche du temps perdu*: “The only paradise is paradise lost”, and nothing could be more apposite to this dictum than the Western myth of Tahiti.

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<sup>137</sup> Edouard Deluc, “Gauguin: Voyage to Tahiti”. (France: Move Movie, StudioCanal, NJJ Entertainment). Film. Released September 20, 2017.

<sup>138</sup> Richard R. Brettel, *On Modern Beauty: Three paintings by Manet, Gauguin, and Cezanne. (1<sup>st</sup> edition)*, (Getty Publications, 2019): 39-69.

## 2.1.2 The transition from colonialism to neocolonialism in French Polynesia (historical events, international agreements, and legal framework, that paved the way for the new order)

- After World War II:  
1946: Constitution → residents of overseas territories = French citizens
- 1951: Right to vote
- 1957: Implementation of Loi-Cadre Defferre, 1956 → The name changes from Établissements Français d'Océanie to Polynésie Française.
- 1958: Referendum (64% in favour of dependance)
- Expanded Autonomy:  
1984: The 1984 law is considered a milestone. The autonomy of French Polynesia (autonomie interne) is significantly strengthened. The government and the territorial assembly acquire broader powers.  
Source: Law 84-820 of 1984
- Pays d'outre-mer: Overseas Country  
2004: French Polynesia acquires the status of "Overseas Country" (Pays d'outre-mer) within the French Republic. This status recognizes the territory's special identity. Organic Law defines the institutional framework and the powers of the Polynesian Government and Assembly.  
Source: Organic Law 2004-192 of 2004
- Recent Developments (until 2025):  
2007: Constitutional revision recognizes the possibility of self-determination for overseas territories.  
2013: Tahiti was relisted as a non-self-governing territory by the UN.  
Source: Constitutional Law 2007-237 of 2007

**Figure 14: Milestones in the self-determination of Tahiti.**

The transition from traditional colonialism to neocolonialism began gradually in the mid-twentieth century with the weakening of the European powers that had participated in the WWII, the rise of national liberation movements, the international pressures for decolonization (UN), and the change of the international order (the end of European sovereignty was followed by the emerge of US and USSR that shifted the geopolitical focus). In the midst of the new international upheavals, 'French' Polynesians indicated a desire for greater independence from 'France'. The term "liberation", the closest relative term to that of "decolonization" that had been expressed in the wartime context, had many different uses in WWII. In Europe it referred to liberation from Nazi Occupation and the establishment or restoration of democratic governments. In Asia, the term referred to liberation from Japanese occupation, but also to a broader idea of the end of empires in the region as a whole. At the outbreak of the war, French Polynesia was a colony (as its name -with the adjective "French"- implied), as was almost all of Asia, India and Malaysia. A major result of the war was to create a new aspiration for freedom not only from Japanese rule, but also from that of

the British, Dutch and French. In that historically critical moment, WWII, apart from its other consequences, played a pivotal role in challenging the political and economic position of France in the Pacific, setting a pattern that was to characterize the future treatment towards overseas territories.

At the beginning of the war, when France fell in June 1940, French Polynesia was among the first French overseas territories to declare their support for General Charles de Gaulle and the Free French forces. This decision, taken on September 2, 1940, demonstrated a firm commitment to continuing the fight against Nazi Germany, whereas some other colonies initially backed the Vichy regime.<sup>139</sup> Over 300 French Polynesians served with the Free French forces, 76 of whom died.<sup>140</sup> The islands provided strategic bases for Allied forces in the Pacific. Unlike New Caledonia, which played a key role in the Pacific Ocean during WWII<sup>141</sup>, Tahiti's contribution was very minor. Tahiti mainly served as a territorial base and as a symbolic proof that not all of France and its empire had succumbed to the Axis forces.

The Pacific gained strategic significance later in the war, especially for the United States in its conflict with Japan. Since French Polynesia was governed by the Free French, this remote Pacific region was largely supportive of the Allied efforts facilitating Allied operations and providing manpower. A typical example is the fact that some of the main American bases were established at Bora Bora, which developed into a major refueling and supply depot, known as “Bobcat”, even before the outbreak of the war on December 1941 (after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor).<sup>142</sup>

During WWII the notion of self-determination was advocated extensively. In particular, the Declaration of Washington in 1942, the Declaration of Moscow in 1943, and other significant documents from that era have references. The Atlantic Charter embraced the notion as a policy in 1941 and it led to the endorse "...for the right of all people to choose the form of government under which they wish to live." Additionally, the Charter contained principles

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<sup>139</sup> Ministère des Armées, “The engagement of the French overseas territories in the Second World War”, Chemins de Mémoire.

<sup>140</sup> Denise Fischer, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics*, (Australian National University Press, 2013), 72.

<sup>141</sup> In the short film titled “Sur les traces du passé, Les Américains de Nouvelle Calédonie” (NCTV, 2014), images from the American armed forces cinema show soldiers on leave in New Caledonia, armed with a wooden board, tackling the waves of the Caillou.

<sup>142</sup> Denise Fischer, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics*. (Australian National University Press, 2013), 43.

that stated that territorial changes should not be asserted without the permission of the peoples and that expansionist policies of any kind should be rejected.<sup>143</sup>

In the aftermath of the WWII, France was confronted with the growing demands for autonomy in the colonies. French –in the midst of post-war transformation- recognized the need for greater equality and evolution in colonial administration trying to comply with the new international structures created by their wartime allies and centered on the United Nations (UN). The very founding of the UN in 1945 (on the basis of a charter establishing the principle of equality of rights and self-determination of people under Article 1), was intended to call upon states administering non-self-governing territories to develop self-government and to transmit technical information on them to the UN (Charter of the UN, Article 73).

#### Chapter XI-Declaration regarding Non-Self-Governing Territories:

*Article 73: “Members of the United Nations which have or assume responsibilities for the administration of territories whose peoples have not yet attained a full measure of self-government recognize the principle that the interests of the inhabitants of these territories are paramount, and accept as a sacred trust the obligation to promote to the utmost, within the system of international peace and security established by the present Charter, the well-being of the inhabitants of these territories, and, to this end:*

*a. to ensure, with due respect for the culture of the peoples concerned, their political, economic, social, and educational advancement, their just treatment, and their protection against abuses;*

*b. to develop self-government, to take due account of the political aspirations of the peoples, and to assist them in the progressive development of their free political institutions, according to the particular circumstances of each territory and its peoples and their varying stages of advancement;*

*c. to further international peace and security;*

*d. to promote constructive measures of development, to encourage research, and to cooperate with one another and, when and where appropriate, with specialized international*

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<sup>143</sup> Nikolaos Kotsiopoulos, *Self-Determination of Peoples, Cases of Kosovo, Crimea, Catalunya*, (University of Macedonia, 2015), 12-19.

*bodies with a view to the practical achievement of the social, economic, and scientific purposes set forth in this Article; and*

*e. to transmit regularly to the Secretary-General for information purposes, subject to such limitation as security and constitutional considerations may require, statistical and other information of a technical nature relating to economic, social, and educational conditions in the territories for which they are respectively responsible other than those territories to which Chapters XII and XIII apply.”*

However, in 1947 France unilaterally decided that it would not transmit information on New Caledonia and French Polynesia to the UN, claiming that they had a status similar to the French 'departments' but concluding that they had administrative and political autonomy and were therefore no longer non-self-governing.<sup>144</sup> France argued that only the New Hebrides were non-self-governing; it resolutely maintains this position to this day, although it began to report quietly on New Caledonia from 2004.<sup>145</sup>

When SPC (South Pacific Commission) was formed in 1947, France prevented discussions on political issues by insisting on its unwillingness to give space to questions of self-determination and independence of its overseas territories. In contrast to France's reluctance, Aotearoa, Australia and the United States, which collaborated with France in the creation of this regional structure –known as the Secretariat of the Pacific Community from 1998 (SPC)- have adopted a completely different attitude towards the territories they administer in the region, gradually allowing for their independence.<sup>146</sup>

Three years earlier, in 1944, a conference in Brazzaville (Congo) advocated for local elected assemblies and representation for overseas territories in the Paris parliament, providing for more decentralized colonial administration and representation in committees. However, the

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<sup>144</sup> Driss Abbassi, Nicolas Bancel, Sandrine Bègue, Mohamed Benyoub, Bernhard Bierlich, Hubert Bonin, Pierre Brocheux, Claude Calvini, Evelyne Combeau-Mari, Clotilde De Gastines, Rufin Didzambou, Jacques Dumont, Jean-Yves Faberon, Viviane Fayaud, Bernard Foubert, Philippe Hrodej, Agathe Larcher-Goscha, Yves Leloup, Jean Martin, Marc Michel, Monique Pouliquen, Jean-Marc Regnault, Josette Rivallain, Maria Romo-Navarrete, Stéphanie Tésio, Daniel Varga and Denis Voituret, “Le Sport dans l'Empire Français. Un instrument de domination coloniale?”, *Outre-mers*, Volume 96 (2009): 178.

<sup>145</sup> Denise Fischer, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics*, (Australian National University Press, 2013), 62-64.

<sup>146</sup> T. R. Smith, *South Pacific Commission: An analysis after 25 years* (Price Milbourn, 1972), 6-20.

goal was to maintain the nationalist aspirations under control and the colonies loyal to France.<sup>147</sup>

In 1945 and 1946, although the French government extended additional rights to overseas residents, including granting them French citizenship, universal suffrage was not yet established. It was the 1946 constitution that formally recognized all overseas residents as French citizens and committed France to leading its peoples toward self-governance and democratic management of their own affairs, explicitly rejecting arbitrary colonization (“écartant tout système de colonisation fondé sur l’arbitraire”, Preamble). However, it was not until 1951 that all French citizens in the colonies were granted the right to vote, and more specifically, only in 1956 with the enactment of the Loi Defferre (Article 10 of the Loi-Cadre of June 23, 1956) that all indigenous residents of overseas territories were officially granted suffrage.

Following De Gaulle's resignation in January 1946 over disagreements about parliamentary powers in the new Constitution, a period of instability in the French government occurred. In the constitutions of 1946 and 1958, the Fourth and Fifth Republics made adjustments to promote greater self-government and independence for the colonized populations. The 1946 constitution established a French Union and dedicated France to empowering its people to govern themselves. The Établissements français d’Océanie (EFO) and New Caledonia could now elect their own *député* (member of parliament) to the French national assembly and senate in Paris. The four oldest colonies (Guyana, Réunion, Guadeloupe, and Martinique) became 'departments' of France (départementalisation), while the rest, including New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna, remained external 'territories'. Guyana, Réunion, Martinique, and Guadeloupe were placed under the interior ministry's jurisdiction. In order to highlight their significance as distinct but equal sections of France, the departments and territories were unified under the prime minister in the ministry of the DOM-TOM (départements et territoires d'outre-mer, or overseas departments and territories) after 1958 and they remain so to this day, known by the more straightforward term "Outre-mer" (Overseas France).<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Moses Wamanga, Kenneth Katonda, Peter Matsanga, Afiya Ahmed, “Summary of the impact of the 1944 Brazzaville Conference” National Movements and New States in Africa, 2021.

<sup>148</sup> Denise Fischer, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics*, (Australian National University Press, 2013), 40-55.



In general, French communities in the Pacific were affected by the fall of Paris in 1940, the participation of overseas Pacific citizens in the fighting in Europe (including the 'Guitarists' battalion, consisting of 387 Kanak and 318 Tahitians and New Hebrides residents, of whom a third died), the dominance of the Americans in the Pacific (the Americans managed the war from the French colony of New Caledonia) and the overall political instability in France after de Gaulle's resignation. This period as a whole highlighted the vulnerability of the French administrators in the region with a crucial question arising: "Was the end of the war also the end of the French Colonial Empire respectively?"<sup>149</sup>

The answer was given in 1958, when a referendum was held to determine the relationship between Polynesia and France. A significant number of Polynesians (64 per cent), fearing the loss of French financial and technical assistance, voted in favor of continuing the dependent relationship. Upon holding the referendum, De Gaulle's rhetoric made two things clear: first, that the modern world necessitated membership of major economic and political federations (argument used by French leaders to date) and, second, that a negative vote would mean that France would go it alone, without providing 'further moral or material assistance'.<sup>150</sup> By voting, the colonies would choose either incorporation into France, so that the status quo would continue, or extended autonomy as a self-governing member of the French Community, effectively laying the foundations for independence. The result of the vote came to recall what was once written by B  lorgey; that the colonial empire would help to maintain France's global prestige in the aftermath of the inglorious wartime experience. On the heels of this vote, in December 1958 France issued new ordinances (*Ordonnance* No 58-1337 of 23 December 1958), winding back autonomy and reducing local freedoms.<sup>151</sup>

Prior to this referendum, the region had been given new autonomy and granted overseas territory status with the implementation of the Defferre Law (*Loi-Cadre Defferre* of 23 June 1956) in 1957 (Decree of 22 July 1957). The name had changed from *  tablissements Fran  ais d'O  c  nie* (EFO) to *La Polyn  sie Fran  aise* (French Polynesia) bringing symbolically (but at the same time literally) the territory closer to France.<sup>152</sup> According to

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<sup>149</sup> Denise Fisher, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics*, (Australian National University Press, 2013), 33.

<sup>150</sup> John Henningham, *Australian Studies of Journalism*, (University of Queensland, 1992), 123.

<sup>151</sup> Denise Fisher, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics*, (Australian National University Press, 2013), 52.

<sup>152</sup> J.M. Regnault, "Histoire de l'assembl  e de la Polyn  sie fran  aise", *Assembl  e de la polyn  sie fran  aise* (1957).

Robert Aldrich, “a local assembly (Assemblée territoriale) and a local administration (Conseil de Gouvernement) were allowed to be established. This government was still governed by France, but its powers were limited. The local assembly could legislate on things like public utilities, education and health, but it had no jurisdiction over the territories budget or foreign relations”.<sup>153</sup>



Pouvanaa a Oopa, whose name was associated with the cultural and economic claims of the Mā'ohi (indigenous Polynesians), as well as the foundation of the Rassemblement démocratique des populations tahitiennes (Democratic Assembly of the Tahitian Peoples, RDPT), was elected vice president of the new governing council in 1958 and announced a plan to secede from France and form an independent Tahitian republic. His advocating for greater autonomy quickly turned into demands for independence, leveraging the dual meaning of the Tahitian word, ti'amara'a (which implies both autonomy and independence).

<sup>154</sup>

He was subsequently arrested, yet his influence contributed to the relatively lower support for remaining with France during the September 1958 constitutional referendum, where only 64 percent voted in favor –compared to over 90 percent in other Pacific territories. This occurred despite vigorous promotion of the ‘yes’ vote by French officials amidst the planned relocation of the nuclear testing program from Algeria to French Polynesia. Many years later, in 1977, France enacted new statutes granting greater local autonomy, but pro-independence and pro-autonomy parties continued to push for the popular election of the president and either increased autonomy or full independence.<sup>155</sup>



French agenda in the 1960s-1980s seemed to run counter to the sense of political evolution in the surrounding region, where decolonization was underway (Western Samoa achieved independence in 1962, Nauru in 1968, Tonga and Fiji in 1970, Papua New Guinea in 1975

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<https://www.assemblee.pf/histoire/page/1953-1996/1953-1957-les-efo-deviennent-la-polynesie-francaise-/6569>

<sup>153</sup> Robert Aldrich, *France in the South Pacific*, (Canberra: ANU Press, 1993), 170-190.

<sup>154</sup> Denise Fisher, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics* (Australian National University Press, 2013), 70-75.

<sup>155</sup> Francis James West and Sophie Foster for Britannica, “Pouvanaa a Oopa” in “History of French Polynesia”.

and Vanuatu in 1980). Disregarding the 1960 UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples and the related Decolonization Committee, also known as the Committee of 24 (UNGA Resolution 1514 (XV) and Resolution 1541 of 14 December 1960), France continued to elide UN decolonization principles.

Along with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the two International Covenants on Human Rights that were ratified on December 16, 1966 –the first pertaining to Individual and Political Rights and the second to Cultural, Economic, and Social Rights– provided a more comprehensive framework of the concept of self-determination. Self-determination was outlined in Article 1 of both Covenants as a universal right that transcends the specific framework of decolonization. More specifically, the first paragraph stated that: “All people have the right to self-determination. According to this right, they freely determine their political status and freely ensure their economic, social and cultural development”. Although self-determination is not defined specifically as a term in this article, another right is established: the free determination of people's political status as well as the assurance of social, cultural, and economic growth. Especially the latter was to be the central concern of the following decades.



Since the 1980s, as has happened in the past at the time of the great oceanic explorations, various writers and scholars have again turned their attention to the former colonies, including the Pacific Ocean -describing it as the center of the world. Unlike in the past when the newly discovered land had attracted aesthetic interest, what Europeans were now interested in was the economic evaluation of this “paradise”.

The twenty-first century was heralded as the Pacific century. Although, as a traditionally strong economic power, Europe (through the colonies occupied by countries like France) still ‘existed’ in the southern hemisphere of the Pacific, it was considered a secondary stronghold in the wider region and seemed to be excluded from the emerging Asia-Pacific cooperation in the late 1980s and 1990s. With China in the background, the new wave of attention to the Pacific this time was global and resulted from the dynamic economic growth of the fast industrializing South East Asia, Hong Kong, and South Korea, all of which are coastal Pacific states. At the same period, Britain's retreat from the South Pacific further strengthened

French persistence, providing France a strategic advantage in an economically crucial region.<sup>156</sup>

In 1984, French Polynesia became autonomous according to Article 1 of the French Law No. 84-820 of September 6, 1984, which defined the status of the territory of French Polynesia. Today's article reads as follows:

Article 1 (abrogé)

Abrogé par Loi n°96-312 du 12 avril 1996 - art. 123 (Ab)

*Le territoire de la Polynésie française comprend les îles du Vent, les îles Sous-le-Vent, les îles Australes, les îles Tuamotu, les îles Gambier et les îles Marquises.*

*Le territoire de la Polynésie française constitue, conformément aux articles 72 et 74 de la Constitution, un territoire d'outre-mer doté de l'autonomie interne dans le cadre de la République et dont l'organisation particulière et évolutive est définie par la présente loi.*

*Le territoire de la Polynésie française s'administre librement par ses représentants élus.*

*Il est représenté au Parlement de la République et au Conseil économique et social dans les conditions définies par les lois organiques.*

*Le territoire détermine librement les signes distinctifs permettant de marquer sa personnalité dans les manifestations publiques et officielles aux côtés des emblèmes de la République.*

*Le haut-commissaire de la République, en tant que délégué du Gouvernement et conformément à l'article 72 de la Constitution, a la charge des intérêts nationaux, du respect des lois, de l'ordre public et, dans les conditions fixées par la présente loi, du contrôle administratif. Il veille, dans les conditions prévues par la présente loi, à l'exercice régulier de leurs compétences par les autorités du territoire.*

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<sup>156</sup> Staffan Burenstam Linder, *The Pacific Century, Economic and Political Consequences of Asian-Pacific Dynamism*, (Stanford university Press, 1986), 349-351.

[translation]

Article 1 (repealed)

*Repealed by Loi n°96-312 du 12 avril 1996 - art. 123 (Ab)*

*The territory of French Polynesia comprises the îles du Vent, les îles Sous-le-Vent, the Austral Islands, the Tuamotu Islands, the Gambier Islands and the Marquesas Islands.*

*The territory of French Polynesia constitutes, in accordance with articles 72 and 74 of the Constitution, an overseas territory endowed with internal autonomy within the framework of the Republic, the particular and evolving organization of which is defined by the present law.*

*The territory of French Polynesia is freely administered by its elected representatives.*

*It is represented in the Parliament of the Republic and in the Economic and Social Council under the conditions defined by organic laws.*

*The Territory is free to determine the distinctive signs that mark its personality in public and official events, alongside the emblems of the Republic.*

*The High Commissioner of the Republic, as a delegate of the Government and in accordance with article 72 of the Constitution, is responsible for national interests, respect for the law, public order and, under the conditions laid down by the present law, administrative control. He ensures, under the conditions laid down in the present law, that the territorial authorities exercise their powers properly. (translated from the French by the author)*

Although the 1984 law is unquestionably significant historically as a watershed in the process of achieving self-government, the Organic Law of 27 February 2004 (amended by Organic Law of 7 December 2007), which is based on Article 74 of the Constitution, served as the primary foundation for the current legal system. Organic Law expanded French Polynesia's self-government in 2004 (a year after France had reclassified the region as an overseas collectivity rather than an overseas territory):

Organic law n° 2004-192 of February 27 2004 laying down the autonomous status of French Polynesia, Article 12 I.

*- When the Constitutional Council has determined that a law promulgated after this organic law has come into effect is within the matters falling under the jurisdiction of French Polynesia, as it applies to French Polynesia, that law can be amended or repealed by the French Polynesian Assembly. II.*

*- Matters shall be referred to the Constitutional Council by the President of French Polynesia after the Council of Ministers have deliberated, by the President of the French Polynesian Assembly pursuant to a deliberation of that Assembly, by the Prime Minister, the President of the National Assembly or the President of the Senate. The Constitutional Council shall advise the other authorities that have the power to refer matters to it that such a referral, which must be supported by reasons, has occurred; these authorities can submit comments within fifteen days. The Constitutional Council shall give a ruling within three months.*

Oscar Temaru, a pro-independent leader, was elected president that year and served briefly before losing to his predecessor, Gaston Flosse, who at that time was opposed to independence. Over the next decade, the presidency rotated among several politicians—including Temaru, Flosse and Gaston Tong Sang, who served multiple terms each representing different visions for the future of French Polynesia in relation to France.<sup>157</sup>

Although many foreigners and French people have taken up residence in these islands (named French Polynesia as from 1957) through the years, the indigenous population has always remained a significant majority.<sup>158</sup> Nevertheless, according to one of the fundamental principles of the French state—that the unity of language accompanies the unity of the state—French has been established as the sole official language, and, as such, it was expected to be the primary language used in public life.<sup>159</sup> However, a strict legal interpretation does not mandate the exclusive use of the French language.

Parliament in the Organic Law on Status of 12 April 1996 recognized that “the Tahitian language and other Polynesian languages can be used”.<sup>160</sup> Consequently, “the use of

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<sup>157</sup> Bruno Saura, "Power Switching and Renewal in French Polynesian Politics." *Journal of Pacific Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 1–22.

<sup>158</sup> International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA). "The Indigenous World 2022: French Polynesia." Last modified March 31, 2022. <https://iwgia.org/en/french-polynesia/4687-iw-2022-french-polynesia.html>.

<sup>159</sup> *Constitution of the French Republic*, October 4, 1958, art. 2, accessed October 27, 2025. <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/en/constitution-of-4-october-1958>.

<sup>160</sup> Organic Law on Status of 12 April 1996, art 115.

Polynesian language is possible in the public life of Polynesians”.<sup>161</sup> This “exception” complies with the recognition of “cultural rights”. In this regard it should be noted that the Organic Law on Status provides that:

*The Tahitian language is a fundamental aspect of cultural identity: it is the substance of social cohesion, the means of daily communication; it is recognized and must be preserved in the same way as other Polynesian languages alongside the language of the French state in order to guarantee the cultural diversity which is the bounty of the French Polynesia.*<sup>162</sup>

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However, the author’s personal online correspondence with locals indicated that the Tahitian language is increasingly becoming less prevalent among the younger generations.

*«I don’t speak Tahitian. I can understand a bit though. I actually don’t think I have close friends with a good written level in Tahitian as it was not very common when I was in school. Most just speak it... and they are becoming fewer and fewer...»* (personal online communication with Hoarai T., native Tahitian currently studying in Paris).

Nevertheless, there is not only a declining use of the Tahitian language that demonstrates colonial presence nowadays. In Tahiti, alongside the French language, subjects such as geography and history are also integrated into the school curriculum. However, since French remains the sole language of official instruction, Tahitian students typically pursue their post-secondary education at French universities, with the notable exception of the Centre Universitaire de Polynésie Française located on the island of Tahiti.

Furthermore, the French “Radio France Outremer” (RFO) handles the majority of television broadcasts and it is France that finances it by paying all the employees and thus controlling the content.<sup>163</sup> To this day, in 2025, «the main and most popular newspapers, such as ‘La Dépêche de Tahiti’ and ‘Nouvelles de Tahiti’, are still published in French» (information obtained by the author through online communication with locals).

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<sup>161</sup> High Commission of the Republic in French Polynesia v Assembly of French Polynesia, above n 8

<sup>162</sup> The Organic Law on Status, art 57 at [2]

<sup>163</sup> Miriam Kahn, “Tahiti Intertwined: Ancestral Land, Tourist Postcard, and Nuclear Test Site”, *American Anthropologist* Vol. 102, No. 1 (2000): 7-26.

In 2013, French Polynesia was relisted as a Non-Self-Governing territory by the UN General Assembly Resolution 67/265, which was adopted on May 17, 2013. The Resolution recognizes that French Polynesia, besides its extended autonomy, remains a ‘dependent territory’ and calls on France to intensify its dialogue with this Pacific region to facilitate the process of self-determination.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> “French Polynesia”, United Nations- The United Nations and Decolonization. Last updated 20 September 2024. <https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsqt/french-polynesia>



## 2.2 Land Appropriation and Environmental Degradation through Spatial Transformation and Ecological Violence

O vai au nei? (My Elder said...) <sup>165</sup>

(Henri Hiro)

Te ra ia hiti, no te taatoa ia hiti.

When the sun shines there it shines for  
everybody

Te marama ia fa no te taatoa ia fa.

When the moon shines, there it shines for  
everybody.

Te fetu ia anapa no te taatoa ia anapa

When stars glitter, there they glitter for  
everybody

Te aho ia huti no te taatoa ia huti.

The breath that we breathe it is pure breath  
for all.

Te tama i pua i te ao ia pua i te ao fanao.

The child who comes into the world, is born  
in a world of happiness.

Te taatoa no te ora, te taatoa ia ora. [...]

All for life and life for all.

*(An excerpt from Henri Hiro's poem, "O vai au nei ?" as found in the recent re-publication in 2004 of Henri Hiro's Pehepehe "I tau nunaa": Message Poétique (Volume 1, new and revised edition, Editions Haere Po, Tahiti, publisher Robert Koenig).*

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<sup>165</sup> Dan Taulapapa McMullin, " 'Here is the Fire that Devours Me': Tahitian Spirituality and Activism in the Poetry of Henri Hiro," Academia.edu, final draft July 2005, accessed October 26, 2025, [https://www.academia.edu/64340332/Here\\_is\\_the\\_Fire\\_that\\_Devours\\_Me\\_Tahitian\\_spirituality\\_and\\_activism\\_in\\_the\\_poetry\\_of\\_Henri\\_Hiro](https://www.academia.edu/64340332/Here_is_the_Fire_that_Devours_Me_Tahitian_spirituality_and_activism_in_the_poetry_of_Henri_Hiro)

### 2.2.1 Indigenous relationship with their land and the natural environment

*“Always present during the colonial history of Tahiti were conflicts between Tahitian ideas about land as nurturing mother and Western ideas about land as expendable resource.” –*

*Miriam Kahn*

#### **‘Te Fenua’ (the Land)**

Mā‘ohi (a term that today is used to refer to the indigenous people of French Polynesia, also known as Tahitians) see the land as something alive, as a living organism interconnected with human life. Mā‘ohi notions of land and nature, which lie at the heart of this struggle over place, are rooted in beliefs about the origin of the islands and the relationship between people and the land. In Polynesia, “land figures as equivalent to one’s own body and family rather than as an inanimate object”.<sup>166</sup> The Polynesian languages reflect this particular concept to such an extent that there is no room for an accurate translation of this earth-human relationship into the corresponding Western European notions. Similarly, the natural elements and natural phenomena are described in a unique way, with terms difficult to be translated into non Polynesian languages.<sup>167</sup>

As is the case for most Pacific Islanders, a Tahitian’s sense of cultural identity is rooted in land. Tahitians experience their land as alive with procreative powers and nurturing abilities. In the Mā‘ohi cosmology, gods and goddesses gave birth to the islands, which then embodied their deities’ procreative powers. The name of the island Huahine, for example, consists of a joining of the words for genitals or seeds (*hua*) and woman (*hine*). For Tahitians the island reverberates with godly fertility.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Teresia K. Teaiwa, “On Analogies: Rethinking the Pacific in a Global Context”, *The Contemporary Pacific*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2006): 71-87.

<sup>167</sup> For example, some Tahitian terms related to ocean waves that can only be described periphrastically in any other language are the following: *arau*= long, applies to waves, *‘are*; *‘ari*; *‘aru*= waves, wave, swell, *‘are ‘ue*= wave that breaks a canoe or a boat, *‘aru fa’ae’e*= wave that capsizes a canoe, *‘are fatu moana*= state of the sea characterized by a very high level with large waves, *‘autua*= to swim on one’s back, *maniatæaha’a*= sea like a millpond, *tō’are*= to be rough (sea), *taihorahora*= the sea when the waves begin to break, *tomotomo*= to fill with water due to the waves, *vāve’a*= large, imposing high wave, *tōhuhe*= to be calm for a moment, like the sea, *hu’a’aru*= white sea foam, *taihōtū*= very heavy sea, *tō’ahe’ahe*= lapping, slightly rippled, *mariuāva’a*= to be swamped by the waves, *hoe*= to move on the water regardless of the means of propulsion, *mania āputaputa*= calm in some places, while in others rough (only when referring to the sea), *fēto’ito’i*= turbulence of the sea, *e’erī*= once used by surfers when they encountered a big wave, *‘aru vehi*= wave that engulfs a person

<sup>168</sup> “Huahine”, Tahiti Island Travel, November 28, 2023.

<https://www.tahitiislandstravel.com/destinations/huahine-2/>

Tahitians see these topographical features as maps of the ancestral wanderings that connect today's inhabitants to their past. The association between people, the land, genealogy, and history is evident in the numerous *marae* cited in the landscape. *Marae* are sacred temples dedicated to individual deities, and serve as portals for the deities when they descend to earth. They are no longer used for religious rituals as they once were, but they continue to be deeply respected as sacred spaces.<sup>169</sup>

However, what reveals the connection of the Tahitians with nature and environment more than anything else is, according to Miriam Kahn, the custom of “planting children’s placentas in the belly of the ‘bountiful mother’ (as the land is allegorically stated)”, “The placenta is always replanted in the earth. When a child is in the womb the mother takes care of the child, but when it is born the mother asks the land to take care of her child”. The relationship between people and land, exemplified by the act of planting the placenta, is always reciprocal. “People must care for the land because the land, in turn, nourishes people by providing the foods and other materials they need. A person’s health and well-being are dependent on the land and, in fact, can be seen as extensions of it. The traditional medicines for curing illnesses are made from products of the land, another reflection of the interdependence of the land with its people” according to the author of ‘Tahiti beyond the Postcard’.<sup>170</sup>

### **“Te Moana” (the Ocean)**

Besides their relationship with the land, Polynesians are also famous for their unique relation with the ocean. This profound relation with the ocean has been linked with the art of surfing known as *hōrue*, which means ‘wave sliding’ in Tahitian. Surfing was never just a means of transportation or leisure; it was a spiritual practice, a ritual and a way to connect with their gods and natural elements. It is the botanist Joseph Banks, member of Captain Cook’s crew, who first referred to the practice of *hōrue* in his journal. On May 28, 1769, a tour of Tahiti

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<sup>169</sup> Daniel Tyerman, George Bennet, James Montgomery and London Missionary Society, *Journal of voyages and travels*, (Wellcome Library, 1831), 515-520.

<sup>170</sup> Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard*, (University of Washington Press, 2011), 23.

was organized during Captain Cook's first voyage and one of the first testimonies of European explorers -observing what was later called "surfing"-was recorded:

*"In our return to the boat we saw the Tahitians amuse or exercise themselves in a manner truly surprising. It was in a place where the shore was not guarded by a reef as is usually the case, consequently a high surf fell upon the shore, amore dreadful one I have not often seen: no European boat could have landed in it and I think no European who had by any means got into could possibly have saved his life, as the shore was covered with pebbles and large stones..."*<sup>171</sup>

In this first encounter with the practice of surfing, Joseph Banks, not knowing what it was about, equated the wooden boards used by these "gliders" to what he thought were the remains of a canoe.<sup>172</sup> Later, Captain William Bligh, commander of the *Bounty*, would in turn describe in his diary on 28 November 1788, a surfing session, noting that "The heavy surf which has run on the shore for a few days past has given great amusement to many of the Natives, but is such as one would suppose would drown any European."<sup>173</sup>

Although we have to go back to May 29, 1769 to find the first written record describing surfing, the oral tradition of the Mā'ohi contains many stories describing the art of gliding over wave, either on boards or small pirogues, or attached to small floats made of reeds as on Rapa-nui (Easter Island). In Polynesian mythology it is a woman who is the founder of surfing, the legendary Vēhiatua-i-te-māta'i.

*"In ancient times in Teahūpo'o, a young woman of high rank, a tapairu named Vēhiatua-i-te-māta'i was a veritable champion in the art of hōrue. "I am Vēhiatua-i-te-māta'i, the daughter of the winds, she who rides the waves of Ta'aroa" she would cry out as she surfed the waves. She stood splendidly on the ocean's surface, seen as the "skin" of the god Ta'aroa, master of the ocean depths. One day, accompanied by Huiātere, Hina and Teurutu, Vēhiatua-i-te-māta'i went to Teahūpo'o to participate in the hōrue. The fa'atere declared the competition open and asked the Teahūpo'o competitors not to let outsiders beat them. The surfers were all in the*

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<sup>171</sup> "The Island of Tahiti 1769-1797- The Contact Period May 1769", Tahiti and Surfing - Where it All Began, Hōrue, A special issue by REVATahiti,(2024): 50-66. In Tahitian, surfing is commonly referred as fa'ahe'e to convey the concept of gliding. However, the discipline and practice of surfing today have a well-defined name: hōrue. Nevertheless, hōrue is primarily a cry of joy that expresses the satisfaction of succeeding in an action.

<sup>172</sup> "Joseph Banks' Description of Surf-riding, Tahiti, 1769," *SurfResearch.com.au*. Accessed October 27, 2025. [https://www.surfresearch.com.au/1769\\_Banks\\_Surfing\\_Tahiti.html](https://www.surfresearch.com.au/1769_Banks_Surfing_Tahiti.html).

<sup>173</sup> William Bligh, "Diary Entry, 28 November 1788," in *Bligh: Tahiti, 1788*, accessed October 27, 2025, [https://www.surfresearch.com.au/1788\\_Bligh\\_Tahiti.html](https://www.surfresearch.com.au/1788_Bligh_Tahiti.html).

*water, Vēhiatua-i-te-māta'i and her friends were waiting on the shore, while the other competitors were already in the water, taunting the girls left on the beach. But Vēhiatua-i-te-māta'i asked to wait for 'Ārue-roa to arrive. And when that south-westerly wind finally picked up, she invited her friends to join the water, the waves being soft and perfect. Vēhiatua-i-te-māta'i was applauded by the crowd. The chief of Matahîhae Te-iha-moe-roa, jealous that she was so admired by his entire population for excelling in this art, decided to appropriate her name and fame, before driving her out of his territory. This is how the lineages of chiefs (ari'i) of the Tai'arapu peninsula took the title of Vēhiatua-i-te-māta'i. Teahūpo'o and its Pere-rure wave are a veritable ode to surfing and still sing today of the great surfer that was Vēhiatua-i-te-māta'i who gave this district a prestige of power, a deified name and the glory of these lieux to beyond the borders." <sup>174</sup>*

Since in Polynesian culture, the ocean was considered a sacred entity, inhabited by powerful deities and spirits, surfing became a way to honor and commune with these divine forces. For thousands of years, surfing has been an integral part of Polynesian culture, treated as an art and ritual. It was believed that the act of riding a wave allowed individuals to tap into the energy and power of the ocean, forging a connection between the physical and spiritual realms. In addition to its spiritual value, surfing has practical applications in Polynesian society. It served as a mode of transportation, enabling islanders to travel between islands and discover new areas. Additionally, it was a means of harvesting fish and other marine life from the water. Polynesian surfboards, known as "olo" or "alaia," were made of solid wood and were adorned with elaborate patterns or spiritually significant symbols. The breadfruit and koa trees, which are robust and buoyant, were commonly used to make the "pahi," the traditional surfboard used in Tahiti.<sup>175</sup>

Furthermore, the Polynesian navigators traveled great distances in specialized surf canoes that skillfully navigated dangerous reefs. Without the use of compasses, sextants, or charts, ancient sailors were able to calculate their position and route by studying the stars, Sun, and other celestial bodies, as well as the pattern of ocean swells and wind flow, viewing the moon, and interpreting other natural phenomena. The ability to navigate without the need of contemporary tools became ingrained in their culture. They were intimately familiar with the

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<sup>174</sup> Cellule TUARO NUI, “Épreuves de surf des Jeux Olympiques De Paris 2024 à Tahiti - Teahūpo'o”, Livret d'information- Ministère des sports et de la Jeunesse et de la prévention contre la Délinquance, October 2023.

<https://foreveryoung.gov.pf/article-j-o-2024/livret-dinformation-epreuve-de-surf-a-teahupoo/>

<sup>175</sup> Mat Arney, “The History of Surfboard Design: Alaia”, Surf Simply (Accessed on 23 September 2025).  
<https://surfsimply.com/magazine/the-history-of-surfboard-design-alaia>

delicate indicators of nature, the behavior of birds, the complex dance of wind patterns, and the currents of the ocean. It was a testament to their profound connection with the natural world.<sup>176</sup>

This alternative ‘environmental knowledge’ allows to imagine a different set of relations to land and water that do not depend on domination and extraction. The Tahitian relationship with land and water entails breaking away from anthropocentric terms such as “humans” versus “animals” and “culture” versus “nature”. Indigenous concepts of kinship with other beings, animate or inanimate, in other words, the “more-than-human,” serve to counter the hierarchical binaries that facilitate the justification of conquest, (neo)colonization, exploitation, and even massacre of those defined as “nonhuman” or less “human.”

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<sup>176</sup> Ben Finney, “Applied Ethnoastronomy: Navigating by the Stars Across the Pacific”, College Park Md, Volume 12 (1996): 336.

### 2.2.2 Colonial and Neocolonial interventions in the ‘sacred’ Mā‘ohi land: From urban planning to nuclear testing and tourist infrastructures

#### i. *Spatial Reconfiguration and Urban Planning*

*“Imperialism, after all, is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control.”*

*-Edward Said*

From 1840 to 1880, the French presence in the Pacific was underpinned by the necessity of secure coaling and provisioning stations for its maritime vessels, a role fulfilled by Tahiti and surrounding islands. The modest territorial scale of these islands, coupled with the compliance of indigenous leadership, facilitated France's consolidation and administration of the region. This led to the formal establishment of colonies in the Pacific, classified as Territoires d'Outre-Mer (TOM), encompassing the Marquesas, the Society Islands (including Tahiti), Tuamotu, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and Vanuatu.<sup>177</sup> Following the shift from traditional colonialism to neocolonialism, the military footprint in the Pacific was downsized, though never entirely withdrawn. The cessation of nuclear testings in the 1990s catalyzed the closure of some installations, leaving others in a state of ongoing reconfiguration or decommission.<sup>178</sup> These initial military bases established in the Pacific islands constituted the opening move in a subsequent comprehensive and leveling intervention into the region's geophysical landscape and urban planning. This intervention fundamentally transformed the spatial configuration and organization of the area.<sup>179</sup>

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Although the term “neocolonialism” emerged after World War II and was first coined by Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, in 1965, traditional colonial violence in the Pacific

¹⁷⁷ Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard*, (University of Washington Press, 2011), 41.

¹⁷⁸ Claudia Ledderucci, "Erasing the Empire through the Restitution of Military Land: Military Bases and Processes of Re-appropriation in French Polynesia." *Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association* 22, no. 1 (2022): 263-274.

¹⁷⁹ There is no specific literature directly addressing the connection between military bases in French Polynesia and environmental degradation. Therefore, broader conclusions must be drawn from scholarly research on the general environmental impacts of military bases worldwide; John Lindsay-Poland and Nick Morgan's "Overseas military bases and environment", Jeff D. Colgan's, "Climate change and the politics of military bases", Jeffrey Santa, Ana Heidi, Amin Hong, Rina Garcia Chua and Zhou Xiaojing's, "'Part II Militarized environments', Empire and environment, Ecological Ruin in the Transpacific".

had already begun to evolve before the war, shifting into a more subtle and concealed form, camouflaged and transformed into “invisible violence” (a rationality of accumulation, bureaucracy, interference in urban planning, alteration of ancestral land management etc.). Dried coconut, surfing, vanilla beans and human labor coexisted with the ‘raw materials’ of the metropolis, which were none other than banks, post offices, ships, planes and military complexes. The “politics of representation” continued, but this time it took a more tangible form, beyond the narratives.

The new economic structures and institutions, which favored the development of services and trade to the benefit of the colonialists, shifted part of the population from traditional jobs (like fishing) to jobs related to colonial activities (administration, services, trade etc.). The Tahitians never became “slaves”, they became directly “employees”. This transition, which confirmed the entry into the new order and marked the beginning of neocolonial practices, was followed by the abandonment of traditional sea and land management methods. A salient example is the introduction of monoculture (coconut plantation is a case in point), which created a crisis in the agricultural sector, with many Polynesians abandoning agriculture and emigrating, while the once sacred land was turned into an object of speculation.¹⁸⁰

Simultaneously, imported products –contributing to the neglect of local varieties– further enhanced the loss of traditional knowledge and the destabilization of natural balances. In general, the marginalization of traditional occupations, as a result of colonial policies, and the introduction of Western products and practices undermined the self-sufficiency of the Tahitians and alienated them from the environment. The deviation from the sustainable customs combined with colonial methods –often based on the intensive exploitation of natural resources and the use of hazardous agricultural chemicals– led to soil erosion, reduced biodiversity, and ultimately degradation of ecosystems.¹⁸¹

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Although nuclear testings were undeniably a manifestation of France’s hard power, urban planning and reconfiguration, as a form of soft power, had much earlier laid the groundwork for the atrocities that were to follow. France, as a colonial power, shaped the “physical environment” of Tahiti to better suit its needs for economic development and national

¹⁸⁰ Francois Ravault, “Land Problems in French Polynesia”, *Pacific Perspective* Volume 10 n° 2 (1982): 31-59.

¹⁸¹ Robert Aldrich, *The French Presence in the South Pacific, 1842–1940* (Palgrave Macmillan London 1990), 169-198.

security.¹⁸² As every imperialist nation–state, it expanded its power and control over its new colony by constructing infrastructures such as roads, wharves and airports. What was once admired, it was soon destined to be replaced. Polynesia, that once had inspired wallpapers that adorned the French living rooms with images of an elusive distant paradise, was steadily transforming into a replica of Paris. In addition to the creation of new spatial arrangements, where before there were beaches with crystal clear waters and dense vegetation, France also took over the planning, and construction of urban built environments to enable the production of labor-power and capital.¹⁸³

Pape‘ete, which is approximately 15.700 km away from Paris, serves as a prominent case study of spatial rearrangement. This transformation was deeply influenced by the new visual perception theories and methods "to see" and "be seen" that radically impacted nineteenth-century spatial organization.¹⁸⁴ As Paris underwent its own restructuring –evolving from “a cluster of isolated cells into a unified physical and human space”,¹⁸⁵ where new boulevards offered citizens a modern, legible urban experience– Pape‘ete simultaneously emerged as French Polynesia's political and commercial hub. Driven by an expanding population of French immigrants and a concentration of French economic and political power, Pape‘ete embodied a characteristic colonial paradigm: a fertile ground where the métropole sought to reproduce itself.¹⁸⁶

This metropolitan-inspired urbanization, however, came at a steep environmental cost. Pape'ete's periphery and central areas were organized following the blueprint of the métropole. Within this context, subsequent infrastructure development, particularly in costal zones –similarly inspired by French urban planning– led to increased coastal erosion and the destruction of sensitive ecosystems.¹⁸⁷ Critically, this rapid urbanization, especially when coupled with the unregulated tourism, that emerged in the following decades, was not accompanied by appropriate management measures. The result was a cycle of changes in land use, destruction of natural habitats, and loss of biodiversity, affecting not only Pape‘ete, but

¹⁸² Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard*, (University of Washington Press, 2011), 40.

¹⁸³ Neil Brenner, “Global, fragmented, hierarchical: Henri Lefebvre’s geographies of globalization”, *Public Culture* Volume 10, Issue 1 (1997):148.

¹⁸⁴ John Urry, “*The “Consumption” of Tourism*”, *British Sociological Association* Volume 24, Issue 1 (1990): 137.

¹⁸⁵ Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution, I: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, (Harvard University Press, 1983), 151.

¹⁸⁶ Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard* (University of Washington Press, 2011), 45.

¹⁸⁷ Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 15-55.

also other areas (particularly their vulnerable coastal zones and coral reefs) that experienced less "urban violence".¹⁸⁸

The capital of Tahiti, originally chosen by missionaries in the 1820s as a peaceful refuge from the mara'amu (the cool southerly winds of the tropical winter), became anything but calm. Prior to the arrival of European explorers in the late 1700s, Pape'ete was a location in a protected harbor renowned for its fresh water supply. French urban planning led to a high concentration of population in urban areas, causing intense urban and demographic pressure. As of the 2010s, almost 75 per cent of the population of French Polynesia had concentrated in Tahiti, mainly due to lack of available land and the group housing policy, which further exacerbated waste management. Until the 1990s, the waste management was uncontrolled: garbage was dumped in illegal landfills, burned or buried without any sorting and treatment obligation. Poor management led to soil and water pollution, with "leachate" from landfills polluting ground and surface water.¹⁸⁹

France's strategy of altering the spatial arrangements succeeded to bridge the chasm between the Pacific and the West, and to bring the Tahiti of 'espace conçu' (space as conceived by the outsiders) and the Tahiti of 'espace perçu' (space as perceived by Tahitians) into alignment.¹⁹⁰ The establishment of a "second Paris" —oceans away from France, in a previously pristine environment— set the basis for an extensive human-led environmental degradation emerging from colonial and neocolonial practices and asymmetrical power relations.

As written by L.T Smith, "Western conceptions of space are not neutral. They are charged with power and have been used to impose dominance on indigenous people".¹⁹¹ Correspondingly, in Pape'ete, colonial power left both visible and invisible scars on the land, confirming that "a landscape is the most solid appearance in which a history can declare

¹⁸⁸ "Sustainable Development Goals in French Polynesia: French Polynesia's SDG monitoring report" (2021):25.

¹⁸⁹ "Sustainable Development Goals in French Polynesia: French Polynesia's SDG monitoring report" (2021):16.

¹⁹⁰ Henri Lefebvre's theory of espace perçu (perceived space) and espace conçu (conceived space) is part of his broader analysis of the social production of space, as developed mainly in his work titled "La Production de l'Espace" (1974). For Lefebvre, space is not merely geometric or physical, but a social product produced through a tripartite dialectic and shaped through the interaction of practices, representations and experiences, while at the same time being a means of production, control and domination.

¹⁹¹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1999), 43–74.

itself".¹⁹² Pape‘ete echoes patterns implemented in most colonial and neocolonial contexts, where a new topography is produced as a result of the constant erasure and reconstruction of space. The conquest of territory, the acquisition of land, the drawing or destruction of borders, the alteration of spatial arrangements and ecosystems, and the naming of places are all common colonial and neocolonial practices.

According to Lefebvre, “the ‘etymology’ of locations in the sense of what happened at a particular place and thereby changed it –all of this becomes inscribed in space”.¹⁹³ Places, apart from their spatial significance, tend to become intersections of social relations and end up being a “landscape” of social representations. Similar to other places affected by colonialism and imperialism, Tahiti witnessed the "mutually constitutive processes, practices, and forms of power through which métropoles and colonies make and remake one another".¹⁹⁴ But, as is almost always the case, it is the colonies that are most spatially and visually abused. In this instance, at the same time that images of Polynesia were circulating throughout the Western world, Pape‘ete was being radically altered to look more and more like the Western standards.



Overall, Western concepts of spatial organization radically shaped how the indigenous world is represented and understood. However, the core issue was not merely the Western perceptions that created stereotypes about the indigenous people, but rather the fact that these stereotypes physically transformed indigenous land, culture, and life to fit Western spatial frameworks. In effect, indigenous territories, traditions, and livelihoods have been colonized and reshaped by these imposed views.

The French rule thus achieved more than conquering the island by appropriating the natural resources; it also conquered it visually, by creating a new image of Tahiti. This image of new spatial arrangements –that were nothing like old pre-colonized Tahiti– was more crucial than the physical acquisition itself. Just as the “politics of representation” played a decisive role in the early colonization of Tahiti, the colonial (and later neocolonial) shaping of Tahiti’s urban planning served as a powerful tool for the French colonialists to maintain their dominance on

¹⁹² Fred Inglis, “*Nation and Community: A Landscape and its Morality*”, *The Sociological Review* Volume 25, Issue 3, (1994): 489.

¹⁹³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 37.

¹⁹⁴ Gillian Hart, “*Denaturalizing Dispossession: Critical Ethnography in the Age of Resurgent Imperialism*”, *Antipode* 38,(2006): 981.

the island. The critical difference was that France no longer relied on “narrative”, as was the case with Bougainville, but on the practical shaping of Tahiti’s visual understanding. “Imagination” had, by then, given way to “infrastructure”, articulated through a triumphal declaration of cultural superiority.

i. Nuclear testing

Taero atomi (Nuclear Poison),

A song by Angelo Neuffer Ari‘itai

Taero te fenua,

Taero atoa te nuna‘a,

Taero atoa te moana,

Taero atoa te vaha

O te mau ti‘a e ha‘avare nei

Na roto i te fa‘aitera‘a mai

Ia oe e te nuna‘a

E ere te mea taero roa,

Te paura atomi.

The land is poisoned,

The people are poisoned,

The sea is poisoned,

As are the mouths

Of our leaders

Who lie

And tell us

It is not very poisonous,

That bomb.

Taero te reva,

Taero atoa te mau ma‘a,

Taero atoa te mau tamari‘i,

Taero atoa te ferurira‘a

O te mau feia e ha‘avare

Na roto i te fa‘aitera‘a mai

Ia oe e te nuna‘a

E ere te mea ino roa,

Te paura atomi.

The air is poisoned,

Our food is poisoned,

The children are poisoned,

As is the conscience

Of those

Who lie

And tell us

It is not very harmful,

That bomb.

Paura atomi,

Aita matou e hina‘aro ia oe

I teie fenua.

Atomic bomb,

We don’t want you

On our land

Paura atomi,
Aita matou e hina'aro ia vi'ivi'i
I teie fenua.

Atomic bomb,
We don't want your pollution
On our land.

Paura atomi,
Aita matou e hina'aro te pohe
I teie fenua,

Atomic bomb,
We don't want death
On our land,

Paura atomi,
Haere e atu oe i rapae au
I teie fenua.

Atomic bomb,
Go away from here
From our land.

Years of colonial practices had reshaped Tahiti's topography and alienated part of its indigenous population from their ancestral lands. This backdrop metaphorically "paved with rose petals" the way for the advent of the neocolonial era, which inaugurated by the Nuclear testing in the Pacific, one of the greatest ecological atrocities in human history. The French nuclear program was a component of a Western framework of comparable atrocities conducted by the United States at Bikini Atoll and Britain at Maralinga in Australia. The international opposition to nuclear testing was slow to gain traction in the early days of the Cold War, but once it did, it was harshly critical of France, especially in the Pacific region, where opposition to Western nuclear testing had been apparent since 1956.¹⁹⁵

In 1962, the French nuclear testing program was relocated from the Western Sahara to the French Polynesian islands of Moruroa and Fangataufa. The logistical requirements of this massive undertaking necessitated the establishment of key support bases in the region. The program's headquarters were set up in Pape'ete, where a large area of coral reef was reclaimed to construct new docks for sheltering and servicing the numerous ships required to support and monitor the tests. Additionally, a crucial support base was established on Hao in the Gambier archipelago. The chosen testing sites, Moruroa and Fangataufa, held significant cultural value in Mā'ohi life, traditionally serving as fishing grounds and places for

¹⁹⁵ Denise Fisher, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics* (Australian National University Press, 2013), 49-51.

foraging.¹⁹⁶ The Permanent Commission of the Territorial Government gave the French State control of the testing sites in 1964 in order to protect French interests, and these regions were designated as national security zones in 1980.¹⁹⁷ After regional and global outcry, and in response to the 1974 ICJ court decision brought by Australia and Aotearoa against France, in 1975 underground testing took the place of atmospheric testing, which had started in 1966 on Moruroa (when France refused to comply with the 1963 agreement by the United States, the Soviet Union and Britain, that provided for the cessation of atmospheric testing and a switch to underground testing).¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, in spite of growing worldwide criticism, underground testing went on until 1992 and then again from 1995 to 1996.¹⁹⁹

In 1964, President de Gaulle claimed sovereignty over Moruroa and Fangataufa (two isolated atolls located roughly 700 miles east of Tahiti). The rhetoric of isolated islands went hand in hand with that of finite spaces as perfect island laboratories, making possible the French nuclear project. Although Moruroa was chosen because of the wide pass into the lagoon that could accommodate large ships, Hao served as the primary staging area for the testing program, as it was deemed prudent for personnel to spend as little time as possible on Moruroa or Fangataufa, especially during the period of atmospheric testing.

The installations in the Gambier Archipelago, where construction on the inhabited main island of Mangareva and the neighboring islet of Totegegíe started in 1968, were less well-known. Tahitians were misled into believing that the activity there involved the construction of a rocket test site rather than a nuclear bomb test site. An airstrip, a port, a desalination plant, water reservoirs, radio and weather stations, supply hangars, cement dikes, and a radiation analysis station were among the amenities on Totegegíe, while on the island of Mangareva a bunker with meter-thick walls was built for sheltering the military and the island's inhabitants from radioactive fallout during the nuclear tests.²⁰⁰ [Infrastructure is still a remnant of the nuclear testing era. Whereas much has been dismantled, empty buildings and airstrips remain, largely unused (US has expressed interest in the future use of the remaining infrastructure as landing strips there). Unresolved today remains also the question of the

¹⁹⁶ Billie Lythberg, Phyllis Herd and Melenaita Taumoeofolau, "'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures", Pacific arts: The journal of the Pacific Arts Association New series, Volume 25, Number 1 (2025): 10-30.

¹⁹⁷ John Henningham, *Australian Studies of Journalism* (University of Queensland, 1992), 162.

¹⁹⁸ Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard* (University of Washington Press, 2011), 71.

¹⁹⁹ Denise Fisher, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics* (Australian National University Press, 2013), 73-74.

²⁰⁰ Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard* (University of Washington Press, 2011), 70-72.

return to French Polynesia of Moruroa and Fangatufa, which were ceded to France in 1964 for the program].²⁰¹

In 2019, during a Q&A session of ‘Peace Boat’, Gabriel Tetiarahi (also known as “Gabi”) – founder of the NGO ‘Hiti Tau’ (“stand up and make a change”), which works to promote economic independence among the Mā‘ohi people and seeks transparency and compensation for the health effects of nuclear testing– recalled the day he witnessed nuclear testing in Moruroa Atoll sharing his feelings about the event:

“Tahitians were guinea pigs, like rats to the French army [...]. The worst consequence of the bomb in our country was the colonization of Tahitians’ minds. We were brainwashed by the “big boys (referring to France).”²⁰²

[Over thirty years (1966-1996), France has conducted a total of 193 nuclear tests in the Pacific with Gabri remembering the last test on the day of his fortieth birthday.]

In the face of international and domestic outcry there was a distracting huge influx of money, technology, jobs, and infrastructure during the nuclear testing period, including the construction of the international airport in Faa‘a, a few kilometers down the road from Pape‘ete, as well as airstrips and the Centre d’Expérimentation du Pacifique (Pacific Experimentation Centre, or CEP), the organization responsible for conducting the nuclear tests, on the island of Hao in 1963 (the year after Algeria’s independence). The islands’ reliance on French inflows increased as the traditional copra and vanilla markets declined and the Makatea’s phosphate riches dried up in 1966. The army’s and the CEP’s budgets grew 50 times between 1961 and 1966, and the number of civil and military employees rose from 400 to 15,000 between 1961 and 1968. The high wages, as well as free food and housing, attracted around 3,000 Tahitian men, who signed up to work at the test sites in Moruroa and Fangataufa, initially constructing airstrips, fortifications and other military installations. The GNP climbed 75 times between 1962 and 1982, whereas the minimum wage increased 15 times over that same period. Furthermore, the migration to Pape‘ete and dependence on

²⁰¹ Denise Fisher, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics* (Australian National University Press, 2013), 84-85.

²⁰² Eduardo Vila, “Planting the seeds of an independent and nuclear-free Tahiti”, Peaceboat, July 16, 2019. Accessed on October 30 2025. <https://peaceboat.org/english/news/planting-the-seeds-of-an-independent-and-nuclear-free-tahiti>

France increased dramatically and swiftly. By 1995, the population of Tahiti and Moorea had tripled and the self-employed peasant class had rapidly transformed into working-class leaving sustainable land management behind once and for all and becoming almost completely dependent on the money and goods brought into the territory by France.²⁰³ Land slipped increasingly out of Tahitians' control. Some people, particularly those who had been educated in France, took advantage of opportunities to sell titles to their land. The purchasers, often real estate agents, then sold the land to French, Chinese²⁰⁴, and other non-indigenous buyers.

«There are many people of Chinese origin here. They own most of the private lands», (personal communication with Mohamed A., South African engineer who has been working in Tahiti for the last 1,5 year, May 2025).

Kim Tai Piha, a Tahitian woman interviewed in 1995 by Miriam Kahn, described this spiraling descent into dependency and the related loss of land:

“Before CEP. Tahitians lived well. They worked in their gardens. They went fishing. They built their houses. After the first test in 1966 Tahitians became dependent on money. Now they need money in order to live. They buy their food. They buy cement and metal to build their houses. Tahitians buy more and more things and how can they pay for everything? They can't. They go to the bank and get a loan. Then how can they pay the bank back? They can't. After a while the bank comes and takes their land and sells it. Who buys the land? Foreigners.[...]They don't grow their own food anymore. They buy it in the store. If they want Tahitian food they buy it in the market. I go to the market every Sunday to sell my food. Do you know who buys it? Tahitians. Every week I get sad when I see that.”

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Ironically, the Tahitian name for the island on which most of the testing occurred –Moruroa– means “big lies”, perfectly in line with the lies of the French government, which was claiming that the testing could pose absolutely no environmental or health dangers. However, there are Tahitian testimonies of local bans on the consumption of fish from the lagoon and coconuts from the land, and of people being sick after disregarding the prohibitions, and even

²⁰³ Miriam Kahn, “Tahiti Intertwined: Ancestral Land, Tourist Postcard, and Nuclear Test Site”, *American Anthropologist* Vol. 102, No. 1 (2000): 13-17.

²⁰⁴ Colin Newbury, *Tahiti Nui: Change and Survival in French Polynesia, 1767–1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 263–65.

of people dying after illegal ingestion of these foods.²⁰⁵ Furthermore, it was mandatory for visitors to carry Geiger counters and to wear special anti-radiation suits while being there. In spite of the government's policy of making local health statistics top secret, it has been recorded that within a decade of the start of the nuclear testing, diseases commonly caused by radiation, such as leukemia, thyroid cancer, brain tumors and eye cataract, became to appear in alarming numbers. In Tureia, the atoll near Moruroa, between 1997 and 2002, 1/3 of the adult population died of cancer, while in Moruroa itself, 30 per cent of the people working there suffered from cancer by 2010.²⁰⁶

In the Polynesian tradition, people and land (*te fenua*) are linked in a relationship of reciprocity. Similarly, it was not only the local population suffering from diseases, but the land itself 'suffered' paying the price of the neocolonial nuclear testing. The land, as mother-feeder, had been poisoned. According to Miriam Kahn, "the land was destroyed, radiation leaked, fissures opened, and in some places the land sank below sea level. There was permanent damage to the food-producing trees and plants". Vaihere Bordes (the coordinator of women's activities at the Tahitian human rights NGO, Hiti Tau) when interviewed by Miriam Kahn, referred to the custom of mothers planting placentas in the soil, contrasting it with the "planting" of radioactive bombs:

«It is the same thing the French Government is doing with the bomb. They plant it in the motherland—but they plant poison.»

Another testimony in Miriam Kahn's book, *Tahiti beyond the postcard*, by a former worker in Moruroa, also gives a vivid image of the tragic ecological desecration:

«I remember how once, three days after an explosion, we returned to Moruroa. But what a shock! The vegetation was all razed to the ground. All that remained were some burned trees. The spot where we had been before was completely wiped out. The little island with the barrier reef had disappeared. The metal tower behind the bunker had melted at its base and was lying flat in the sun. We were forbidden from walking wherever we wanted, and could only go in the concrete zones, which, we were told, had been decontaminated».

²⁰⁵ Miriam Kahn, "Tahiti Intertwined: Ancestral Land, Tourist Postcard, and Nuclear Test Site", *American Anthropologist* Vol. 102, No. 1 (2000) :14.

²⁰⁶ Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard*, (University of Washington Press, 2011), 72-73.

There was a considerable debate, which continues until today, about the environmental and health risks of nuclear testing. As time and opposition progressed, France became more skilled at mounting information and diplomatic offensives. On top of that, France invited a succession of regional teams to visit French Polynesia and conduct tests (led by Haroun Tazieff in 1982; Aotearoa scientist Hugh Atkinson, in 1984; their own world-renowned oceanographer Jacques Cousteau in 1987; and Dr Frank Feuilhade in 1990), but none of these produced conclusive reports, largely because France did not allow free access to the sites. A US Greenpeace team conducted its own tests on the reef without French support in 1990 and, before they were arrested and bundled off to Pape'ete by the French navy, they claimed to have found radioactive substances.²⁰⁷

Just before the Rainbow Warrior, a Greenpeace ship, was scheduled to sail to French Polynesia to protest nuclear testing there, two French secret agents bombed the ship in Auckland on July 10, 1985, killing photographer Fernando Pereira. In November 1985, Alain Mafart and Dominique Prieur, two of the implicated spies, were sentenced and imprisoned in Aotearoa. However, in reaction, France threatened to lower the European Economic Community's (EEC) quota for butter imports from Aotearoa, blocked the import of wool and offal from Aotearoa, and banned New Caledonia from importing lamb from Aotearoa, an act that widely described at that time as state terrorism. Although the question of nuclear testing and deterrence enjoyed widespread domestic support in France until 1985, the Rainbow Warrior controversy sparked a shift in French popular sentiment.²⁰⁸ Leaders of France's own Pacific islands began to doubt the country's pledges to them after it disregarded its UN-brokered commitment and the lengthy, five-year court fight.

Once more, civil society was involved. Lobby groups like the NFIP continued to raise concerns about the tests' detrimental effects, which ranged from coral damage and radioactive leakage into the ocean to direct health consequences like cancer or ciguatera fish poisoning. As the moratorium on all testing -declared in 1992 by the French President Francois Mitterand- was lifted by President Jacques Chirac on June 13, 1995, within days of President Chirac's announcement of additional tests antinuclear protesting began on a scale that was

²⁰⁷ Denise Fisher, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics* (Australian National University Press, 2013), 84-85.

²⁰⁸ Denise Fisher, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics* (Australian National University Press, 2013), 80-81.

unprecedented in the history of French Polynesia, spreading to all major islands. International media responded swiftly. Writers, television crews, and radio reporters from all over the world descended upon Tahiti. Greenpeace's anti-nuclear ship, the *Rainbow Warrior II* (the original *Rainbow Warrior* had been blown up by French agents in Auckland in July 1985), once again left Aotearoa for Tahiti with an international crew representing ten different countries.²⁰⁹

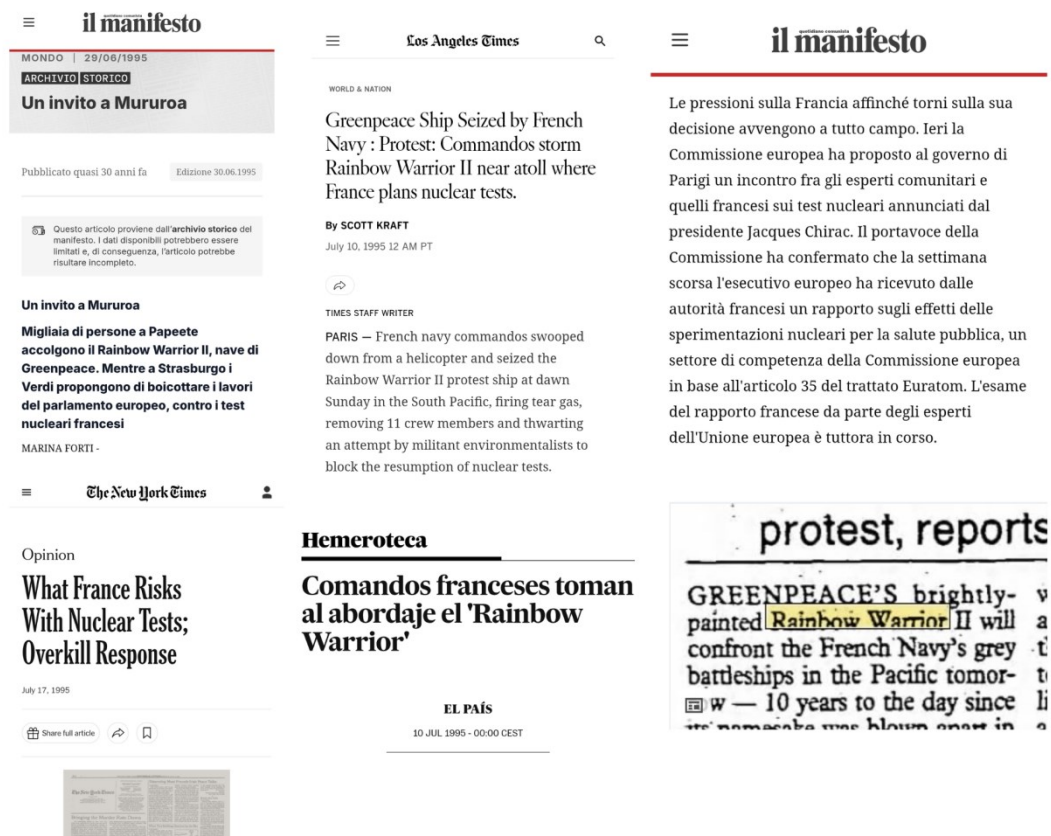


Figure 15: All articles were taken by each newspaper's online archives.

On June 29, a record number of demonstrators -between 15,000 and 20,000, according to estimations- took to the streets of Pape'ete to demand a vote on the resuming of nuclear testing. Two months later, Pape'ete witnessed a number of other, if somewhat smaller, nonviolent protest marches. The Eglise Évangélique de Polynésie Française arranged the biggest of those protests, and Jacques Ihorai, its president, pleaded for the testing to stop. Once more, hundreds of journalists from all over the world traveled to French Polynesia as

²⁰⁹ Jacques Bugier and Florence De Changy, "Les indépendantistes cherchent à capter la mobilisation antinucléaire", *Le Monde*, 5 September 1995. https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1995/09/05/les-independentistes-cherchent-a-capter-la-mobilisation-antinucleaire_3855738_1819218.html

the month when the nuclear testing was supposed to start drew near. Without any prior public notice, “operation thetis” was carried out in Moruroa at 11:30 in the morning of September 5, 1995. The blast was only somewhat less powerful than the one at Hiroshima. It produced pressures of several million atmospheres and temperatures of hundreds of millions of degrees. Only a billion of a second was spent transmitting data by the instruments recording the explosion before the blast destroyed them.

When questioned why he did not test the bomb in France, Admiral Jean Lichere, the director of CEP, replied, “But this is France!” and publicly assured that the nuclear test “will have no significant impact on the environment” during the evening’s television news. This official stance immediately preceded a major public backlash. The following day, thirty-six hours of nonstop rioting, arson, and looting erupted across Pape’ete and the adjacent town of Faa’a. The unrest began with an antinuclear sit-in on the airport runway, initially led by approximately 30 women and quickly gaining momentum as hundreds of local Tahitian people joined the demonstration. The altercation intensified as police sprayed the crowd with tear gas. After destroying internal walls and breaking windows with a bulldozer, protesters set fire to the terminal building, making it dangerous for commercial aircraft to land or take off for several days. The protesters destroyed the airport before advancing into the heart of Pape’ete, where they set fire to buildings, broke down storefront windows and looted shops. Over 120 vehicles were flipped over and burned. Bottles, trash cans, steel barricades, and stones were hurled at the High Commissioner’s office. Many of the protesters were arrested by police. More troops were imported from New Caledonia and France. Surprisingly, only 40 individuals were hurt, despite an estimated four billion CFP in damage.

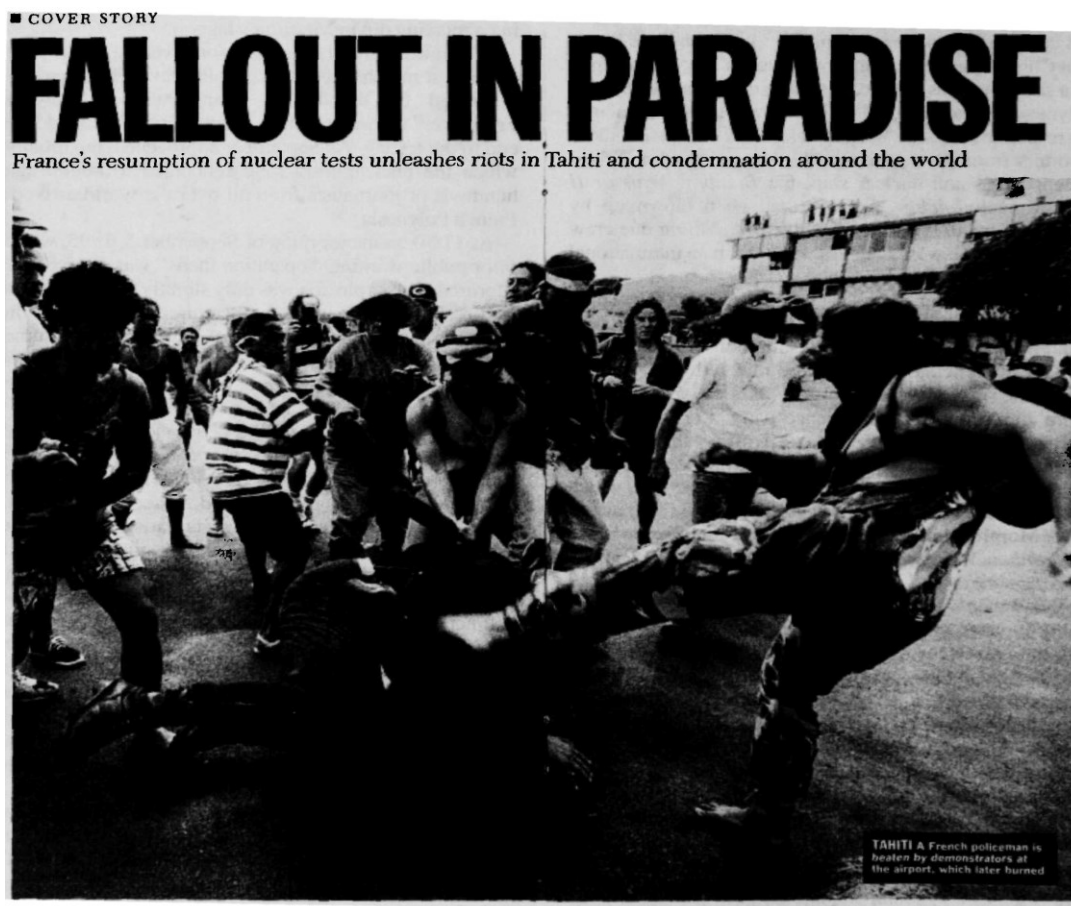


Figure 16: Time, International Edition, September 18, 1995, pp. 22-23, photo by Francis Mori. AP/World Wide Photos.

Eight plaintiffs filed the first complaint in April 2009, asking the French Labour Tribunal to compensate them for the health repercussions of the tests. Additionally, the French government established a 10 million euros compensation fund and approved legislation in December 2009 that would provide compensation to those who were determined to have been impacted by the experiments. This new legislation, according to advocacy groups, would not go far enough, and the issue would remain contentious.²¹⁰

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The French CEA undertook a coordinated campaign, spending over 90,000 euros, to deny evidence that showed France's nuclear experiments in French Polynesia between 1966 and 1996 had a major negative impact on the health of the local population (according to documents obtained by the investigative media outlet *Disclose*). It specifically aimed to refute the conclusions of the 2012 "Toxique," which claimed that there was widespread radioactive contamination from only six of the 193 tests conducted, using declassified data

²¹⁰ French Compensation System for Victims of Nuclear Tests." Nuclear Justice Network, June 17, 2020. <https://nuclear-justice.net/article/title-5/>.

and interviewees. One of CEA's responses was the distribution of 5,000 copies of a pamphlet titled "Nuclear testing in French Polynesia: why, how, and with what consequences?" throughout the area. According to the CEA, the brochure's goal was to provide Polynesians the information they needed to comprehend the tests and their effects, using the required scientific rigor to describe the health and environmental repercussions in an "objective and transparent manner." In contrast to the 173,000 documents declassified by the military, the CEA/DAM has only declassified 380 documents in the four years since Macron called for "greater transparency" surrounding the tests and their outcomes, according to the parliamentary committee's study. The parliamentary committee, which has questioned over 40 lawmakers, members of the armed forces, scientists, and victims, should have finished its report, by the end of May 2025.²¹¹



Figure 17: "Poisoned legacy of nuclear testing in French Polynesia", Disclose (2021).²¹²

²¹¹ "Poisoned Legacy of Nuclear Testing in French Polynesia", Disclose, Investigative report, accessed September 13, 2025. <https://disclose.ngo/en/article/poisoned-legacy>.

²¹² "Poisoned Legacy of Nuclear Testing in French Polynesia", Disclose, Investigative report, accessed September 13, 2025. <https://disclose.ngo/en/article/poisoned-legacy>.

i. Tourism

*“The myth of Tahiti, ever present in the Western imagination, is the fuel
that propels Tahiti’s tourism industry”*

-Miriam Kahn

In the early 1960s, while the nuclear testing was in progress, a peculiar diversion began, which was none other than the investment in mass tourism. Images of an alluring paradise now had a completely new function. These pictures of charming people and turquoise lagoons might distract attention from the nuclear testing program by obscuring the testing's harmful effects. Tourists began flocking in by the thousands, as the airport -which had originally been built to facilitate the nuclear testing program- catered for their arrival (the only airfield in existence until 1960 was the one built on Bora Bora during World War II). As nuclear supplies and personnel were channeled through the airport to the islands of Moruroa and Fangatuafoa, tourists were also arriving on international flights in record numbers. The Faa'a international airport, which remains to this day the only airport in Tahiti, one year after its operation contributed to an increase of 2,500 more tourists regarding the previous year, a number that soon reached 9,000 within next year.²¹³ At the same time, luxury hotels began to be built to accommodate the tourists, most of whom were Americans (as is still the case today according to the statistics of the Institut de la statistique de la Polynésie Française (ISPF) and the Tahititourisme.org).

²¹³ Bernard Covit, *Official Directory And Guide Book For Tahiti* (Syndicat D'Initiative and the Chamber of Commerce, 1964), 113.

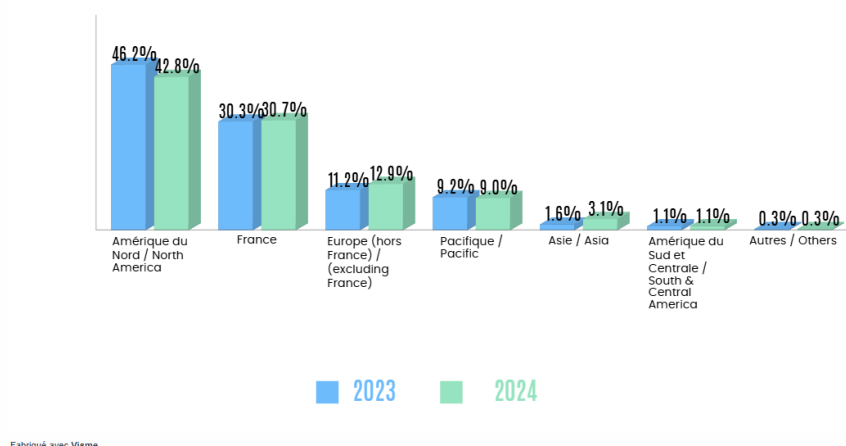


Figure 18: Number of tourists in Tahiti per region for 2023 and 2024 according to ISPF. ²¹⁴

In 1966 –the same year that the ‘Office de Développement du Tourisme’ was founded and the first guidebook, ‘Official Directory and Guide Book: Tahiti’ was produced– a young French woman named Paulette Vienot, set up ‘Agence Tahiti Nui Travel’ in Pape‘ete. It was the first and still the largest and most successful of Tahiti’s travel agencies. This travel agency established the welcoming of tourists at the airport with flower garlands and traditional Polynesian dances, known as ‘Ori Tahiti (a typical image perfectly interwoven with the Western imagery about Tahiti, that has become integral to the promotion of tourism). For many years stereotypical images of flower-clad dancers were circulating around the world. Hollywood movies (i.e. *Mutiny on the Bounty*), chocolate companies (i.e. Mars Company with the 2006 *Bounty Bar Wrapper*), and guide-books were praising the beauty of Tahiti in the same way Bougainville once did.²¹⁵

The period following the cessation of the nuclear test program (on January 2, 1996 France conducted its last nuclear test) has been catalytic for tourism due to fears of an imminent withdrawal of financial support from France. Chirac offered aid totaling just under 1 billion former French francs (about \$A300 million) for the next ten years when he reconsidered his decision to resume nuclear testing in 1996 and closed the CEP, ending the testing program once and for all. Paradoxically, the territory's standard of living and aspirations were raised to an almost unachievable level by France's significant investment under the CEP in

²¹⁴ “Chiffres clés, études et statistiques”, Tahiti Tourism (2024). <https://tahititourisme.org/statistiques-marches/chiffres-cles-etudes-et-statistiques/>

²¹⁵ Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard*, (University of Washington Press, 2011), 75-80.

infrastructure, port facilities, roads, hydroelectric and solar generating schemes, and employment opportunities. It would be unaffordable to keep up.²¹⁶ In the post-CEP economy, tourism was identified by the Territorial government as being of major importance. One of the government tactics to increase tourism was the development of the cruise ship industry.²¹⁷ But this industry could not survive on its own without the backing of the appropriate facilities, services and public spaces on shore, which at that time were anything but sustainable and respectful for the host region.

The participation by more people in a cash-based economy led to greater dependence on imported foods. Instead of spending their time fishing and gardening in ways that tourists would have anticipated, and would have found picturesque, Tahitians were now walking out of stores with bags of imported groceries. A large proportion of Tahitians had begun to move away from the environment and traditional life close to nature. But such an image of the westernized “noble savage” was incompatible with the Bougainville’s (and later Gauguin’s) representation of Tahiti, which was responsible for attracting tourists. Consequently, it should have been suppressed. Control of Tahiti’s image was not yet in the hands of the locals and clear proof of this is the fact that two of the largest postcard production agencies, *Pacific Promotion Tahiti* (1974) and *Blu* (1995), were run by a Frenchman and an American respectively.

Diane Commons, the founder of the company *Blu*, spoke in an interview with Miriam Kahn about the manipulation of the Tahitian images; Images of seductive ‘vahine’ (a Tahitian word that means women) and idyllic scenery appear not only on postcards but also on calendars, posters, place mats, coasters, address book covers, rulers, cigarette lighters, ashtrays, playing cards, stationery, books, and screen savers for computer monitors; Images nurtured by Western imagination, which -whether valorizing colonial activities or camouflaging environmental degradation- continue to serve the French agenda (that insists on treating Tahiti as a remote money machine and as a holiday resort for the French elite) and perpetuate the narrative of an incomparably beautiful Tahiti untouched by western civilization, because only such a Tahiti is capable of bringing tourists:

²¹⁶ Denise Fisher, *France in the south Pacific, Power and Politics* (Australian National University Press, 2013), 79.

²¹⁷ Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard*, (University of Washington Press, 2011), 100.

«I try to create only beautiful images.[...] I had to walk through filth and stand in piles of trash in marijuana fields to take this picture. It was so ironic. If anyone had seen what I was doing they would have been amazed. I had to walk through a very impoverished area to get there, with dirty diapers and garbage all around, and people in really poor health. Imagine! I was trying to set up my tripod in the middle of the trash, surrounded by young men guarding their marijuana fields, just to get that beautiful image. What I saw through my lens was so majestic! And there I was standing in the trash, [...] but tourists want to stay in the postcard» stated Diane Commons in 2001.²¹⁸

(Over)tourism, despite its contribution to the local economy, was never “sanctified”. On the contrary, it came hand in hand with environmental concerns that were raising backlash. When, for example, in 2000 the Sheraton Mo‘orea Lagoon Resort and Spa (then the Outrigger Hotel) announced plans to create an artificial beach and build thirty-one overwater bungalows—actions that would chase away the fish and disturb the coral ecosystem- local residents responded with a three-month protest. Fishermen in canoes surrounded the dredge that would suck up the sand used to create the new beach. On shore, families set up a camp and placed signs by the road alerting tourists and others to the social and environmental injustice occurring as a result of this tourism development. Eventually the hotel was ordered to remove the excavators.²¹⁹

Tahitian contemporary history shows that there have been many kinds of mobilizations of comparable range. Some of them were more symbolic and implicit, such as the following; On Huahine, the French manager of one of the most luxurious hotels (built on sacred land including a *marae* and access to fishing grounds) systematically ignored the concerns and complaints of local residents. As a consequence, tourists being taken to the hotel and their \$500 per-night overwater bungalows had an uncomfortable journey, since their van had to slow down and weave a path through the many large potholes in the dirt road to the hotel. Tahitian owners of the land refused to allow this to be maintained.²²⁰

A relatively quick search on Trip Advisor proves that the majority of large hotel complexes and tourism businesses in Tahiti today are owned either by international chains or by

²¹⁸ Ibid., 80-83.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 68.

²²⁰ Ibid., 69.

investors and companies of French interests, reflecting the aspect of neocolonialism related to the economic relationship that France maintains with the region.²²¹ Apart from the big chains, there are also smaller boutique hotels, guesthouses and family businesses (such as Fare Suisse Tahiti, Maison Taina etc.) often owned by locals or small private individuals, but without dominating the luxury tourism market.

«Most of the Tahitians work in the public sector or in hospitality sector, but they are definitely not running big companies” said Mohamed, who has been in Tahiti for a year and a half for a launch of a French project (personal communication with Mohamed A., May 2025).

Foreign capital, frequently provided by the former colonizers, is typically used to finance infrastructure development on territories such as Tahiti. Additionally, these investments create a vacuum according to which 55% of the tourism revenue is transferred outward to other nations. This investment void results from the industry's need for assistance from other countries in order to function and maintain growth over time.²²²

It is also noteworthy that the island does not seem to have any particular appeal to digital nomads (in the absence of favourable legislation and real estate agency advertisements), but it certainly appeals to upper middle class tourists who are willing to paying exorbitant amounts of money to be there, as evidenced by the high prices not only in the local shops, where “a beer is 10\$ for pint”, but also in chains such as MacDonald’s, where a “big mac meal costs around 20\$” (personal communication with Mohamed A., May 2025). And this is perfectly reasonable, considering that Tahiti is an island in the middle of nowhere and has a single airport. Travelling from Paris to Pape’ete usually takes more than 20 hours, as most flights are not direct. Several non-stop flights do operate from Pape’ete to Paris, and the 16,5–hour flying time holds the record for the world’s longest commercial domestic flight. Consequently, no one is in Tahiti by chance. Tourists always arrive there for a reason, whether that reason is to relax in an all inclusive or get in touch with nature and especially the ocean waves.

²²¹ Information found following personal online research on tourist websites.

²²² Isaac Killilea, "Post-Olympics Analysis of the Surfing Dispute in Tahiti over Environmental Degradation and Colonial Impact", International Relations Review, October 8, 2024.
<https://www.irreview.org/articles/2024/10/8/post-olympics-analysis-of-the-surfing-dispute-in-tahiti-over-environmental-degradation-and-colonial-impact>

The largest export from Tahiti continues to be the export of illusion. In 2023, there were over 300,000 visitors to Tahiti –alone with 30% of visitors from France. Moreover, the region has been a world famous venue for many surfing events given its landscape of rough corals that create underwater turbulence and small whirlpools that result in strong waves.²²³ Since the island has worldwide reputation for its waves and is popular in the surfing communities, there are resorts and camps that cater specifically to surfers, with Teahupo'o being one the most famous and popular surf spots in the world despite its danger.

Tourist services and accommodation, such as 'Tauhanihani Village La Vague Bleue' and 'Vanira Lodge', cater mainly to surfers and visitors who want to enjoy water activities. Surfing as a subculture and distinct tourism sector has its own identity (mainly, it is characterized by 'environmentalism', masculinity, white ethnicity, the importance of performance level in the sport, clothing, and its own slang) and "surf tourism" is also unique. It particularly occurs when a person has traveled for more than 40km from their 'home', spend the night at their destination and their leisure time mainly amidst the waves. The surf tourist prefers exotic destinations with no crowd ²²⁴ and their main motivation during the trip is the quality of the waves. ²²⁵ To find the best waves they look for places that are exotic, virgin, and far from the big cities.²²⁶ But surfers who travel oceans away from their home to catch an astonishing wave, bring with them their culture, which often clashes with the local culture. For a European white man in his thirties, for example, surfing is probably not a ritual like it was for a Mā'ohi, but a sport or a way of leisure. Similarly, an individual who has travelled so many kilometers away to reach the middle of the Pacific, needs accommodation and food, in other words needs appropriate infrastructure "by the waves", in order to have the opportunity to spend as much time as possible in the ocean.

²²³ Isaac Killilea, "Post-Olympics Analysis of the Surfing Dispute in Tahiti over Environmental Degradation and Colonial Impact", *International Relations Review*, October 8, 2024.
<https://www.irreview.org/articles/2024/10/8/post-olympics-analysis-of-the-surfing-dispute-in-tahiti-over-environmental-degradation-and-colonial-impact>

²²⁴ Krause S. M., "Pilgrimage to the Playas; Surf tourism in Costa Rica", *Anthropology in Action* Volume 19 (3) (2012):37-48.

²²⁵ S. A. Martin, and I. Assenov, "Investigating the importance of Surf Resource Sustainability Indicators: Stakeholder Perspectives for Surf Tourism Planning and Development", *Tourism Planning and Development* Volume 11(2) (2014): 127-148.

²²⁶ Tower Nicholas, "Surf tourism and sustainable community development in the Mentawai Islands, Indonesia: A multiple stakeholder perspective", *European Journal of Tourism Research* 11 (2015): 166-170.

Once the promising destinations with spectacular waves are known to surfers, they rapidly become popular to their families, friends, journalists and investors. The result is a new found interest for the destination among different types of tourists, and this causes growth in the region, along with environmental problems –in the majority of cases.²²⁷ A typical example is the case of Teahupo'o, a village on the southeastern coast of the island of Tahiti. By the 1980, local surfers were already riding Tahupo'o's waves, and after international bodyboarders showcased its full potential, it became a pilgrimage site for elite surfers.

«It was a secret spot» surfer and Tahitian native, Peva Levy, remembered, *«But it was not a secret spot for a long time.»*²²⁸

Supporting infrastructure such as Surf Clubs was developed (the Tahiti Surf Club was founded in 1967), local and international competitions were held (such as World Surf League Tahiti Pro and Women's Competitive Surfing, which was withdrawn from the area in 2006 due to the danger, but has been reinstated in recent years), and specialized tourism services were aligned with surfers' needs in the area. In the escalating recognition of Teahupo'o as a renowned surfing spot, in 2024 this small Tahitian village ended up hosting the Olympic Surfing for the Paris Olympic Games.

According to field studies, the surf tourism sector has been experiencing increasing growth already before the COVID-19 pandemic.²²⁹ Although there is not an exact number, researchers estimate that there are more than 35 million surfers around the world and the number keeps growing.²³⁰ However, surf tourism, in general, is capable for exerting a severe and detrimental impact on the environment depending on how the destination manages its resources. Deficient management of surf resources may cause crowding, trash, water pollution, erosion, reef damage, environmental deterioration and pollution from tourists and product transportation. It should be noted that even though the number of surfers keeps

²²⁷ Pimpom Audrey Tantamajarik, "Sustainability Issues Facing Costa Rica surf Tourism Industry" Master's Thesis (University of Hawai'i, 2004).

²²⁸ Daniel Cole, "How the decision to host Olympic surfing in this Tahitian town could affect local life, environment", PBS News (February 22, 2024). <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/how-the-decision-to-host-olympic-surfing-in-this-tahitian-town-could-affect-local-life-environment>

²²⁹ R.C Buckley, D. Guitart, A. Shakeela, "Contested surf tourism resources in the Maldives", *Annals of Tourism Research* 64 (2017): 185-199.

²³⁰ Danny O' Brien, Jess Ponting, "Sustainable surf tourism: A community centered approach in Papua New Guinea", *Journal of Sport Management* Volume 27, no.2 (2013): 158-172.

growing, surf resources are limited and remain constant. Therefore, the carrying capacity of host communities is directly affected.

In the specific case of Tahiti, it could be argued that this Pacific island stands somewhere in the middle: It does not seem to be facing the problem that Costa Rica, the Mentawai Islands, and the Indopacific Islands are facing. These islands are characterized by poor water supply systems, often not sufficient for tourist consumption. As a result, they are forced to use salty water to meet the needs of their populations, usually forcing the local population to leave the beaches and emigrate inland. On the other hand, Tahiti is also far from following the commendable example of Papua New Guinea, which besides being a world-class surfing destination, it is one of the few countries that have tried to manage their surfing resources in a sustainable way. In this case, stakeholders (SAPNG, non-profit organizations, tour operators, and the local community) work and operate under the Surf Management Plan (SMP). According to the SAPNG (Surfing Association of Papua New Guinea) website “the vast majority of the land ownership is under traditional customary clans”. For coastal communities, this extends to traditional rights and border reef custody. The Surf Management Plans are access agreements that include sustainable quota limits to surf resources in exchange for fees through contests.²³¹

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On July 15, 2025, the official Tahiti Tourism Instagram page posted an advertisement featuring the slogan “le paradis n’ existe pas” (paradise does not exist), with a background of altering frames of magnificent beaches, sunsets, and resorts. The juxtaposition of this phrase with images of idyllic landscapes and luxurious living, which evoke a sense of leisure and vacation, suggests one thing: In 2025, Tahiti has fully embraced the label once imposed upon during its early colonial history, and is now capitalizing on its primary export product –the illusion of a paradise.

The quantitative data underscores tourism's critical role: it currently accounts for 14.7% of French Polynesia's total GDP as of February 2025. This vital contribution is not new; tourist

²³¹ Valentina Robledo, "The Challenges of Sustainability in Surf Tourism Destinations," *Alba Sud* (November 12, 2020).

earnings in 2019 amounted to XPF 70.6 billion, or 11% of the territory's GDP.²³² The sheer scale of tourist expenditure highlights this reliance: in 2018 tourists spent XPF 65 billion (approximately €541 million, excluding international air transport) during their stay, which averaged in a total of 14.7 days. This amount was five times greater than the export revenue from local products. On average, each tourist spends approximately XPF 300,000 per stay.²³³

This robust flow of tourists, includes significantly surf tourism, necessitates substantial investment in infrastructure –specifically accommodation (hotels and resorts), transportation (airlines like Air Tahiti Nui and Air Tahiti), and leisure facilities (surf camps). This extensive development, confirmed to be a major contributor to the wider Polynesian GDP compared to other overseas collectivities, leads to the problematic "justification" of selling natural assets like waves as commercial products. Consequently, the environment is often "sacrificed on the altar of tourism development" when necessary sustainability measures are overlooked, posing a serious threat to the area in question.

The fragility of this economic model was starkly exposed by the COVID-19 crisis. The subsequent lockdown and the halting of international flights led to severe economic consequences, particularly in the tourism sector. Between July 2020 and June 2021, French Polynesia recorded only 57,000 tourist arrivals, representing a 65% decline from the previous year. The selection of Teahupo'o as the host venue for the Olympic surfing events was officially known as early as March 2020. Responding to this financial distress –and arguably with the forthcoming Olympic Games in mind– President Emmanuel Macron announced a CFP 28 billion State-backed loan during his visit in July 2021. This package, channeled through the French Development Agency, was designed to support distressed notably the airline Air Tahiti Nui. Nonetheless, the acute health crisis and the resulting financial intervention simultaneously deepened the region's dependency on the metropolitan French government and exacerbated existing socio-economic inequalities across the territory.²³⁴

²³² "Sustainable Tourism Practices in Tahiti and Their Impact on Local Communities", Far & Away Adventures, 2024, <https://farandawayadventures.com/sustainable-tourism-practices-in-tahiti-and-their-impact-on-local-communities/>.

²³³ "Compte rendu du Conseil des ministres", Website of the Presidency of French Polynesia, Bureau de la communication, 2020, <https://www.tntv.pf/tntv/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Conseil-des-ministres-29-juillet-3.docx>.

²³⁴ The Indigenous World 2022: French Polynesia, IWGIA. Accessed on October 29, 2025. <https://iwgia.org/en/french-polynesia/4687-iw-2022-french-polynesia.html>

Summary

This chapter traced the historical trajectory of French colonialism and its transition into contemporary neocolonial governance in French Polynesia. It examined how colonial legacies, including spatial transformations, nuclear testing programs, and the promotion of tourism, continue to shape environmental governance and indigenous relations. The analysis examined the socio-political frameworks that maintain metropolitan control, revealing deep-seated asymmetries despite political reforms and partial autonomy. These insights provide the contextual backdrop necessary for the subsequent case study of the 2024 Olympic surfing events in Teahupo'o, where these historical and political dynamics are materially manifested.

Chapter III

Paris 2024 and the Tahitian Waves:

A Neocolonial Lens on the Recolonization of Tahitian Space through Olympic Surfing

Case Study: The 2024 Olympic Surfing at the Legendary Teahupo'o Wave

In 2024, as the Paris Olympic Games approached, Tahiti found itself in a flurry of preparations to host the Olympic Surfing events. Amidst these preparations, the iconic Teahupo'o Wave, the central figure of the Olympic surfing planning, sparked a significant divide among locals, who found themselves torn between immense pride and deep concern.

The choice of Teahupo'o ignited considerable controversy, primarily due to the proposed construction of a new aluminum judges' tower on the coral reef. Despite extensive protests from residents, local associations, surfers, and environmental organizations who warned of irreversible damage of the reef and potential alteration to the Wave itself, the Paris 2024 organizers insisted on the necessity of the new tower, citing safety concerns and rejecting the use of the existing wooden one, that had already been in use for large-scale surfing events for about two decades.

The tense situation culminated in an incident where a barge caused damage to the reef during preparatory work. This incident sparked additional concerns regarding broader environmental impacts, reigniting fears of *ciguatera*, a risk associated with consuming fish contaminated by toxins released from dead corals, and the alteration of the local way of life, especially for those rely on fishing for their livelihood.

Despite adjustments to the tower's design in an attempt to find a compromise, the situation at Teahupo'o underscored the urgent need for genuine consultation and respect for indigenous culture, as well as the necessity of a robust regulatory legal framework to bridge the gap

between the demands of major sporting events like the Olympic Games on the one hand and the vital protection of vulnerable natural environments on the other.



Figure 19: Daniel Cole, “Hundreds are set to descend on Tahiti for Olympic surfing. Can locals protect their way of life?” AP News (September 20, 2024).²³⁵

²³⁵ Daniel Cole, “Hundreds are set to descend on Tahiti for Olympic surfing. Can locals protect their way of life?”, AP News (September 20, 2024). <https://apnews.com/article/olympics-surfing-paris-2024-tahiti-teahupoo-c4ceff2ccaaf4cd4e0b9f554093bd54b>

3.1 Crossing the waves 10,000 miles away up to the ‘Wall of Skeletons’

This section explores the selection of Tahiti as the host for the 2024 Olympic surfing events. The Committee’s decision drew parallels with the nuclear testing era, since France revived the island’s colonial legacy, disregarding Tahiti’s unique natural environment, which is a cornerstone of its cultural identity and folklore. Paris 2024 Olympic surfing event reveals that, in modern history, Tahiti continues to function for France as a source of exotic imagery, a dynamic that underpins the controversial choice to host the Olympic surfing competition in Teahupo’o -a location revered for its pristine natural state. The driving force behind this selection was not only the legacy of the Wave itself, widely considered as one of the most spectacular in the world, but also France’s ambition to portray itself as a superpower. By showcasing its overseas territories, France sought to demonstrate its national values of multiculturalism, diversity and inclusion, positioning itself as a melting pot of culture.

The lack of consultation with the local population during the Olympic decision-making process was also a critical aspect, particularly given that the Paris 2024 decision had led to a significant division within the local community. Residents of Teahupo’o grappled with a mixture of pride in hosting such a prestigious event and deep ecological and sustainability concerns rooted on the fact that such a small, remote village “at the end of the road” was ill-equipped to handle an event of such a massive scale.

This part of the thesis sets the stage for comprehending the deep-rooted cultural and political parameters lying behind Tahiti’s selection as the host for the Olympic surfing events, as well as the complex dynamics between the métropole and the overseas territories, all against the backdrop of the tremendous Teahupo’o wave -the official Olympic wave for 2024.

3.1.1 Why Tahiti was chosen as the Olympic Surfing venue

«That summer (2024) everyone was talking about Teahupo'o. The picture of that surfer (Gabriel Medina) flying over the waves kept appearing on my Instagram page...with every doom scrolling it was there!»
(Personal communication with Nora V.)

To answer the question “why Tahiti was chosen as a surfing venue for the 2024 Paris Olympics?” one only has to look back in time. Why did the French want Tahiti as a colony in the first place? What did it serve? The mythical island of Tahiti, along with other French colonies in the Pacific, was a minor player in the grand plan of French colonization. Agricultural products (rubber, hardwoods, palm oil, coffee, cocoa, nuts, and spices); mineral resources (oil and gold); animal products (animal hides, ivory, and feathers); slaves and human laborers; strategic military outposts; and prison colonies were among the many advantages that France received from the majority of its other colonies.

The French empire was the second largest after Britain in the late nineteenth century, with over 100 million inhabitants and an area of over six million square miles (which means over thirty times the size of France). Large swaths of the Sahara Desert and Antarctic ice, alongside sun-drenched islands in the Caribbean and Indian Ocean and exotic jungles in Africa and South America, were among France's assets. France possessed "toeholds in India and on the Red Sea, remote, little-known outposts like Wallis and Kerguelen, and enormous colonies like Indochina and Madagascar." The French tricolor flag was even flying over the legendary city of Tombouctou.²³⁶ Tahiti seemed to have little to offer. It was not a feasible place to establish a settler colony because it was half the way around the world from France, and there was not enough land for crops or settlement, nor were there enough mineral resources for extraction (except from phosphate on the tiny island of Makatea). On top of that, the numerous attempts to cultivate cotton, coffee, and oranges for revenue-generating reasons were unsuccessful.²³⁷

²³⁶ Robert Aldrich, *Greater France A History of French Overseas Expansion* (Red Globe Press London, 1996), 1-13.

²³⁷ Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard* (University of Washington Press, 2011), 47.

The Iconography Engine and the Vision of a Potent, Unified France: Recycling the “politics of representation”.

However, Tahiti did offer the métropole a limitless supply of dreams and desires. The main commodities that were shipped to Europe were illusions of an accessible Eden on earth and images for screensavers. Being a source of dreams and imagery was not exactly the reason Tahiti remained a colony, but the notions of this mythical place gave France a solid basis on which to launch and carry out a number of political and economic initiatives, express the sense of cultural superiority in a number of visually striking and politically potent ways, and preserve its status quo and geopolitical ambitions.²³⁸

«There is always a political agenda for such decisions (meaning the venue of the Olympic events), and once you have the knowledge that France used to have nuclear tests around French Polynesia and it helps the Tahitians with a monetary amount every year then it would make sense to pass the surfing venue to us to help with the economy and to increase the favoring and reach of the French government on the island, and, of course, to influence a new generation that only saw the good side of France» stated Vatea, who emphasized that the Paris 2024 decision was perceived by many as a contributing factor to a ‘politics of oblivion’ (personal online communication with the local Tahitian Vatea).

Summarizing Vatea’s main points, Tahiti never ceased to serve the French political agendas. More precisely, as years went by, ‘French culture’ successfully crossed the oceans; the indigenous people were –to the greatest extent– assimilated and became French citizens both on paper and culturally; nuclear testing was almost forgotten. In this context, all Tahiti could provide was again “images”. The times changed and colonialism gave way to neocolonialism. Colonial practices accordingly proved obsolete. Bougainville’s tales, postcards and Hollywood movies were now inadequate. Neocolonial practices, in turn, had to be modernized to reflect the new order. The Paris 2024 Olympic Games were held at a time when the “politics of representation” was almost entirely carried out by the Internet, and Instagram was by far the dominant of “Image”. It was, therefore, Tahiti that possessed the inherent capacity to offer the most aesthetically optimized ‘Olympic scenery’ for visual social media platforms.

²³⁸ Miriam Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the postcard* (University of Washington Press, 2011), 48-58.

«For my part, I was surprised when I heard that the (Olympic) surf was going to be held in Tahiti. I mean...there were alternatives in metropolitan France (Biarritz, Hendaye etc.) that have the surf culture. In hindsight, I considered the choice of Tahiti –besides the fact that it has the original surf culture and practically there are better waves in the summer in the Southern Hemisphere- as political.» (Personal communication with Nora V., summer 2025)

The sport of surfing could indeed have been held in the mainland, as France's Atlantic coastline is home to some of Europe's most iconic surf venues: First of all, Hossegor -widely regarded as the surfing capital of France- hosts major national (the Quiksilver Pro France) and international competitions and is famous for spots like La Gravière (legendary A-frame waves and hollow powerful barrels demanding advanced technique) and La Nord (massive challenging waves that can reach up to 5 metres ensuring a line-up of skilled athletes). Not very far from Hossegor, Capbreton's Plage de la Piste and Plage du Santosha are iconic for their heavy hollow waves that break over sandbanks and are framed by WWII bunkers creating a dramatic setting. Biarritz (La Côte de Basques) in Nouvelle-Aquitaine, Southwest of France, is also a well-known surf destination; famous for its mellow rolling waves it is considered by many as the birth place of European surfing offering long peeling lefts and rights over a stunning bottom with a stunning backdrop. Close to Biarritz, Guéthary stands out with its rocky reef break that produces some of the largest rideable waves in France, making it a favourite destination among big wave surfers and athletes looking to push their limits in a raw environment. Moliets-et-Maa, Lacanau (in Nouvelle-Aquitaine, Southwest of France), Seignosse (Le Penon, Les Boundaines, Les Estagnots), Point de Torche (located in Brittany, Northwest of France, is famous for its consistent and powerful waves thanks to its exposed headland that picks up swell from multiple directions); all these places are popular surf venues that were rejected because they fell short on one important criterion: They could not offer the magical spectacle that Teahupo'o could offer.²³⁹

«Polynesia is the birthplace of surfing! I felt proud that we were honored in this way» said Tiahura, referring to the Paris 2024 thought of choosing Tahiti as hosting venue. *«Also the waves here are heavier...not comparable to those of metropolitan France»* he added. (personal online communication with the local Tahitian Tiahura L., June 2024)

²³⁹ "Cinq territoires candidats à l'accueil des compétitions de surf de Paris 2024", Paris 2024 Espace Presse, 2024.
<https://presse.paris2024.org/actualites/cinq-territoires-candidats-a-laccueil-des-competitions-de-surf-de-paris-2024-7a48-e0190.html>

The official announcement issued by a Paris 2024 Press release was as follows: “Surfing returns for its second appearance in the Olympic Games, as a part of Paris 2024, in one of the most majestic and spectacular surfing locations on the planet, French Polynesia’s Teahupo’o”,²⁴⁰ accompanied by a justification that was just as grandiloquent: “The choice of Teahupo’o as the venue for the Olympic Games surfing events, comes from a shared ambition by the Paris 2024 teams, the various departments of the country , the State, the municipalities concerned and the International Surfing Federation (ISA) to guarantee a sporting competition of the highest standard at the Olympic Games and to put the iconic Teahupo’o wave, French Polynesia and its culture in the Global spotlight”.²⁴¹

«Since Tahiti is part of France and Teahupo’o is one of the most powerful waves in the world, it was a great opportunity for the ‘Olympic Games’ to choose it in order to have the best venue» highlighted Ben Thouard (French ocean photographer representing Agence France-Presse), who was selected as the only photographer in the water during the surfing competition (all other members of the press are stationed on nearby boats).²⁴²

Even though mainland spots could enable athletes and the public to conveniently meet with the rest of the Olympic crowd, in the Northern Hemisphere -during the summer season- waves tend to be smaller. As a result, the chances of finding spectacular waves off the Atlantic coast of France were slim. For instance, the popular spot of La Gravier in Hossegor is not known to have great waves at the end of July. In contrast, in the Southern Hemisphere, at that time of the year, the swell is at its peak. Consequently, the surfing event would be executed flawlessly, which is of great importance, as any errors could have led to the sport being removed from the Olympic program the next years (prior to the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, it had only been held once, making its debut at the Tokyo Games in 2021, and had not yet secured a long-term slot in the program). In adherence with the Paris 2024 Committee’s desire for a natural site, wave pools were not considered, meaning the event would have to take place exclusively in the ocean.

²⁴⁰ "Olympic Surfing 2024 Heat Draws Confirmed," Board Sports Source, accessed June 1, 2025.

<https://www.boardsportsource.com/olympic-surfing-2024-heat-draws-%20confirmed/>.

²⁴¹ “Confirmation of the organization of the Olympic Games Surfing events at the Teahupo’o site with a new, more moderate judges’ tower”, Paris 2024 Press Releases and Press Kits, 2024 , accessed June 1, 2025. <https://press.paris2024.org/news/the-polynesian-government-paris-2024-and-the-haut-commissariat-confirm-the-organisation-of-the-olympic-games-surfing-events-at-the-teahupoo-site-with-a-proposition-of-a-new-more-moderate-judges-tower-eafc-7578a.html>

²⁴² Mary Cunningham, “Ben Thouard has a unique view of the 2024 Summer Games: Underwater in Tahiti, photographing surfing”, CBS News, 29 July 2024. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ben-thouard-underwater-photographer-olympic-surfing-tahiti-paris-2024/>

«[...] But we are talking about just three days! I find it hard to believe that this was all done for a three day contest.» (personal communication with Nora V., summer 2025)

France, as demonstrated by the fact that it strongly supported its choice of Teahupo'o until the last minute, never treated the Olympic events in French Polynesia as a 'three-day competition'. Instead, from the very beginning, the symbolic aspect of the Olympics as a celebration of unity, diversity and inclusion was emphasized. As a result, long before the launch of the declarations of interest in organizing the Olympic Surfing events in October 2018, the Paris 2024 Olympic Games were already seen, according to the officials, as a good opportunity to highlight France's prestige and potential as a superpower. Therefore, when the option of an overseas territory 'came to the table' it arrived like a *deus ex machine*, perfectly serving the French "Olympic vision".

«Through the Olympics, France promoted its soft power (fashion, film, literature/social sciences, food/drink etc.) and I think the choice of French Polynesia was a reminder of its hard power, as it holds territory at every latitude and longitude on the planet.» (personal communication with Nora V., summer 2025)

The selection of Teahupo'o in Tahiti was driven by a powerful twofold strategy: unity and prestige. This choice was fundamentally aligned with the French ambition to spread the Olympics beyond metropolitan Paris, thus engaging its overseas territories and showcasing the nation's rich and diverse heritage. The Paris 2024 committee immediately expressed this decentralized vision when the official call for surfing bids opened. This inclusive approach was later reaffirmed when Jean Castex suggested Tahiti's declaration of interest in mid-June 2019, with two sites, Papara and Teahupo'o, initially under consideration.²⁴³

The circumstances for France could not have been more favourable. Holding the surfing event in a location with such a long-standing tradition of the practice was a unique opportunity. It could bring the eighteenth-century European vision of a Rousseau-inspired utopia back into the spotlight, offering a compelling narrative. Not only is surfing deeply linked to the ancestral roots of the Polynesians, but the venue itself could highlight France's geographical diversity and its ability to fully include all aspects of its nation in the organization of the Olympic Games.

²⁴³ Marie Delaplace and Pierre-Olaf Schut, *Planning the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 100.

«For us, Tahiti represents the authenticity of our sport and the ISA's mission to celebrate surfing's unique culture and lifestyle, while also recalling the long history and heritage of our sport from its Polynesian origins.» said International Surfing Association President Fernando Aguerre.²⁴⁴



Moreover, the Olympic Games, beyond their athletic core, are fundamentally a commercial product and a visual spectacle. As a televised event, they had to remain consistent with what the audience demands, which is none other than “powerful imagery”. While television once dominated, today's mainstream landscape includes the internet, Tik Tok, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Instagram, and a plethora of other platforms that readily provide easily accessible and spectacular images in vast quantities. However, in a world where ‘image consumption’ becomes increasingly effortless, viewers are becoming progressively more demanding.

France at the threshold of the Olympic Games faced an immense challenge. In a sport like surfing, inherently capable of delivering astonishing images of tremendous waves, Tahiti –an overseas possession aligned with 2024 Paris' ambitions of the French status quo confirmation– emerged as host city's strongest asset. Centuries after the first explorers' accounts and the paintings of Gauguin, it was time for “real images” to give life to the myth of Tahiti and replace engravings and postcards.

«Teahupo'o is a freak of nature. It's almost like God's gift to surfing. The light is generally perfect from dawn to dusk, the wave is incredibly powerful and then there's this crack in the reef where media boats can bob». (Mimi LaMontagne)²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Romuald Pliquet, “Teahupo'o Locals Are Voicing Environmental Concerns About Hosting Olympic Competition in 2024”, The Inertia, 2020.
<https://www.theinertia.com/surf/teahupoo-locals-are-voicing-environmental-concerns-about-hosting-olympic-competition-in-2024/>

²⁴⁵ Teja, “Going Ashore to See the Famous Teahupo'o Surf Beach”, Teja on the Horizon, March 2024.
<https://www.tejaonthehorizon.com/walkthrough/tahiti-lagoon-getaway-2-teahupoo-surf-beach/>



Figure 20: The wave of Teahupo'o as captured by the local B.W while being interviewed by the author.

«Surfing was born in the Polynesian Islands centuries ago. It is only fitting that the surfing events of Paris 2024 Olympics would be located in French Polynesia, on one of the most beautiful and performance driven waves.», shared Tim McKenna, in a private correspondence with the author in July 2025.

Folklore meets Geomorphology amidst the Lethal Waves of the most Remote Olympic Venue of All Time

Teahupo'o had the lead from the beginning among the other less competitive and less "fantaisie" candidates. Around 90 minutes by car from Pape'ete on the Tahitian peninsula ("Tahiti Iti") and almost 9,700 miles away from Paris, Teahupo'o is a small village, where lies a natural wonder that -through the years- has captivated surfers from all around the world.

Teahupo'o is a relatively inaccessible place, often referred to as "the end of the road". The first thing one can notice entering the village is the surf board with its name on it, 'TEAHUPOO', next to a huge artificial wave, the famous Teahupo'o Wave. There are some more welcome signs explaining the terrifying waves of Teahupo'o, reminding, at the same time, of the sharp corals beneath. Kids spend the afternoon surfing as families watch from the black sand beaches. At the end of the village's road lies its sole snack bar, which is only open

for lunch and serves fish caught that morning. Though it is known throughout the surfing world, there is not a single surf shop in Teahupo'o, with the town forgoing most of the development that is usually a staple at popular surf destinations. This remote village is, by quite some distance, the furthest an Olympic venue has ever been from the host city, since events rarely take place far from the continent where the Olympic Games are held.²⁴⁶

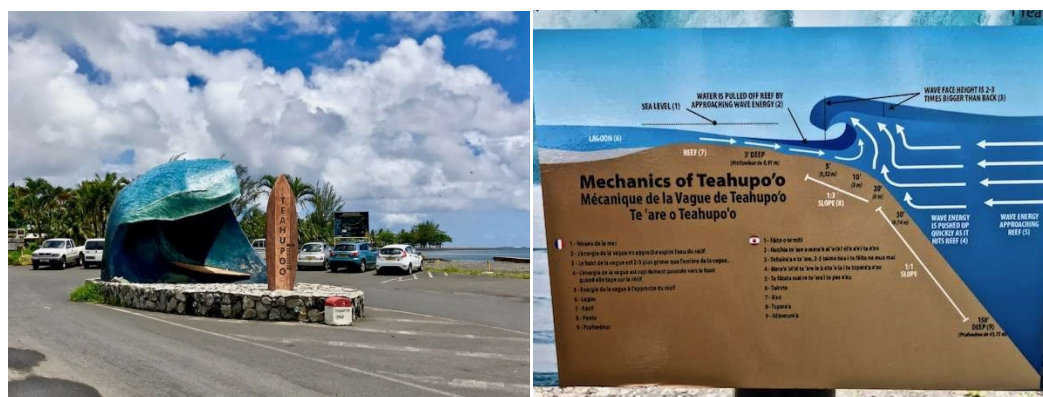


Figure 21: Welcome signs in Teahupo'o from Teja, “Going Ashore to See the Famous Teahupo'o Surf Beach”, Teja on the Horizon, March 2024.

Setting a record for the furthest Olympic venue is emblematic itself, but Teahupo'o has also a great cultural and spiritual significance in Tahitian history. It is regarded by many locals as a place of powerful *mana* (the Polynesian concept of supernatural force of spiritual energy that governs everything). President of the environmental organization Via Ara o Teahupo'o, Cindy Otcenasek, while describing what *mana* means, stated that “in Polynesian culture, gods are present everywhere, in the coral, in the ocean...”, explaining how this philosophy hold particular for surfers, especially those native in the area. Tahitian Olympian Vahiné Fierro, for instance, recognizes Teahupo'o as sacred “temple” rooted in “a spiritual belief, living incarnation of our heritage, and our ancestral land”. Her words underscore the enduring legacy of Polynesian culture, and the desire to uphold a symbiotic relationship with the natural world.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ This has happened only once in modern Olympic history when, during the 1956 Summer Games in Melbourne, the equestrian events were held in Stockholm, Sweden, more than 9,000 miles from the host city, because Australia had strict rules requiring horses to spend six months in quarantine –and the Australian government refused to budge for the Olympics.

Richard Baka, “Melbourne's status as an Olympic city : past, present and future perspectives”, The international journal of the history of sport (2019): 1-24.

²⁴⁷ Jo Weiss, “Waves of Change: Teohupo'o's Surfing Legacy in the Age of Globalization”, The Beaver, October 2024.

<https://thebeaverlse.co.uk/waves-of-change-teohupoos-surfing-legacy-in-the-age-of-globalization/>

According to the cultural lore, the area where Teahupo'o is located was considered by ancient Tahitians as a sacred and mystical site. Important ceremonies and rituals were performed there in order to protect fishermen and inhabitants from the dangerous forces of the ocean governed by *mana*. Rituals and traditions were associated with the sacred site of Teahupo'o as means of respect and communication with the sea and nature spirits, which were considered particularly powerful in this place.

Since the Polynesians are widely considered to be the first people who surfed, their folk tradition possesses a rich ethnonarrative that connects them to surfing. According to a passed-down legend, surfing held the status of a royal sport with ceremonial connotations in the Polynesia's pre-colonial era. The legend commemorates the twin princes who were the first to surf the dangerous wave of Teahupo'o, called Taravao-nui-i-te-vaha-'oro-'oro. The twins, Hinapu'u and Maraëone, organized a sporting competition with three events: the javelin, the slingshot, and surfing the Taravao-nui-i-te-vaha-'oro-'oro. Although the legend mentions that the winner would be seen as a hero, it doesn't reveal which of the twins won.²⁴⁸ Another popular legend attributes the genesis of surfing in Teahupo'o to a woman, the renowned Vēhiatua-i-te-māta'I from Ra'iatea, who is said to have participated in the local *horue* (as surfing is called in Tahitian) and performed so marvelously in the big waves that incited the wrath of the ari'i (the local chief), who chased her away and took her name for himself.

Although Teahupo'o hosted an Olympic sport for the first time, this small hamlet has taken on hosting surf-related sporting events before. The Teahupo'o wave is of such phenomenal quality that the World Surfing Championship (WSL) includes a major stop in Tahiti, known as the "Billabong Pro Tahiti". This competition is famous for the challenging and breathtaking conditions that Teahupo'o offers and is a crucial event in the WSL calendar. Given its enormous, perfect waves offshore, surfers hold this enchanted location in high regard.

«It's every surfer's dream to be there at least once in their life...to ride this legendary wave...to be there without being terrified actually» (interview that took place via online exchanges in June 2025 with a professional surfer located in Morocco, asking for his personal data not to be disclosed)

²⁴⁸ Teja, "Going Ashore to See the Famous Teahupo'o Surf Beach", Teja on the Horizon, March 2024. <https://www.tejaonthehorizon.com/walkthrough/tahiti-lagoon-getaway-2-teahupoo-surf-beach/>

An extremely shallow coral reef near the village is a natural surf break, causing hollow waves of two to three metres and sometimes up to seven metres, offering a unique visual feast, something the committee members were well aware of before deciding on the venue. Teahupo'o wave (bearing the name of the village) forms thanks to a unique combination of geographic and oceanographic factors that make it unique and fearsome. Surrounded by the entire Pacific Ocean, it faces gigantic waves that travel thousands of kilometers before hitting the reef with force. All of the swell from the south and, most importantly, the depth differential when these swells reach Tahiti are what make this wave so incredible. Similar to Nazaré waves, the seabed—more especially, the shallow coral bottom—is extremely significant. When the waves hit this location, they surge sharply and crash into a huge wall of water because the reef is so steep. One of the best and deepest tubes in surfing is created by this collapse. The Wave forms in the Teahupo'o passage, a narrow strip of water that connects the open ocean to the Tahitian lagoon. With a coral reef that slopes abruptly downward, the pathway is narrow. The underwater topography compresses and accelerates wave energy as these big waves enter Teahupo'o Passage, acting as a funnel. As the waves move onto the reef, this results in a sharp rise in both height and speed, which makes Tahupo'o a spectacle unlike any other.²⁴⁹

Nonetheless, this remarkable natural occurrence, which draws daring surfers seeking extreme excitement, is renowned for having some of the world's strongest and most hazardous waves. The Tahitian term Teahupo'o is often translated into English as "Wall of Skulls" and according to legend, this name derives from a local king, who collected heads. Another myth posits that the village was named after a great battle between two tribes, when the victors built a wall from the skulls of the enemies to mark the boundary of their territory.²⁵⁰

'Pah-moo'! Paris 2024 Embraces Most Perilous Waves in Defiance of Modern Surf History Cautions

The tragic irony lies in the macabre name perfectly in line with the peril caused from the extreme conditions of this wave. The Teahupo'o wave is “not a wave for the faint-hearted”,

²⁴⁹ “Teahupoo: meaning, how it is formed and how much it measures”, Nautical Channel Organization, 2013. <https://nauticalchannel.com/new/teahupoo>

²⁵⁰ “Teahupo'o: Surfing Venue for Paris Olympics – See, feel, surf the legendary wave”, Tahiti Tourisme, The Islands of Tahiti, August 2023. <https://www.tahititourisme.com/teahupoo-surfing-venue-for-paris-olympics/>

as the Paris 2024 website called it.²⁵¹ In total there have been five deaths on the Teahupo'o wave. Few are the deceased if we compare it with those who have suffered serious and important injuries. In modern Teahupo'o's history, both in 2000 and 2005, Thierry Vernaudon and Malik Joyeux, two local surfers, died in this wave. In addition, the case of "Code Red" (due to the height and danger) is not unusual. This means that all water activities in the area will be suspended for at least 24 hours (so far, "Code Red" has been declared twice, in 2011 and 2022. It was on those occasions that Teahupo'o largest wave was seen, reaching approximately 10 metres. Moreover, the French Marine Authority was forbidden, under threat of arrest, to enter the water).²⁵²

Notable moments in Teahupo'o surfing history include: Laid Hamilton's innovative tube-riding with the "Millenium Wave" in 2000; the 2011 Code Red Swell, which put Billabong Pro on hold, and saw Nathan Fletcher ride one of the most unfathomable tubes still to this day; Kelly Slater's perfect heat at the 2026 Billabong Pro; among many others.

According to Matt Warshaw, a preeminent historian in the field of surfing, Tahitian surfers were documented riding small Teahupo'o's swells and ripples as early as 1985. However, the wave's international prominence remained limited until the advent of bodyboarders, Mike Stewart and Ben Severson. Their pioneering efforts, undertaken several years subsequent to the initial Tahitian engagements, involved successfully navigating Teahupo'o Wave at its proper size. After that, the floodgates opened. This pivotal development served as the catalyst for the wave's widespread recognition. Following their groundbreaking rides, an influx of surfers commenced annual pilgrimages to Teahupo'o, thereby initiating a period of profound innovation and boundary-pushing within the sport, as athletes sought to redefine the limits of human capability in surfing and survival.²⁵³

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"Pah-moo" is a common expression in Tahiti, which surfers say to each other when they are preparing to take on a big wave, loosely translated to 'just go for it'. *«The phrase is for those daring enough to take on one of the heaviest and deadliest waves in the world»* highlighted

²⁵¹ Isabel Yip, "Olympic surfers take on one of the world's deadliest waves at 'the place of skulls'", NBC News, July 31, 2024. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/olympic-surfing-teahupoo-place-skulls-waves-rcna164339>

²⁵² Marc Antoine Bouvant, Jamie Brooks and Stirling Howland, directors. Code red. Netwrok A., 2011. 15:00 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIBgWI_BTyM

²⁵³ Dashel Pierson, "Olympic Surfing 101: Everything to Know Before Paris 2024", SURFER, 22 July 2024. <https://www.surfer.com/news/olympic-surfing-paris-2024-teahupoo-tahiti>

the French ocean photographer, Ben Thouard, referring to the Teahupo'o wave shortly before covering the Olympic surfing competition.²⁵⁴ What Ben Thouard said in 2024 was confirmed to the author a year later, in 2025 by the local Tahitian Tiahura, who further added: «*The highest and most dangerous surfing waves were recorded on the beaches of Tahiti! Our island has a reputation of being one of the surfers' dream destination and it also has the scariest wave in the world (meaning the one of Teahupoo).*» (personal online communication with Tiahura L., June 2025)

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Overall, although the safety of the athletes seemed to be compromised, Tahiti “rode the wave”, transcending the low-quality printed cheap postcard paper to appear on mobile and laptop screens in real-time and offer the public images that would link Paris with landmarks of unparalleled splendor. What postcards once achieved in the era of early colonization, today is accomplished through spectacle -the ‘image’ disseminated via big screens inside bars, local pubs and cafés, and through the social media: the immediate, rapid ‘image’, the increasingly less printed. It is no coincidence that the most emblematic shot of the 2024 Olympic Games was that of surfer Gabriel Medina, which went viral, circulating widely online. The iconic shot received accolades half a year later. It was a “moment” mentioned by a large number of my interviewees (from diverse nationalities and backgrounds), proving that, ultimately, the 2024 Olympic surfing left its mark on collective memory. One cannot forget the perfect alignment with the wave, which allowed G.Medina to seemingly levitate for a few seconds, yielding the perfect photographic result and vindicating France’s strategic choice.

«*[.]Being rugby men, my friends and I did not really talk about surfing, but we did like the pictures of surfers that published during the Olympics. My favourite was that one of the Brazilian surfer who seemed to be flying over the water (Gabriel Medina)*» (personal online communication with Guilhem D., in June 2025).

The mind-bending photo, taken by Jerome Brouillet flew around the world from the moment it was posted on the Agence France-Press server, mere minutes after being taken on 29 July 2024. In the months since, the photo has garnered more than nine million ‘likes’ on Medina’s Instagram page alone and half a year later won the 2024 World Sports Photography Awards

²⁵⁴ Mary Cunningham, “Ben Thouard has a unique view of the 2024 Summer Games: Underwater in Tahiti, photographing surfing”, CBS News, 29 July 2024.
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ben-thouard-underwater-photographer-olympic-surfing-tahiti-paris-2024/>

(including work from over 2,200 sports photographers from over 96 countries –over 13,000 images overall).²⁵⁵

«You know, that past summer of '24, the Olympics really overshadowed even the best advertising campaigns from Tourist Agencies. Suddenly, a lot of people learned that Tahiti actually belongs to France. Until then, they had no idea it was French, or even where it was on the map!» (personal communication with Guilhem D., June 2025)

“That summer everyone was talking about Teahupo’o...”!



Figure 22: “Golden Moment”, captured by photographer Jerome Brouillet, AFP via Getty Images.

²⁵⁵ World Sports Photography Awards 2025, winner announcement.
<https://www.worldsportsphotographyawards.com/winners-and-shortlists-per-year/winners>

3.1.2 “Welcoming” the Paris 2024 Committee’s decision



Figure 23: Timeline from Cellule TUARO NUI, “Épreuves de surf des Jeux Olympiques De Paris 2024 à Tahiti - Teahūpo'o”, Livret d’information- Ministère des sports et de la Jeunesse et de la prévention contre la Délinquance, October 2023.

When the call of bids for the surfing events officially opened on 26 June 2019, Paris 2024 stated that the chosen venue “must be in line with Paris 2024’s vision for sustainable and responsible Games (...). Paris 2024 wishes to choose a site that offers athletes optimal competition conditions (...) with experience in hosting surfing competitions”. The venue had to “offer a celebration of the Olympic and Paralympic Games with the public, contribute to the development of surfing and control the environmental impact of hosting competitions”.²⁵⁶ This was followed by a period of sustainability promises and lack of information to local population about the surfing event, its duration, its financing and especially the potential environmental costs.

Residents, after initially being caught between pride, mistrust and environmental concerns, soon felt marginalized. The news about the bid reached the public through a speech given by the then president of the country, Edouard Fritch, after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had already validated Teahupo'o on March 3, 2020. Similarly, neither Pape'ete's major

²⁵⁶ “Cinq territoires candidats à l’accueil des compétitions de surf de Paris 2024”, Paris 2024 Espace Presse, 2024.
<https://presse.paris2024.org/actualites/cinq-territoires-candidats-a-laccueil-des-competitions-de-surf-de-paris-2024-7a48-e0190.html>

transportation and tourism players had been notified. As it turned out, the local population was not involved in the Teahupo'o bid process, which could be characterized as top-down.²⁵⁷

The enduring trauma from a 1974 French nuclear weapon test, which caused a radioactive cloud that exposed Teahupo'o residents –including children– to significant health risks (resulting in 60 current cases of radiation-induced cancers in the village), framed a segment of Tahitian public opinion regarding the Olympic Games events in the area in question. Mayor Roniu Tupana Poareu captured this emotional conflict in a statement to the New York Times: "I am happy that we have the Olympic surfing, and I am proud that everyone in the world will know Teahupo'o. But sometimes, when I see the suffering of my family, I hate France."²⁵⁸



From interviews with local Tahitians conducted between May and June 2025, it was evident that the community was equally divided. Half of the residents expressed pride that the largest sporting event was held in their homeland ("it's a great honor for the Country"), while the other half articulated concerns regarding sustainability and ecological impacts ("[...] It's still too early to notice the environmental impact the event had on the reef and the wider ecosystem").

A similar equal division also emerged when the residents were asked whether they believed the village's capabilities were adequately considered before the selection of Teahupo'o as the host location. One interviewee responded, «*This approach seem to want to force a negative narrative that is not there, in an attempt to force Tahitiens into victimhood*» (the interviewee preferred that their personal data not be disclosed), while other interviewees, instead of providing a direct answer, shifted the focus to the financial benefits of the event for the local community: «*The event brought a lot of people and money to a small village. Boat guys were paid 1.200.000 xpf just to have the boats near the wave for safety reasons...with no one but them on board*» (personal online communication with the local resident, Horai T., June 5, 2020).

²⁵⁷ Marie Delaplace and Pierre-Olaf Schut, *Planning the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 100.

²⁵⁸ Hannah Beech, "Olympic Surfing Comes to a 'Poisoned' Paradise", New York Times, July 30, 2024. Accessed on July 2, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/30/world/olympics/olympics-tahiti-nuclear-testing.html>

Since Teahupo'o is considered to be Tahiti's last unspoilt area of wilderness by the sea, the former President of French Polynesia, Edouard Fritsch, had secured that "the competitions and the organization of the 2024 Olympic Games will adapt to the Teahupo'o site and not the other way round". However, the first public works were carried out in a state of mistrust.

«The dialogue was very bad and this is the main reason for all the controversy. [...] To have ongoing dialogue with the population and explain the projects a long time before without imposing anything in sensitive locations is a lesson should be taken into account by future organizers», as noted by Tim McKenna in private correspondence in July 2025.

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As per several announcements, a plan stipulated that 98% of Olympic housing was to be accommodated within the homes of local residents.²⁵⁹ Some inhabitants expressed their interest in the Olympic Games and started to improve or even build new accommodation. There were 30% more requests for information in 2023 to develop land for bungalows, but "*many quickly gave up*" (as confirmed to me by the local Tahitian Vatea), because of the formality of the application. On top of that, due to the tradition of home-stay accommodation²⁶⁰ (which was limited to 50 rooms by 2020) and the lack of hotels in the area (West Tairapu), there was no tourism strategy.²⁶¹ This situation was exacerbated by the lack of information on tourist arrivals and the fact that several hotels in Tahiti had not reopened after the pandemic (personal online communication with Vatea, June 2025).

«I will try to live at my daughter's house during the Games. If she also rents out her house, I have a tent. It's not hard for two weeks, and given all the money I will make, it's worth it», stated Gregory Parker, a family man, who hails from Teahupo'o.²⁶²

²⁵⁹ Daniel Cole, "How the decision to host Olympic surfing in this Tahitian town could affect local life, environment", PBS News (February 22, 2024). <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/how-the-decision-to-host-olympic-surfing-in-this-tahitian-town-could-affect-local-life-environment>

²⁶⁰ Home-stay constitutes a distinctive modality within the hospitality and lodging sector. It is characterized by the temporary cohabitation of a visitor with a local resident (host) within the host's private dwelling in the destination area. The economic framework governing home-stay provisions is diverse, encompassing gift economy, monetary compensation, home exchange or barter economy.

²⁶¹ Marie Delaplace and Pierre-Olaf Schut, *Planning the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 101.

²⁶² Daniel Cole, "How the decision to host Olympic surfing in this Tahitian town could affect local life, environment", PBS News (February 22, 2024). <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/how-the-decision-to-host-olympic-surfing-in-this-tahitian-town-could-affect-local-life-environment>



Figure 24:“Teahupo’o native Gregory Parker poses for a portrait in the beachfront bungalow that he will rent out to Olympic accredited officials during the Olympic surf competition in Teahupo’o, Tahiti, French Polynesia, Sunday, Jan. 14, 2024. (AP Photo/Daniel C).

The late launching (in July 2022) of a Paris 2024 office in Pape’ete has hampered awareness of the issues surrounding this event and left too many uncertainties hanging in the air. According to a survey involving 214 residents (93% of them permanent residents) out of a total population of 1.417, 80% had no information beyond the fact that Teahupo’o had been selected, 78% did not know the date of the events, 53% were opposed to the construction of an Olympic village near Fare Mahora Point and 78% to its conversion into social housing. Respectively, 67%, 87% and 80% were opposed to building a bridge over the Fauoro River, a public road after the bridge, and a new mooring area for sailing boats. There were also concerns about transport from Pape’ete to Teahupo’o, as the two prevailing solutions were either transport by boat or widening the existing narrow road. The practical arrangements for organizing the events were also uncertain: construction of a new judges’ tower or use of the existing wooden tower; access or not of local taxi-boats to the event site; presence or not of spectators and officials at Teahupo’o and how they will be catered for; use or not of a grandstand, all these issues were among the main concerns.²⁶³

²⁶³ Marie Delaplace and Pierre-Olaf Schut, *Planning the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 104-105.

The persistent lack of official information surrounding the Olympic Games events in Tahupo'o fueled widespread speculation. Olympic infrastructure planning was accordingly characterized by a distinct lack of transparency, leading to rampant rumors. Multiple options for athlete accommodation were continuously under discussion, including the construction of a permanent athletes' village (with post-Games plans ranging from "green classes" to social housing) to be sited variously in Teahupo'o, Tahiti, or other islands. Two alternatives were also considered: renovating the Puunui hotel or mooring a ship off Vairao; the latter was initially opposed by Paris 2024 due to the negative environmental connotations of cruise ships. Adding to the planning ambiguities were several proposed public works that lacked precise detail, notably the final purpose of the Domaine Rose and the necessary access solution (specifically, whether a permanent legacy bridge or a temporary structure would be constructed).

One of the reasons that communication, information and transparency about Olympic constructions and initiatives proved extremely difficult, was the complex governance. Through the Ministry of Major Works and Land Transport, also known as the IJSPF (Institute of Youth and Sports of French Polynesia), the French Polynesian government served as both project manager and project owner. However, the project's governance required to consider surfing players (ISA and WSL), Paris 2024, and numerous other institutional actors (Haut Commissariat, Commune de Taïarapu Ouest, Mairie de Teahupo'o). Last but not least, the locals and their associations –especially the environmental ones– were ready to acknowledge that they were also stakeholders.²⁶⁴

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It was mid-July 2020, when the Vai Ara O Teahupo'o association decided to organize a consultation. However, as no information was forthcoming, the association decided in mid-September 2020 to organize a press conference with the local media.

«We demand transparency in the study of projects and want to have decision-making power in the final choices. However, today we are excluded from all. Negotiations and future infrastructures and developments are imposed on us. (...) We do not want our little piece of paradise to be devastated. We want to continue to live in harmony with Mother Nature and

²⁶⁴ Marie Delaplace and Pierre-Olaf Schut, *Planning the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 109.

keep the authenticity which is the strength of Teahupo'o». (Tahurai Henry, spokesperson for local group Mata Ara ia Teahupo'o 2024).²⁶⁵

The Country, commune mayors, and Paris 2024 all saw the press conference with suspicion, taking it as a sign of growing conflict. Because of the above, the local government and Paris 2024 tightly controlled information, which increased local's ambiguity.²⁶⁶

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Overall, the decision to choose Teahupo'o as the Olympic Surfing venue –as previously mentioned– was of twofold importance, with one pillar being the reaffirmation of French global status quo via the inclusion of the overseas territories, and the other pillar being the goal of fostering national unity across the entire republic through shared Olympic engagement. What the awarding committee did not take into account in the case of national unity was that, regarding the overseas territories, despite the romantic narrative of a united France and the attempt to perpetuate it, a certain cultural gap existed between the IOC (International Olympic Committee) and the OCOG (Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games) on one side, and surfers and Polynesians on the other side. This cultural distance seemed to supersede even the ostensibly challenging geographical distance.

This chasm found a foundation (and later caused contradictions and friction) in the very legacy of the Olympic Games, which seemed to be “a result of a Western-centric vision” (personal online communication with the local Tahitian Marie-Claire S, June 2025). The 2024 Olympic Games proved that a practice of cultural significance can be a commodified sport in the very place where it started as a ritual, but also that French nationality is defined only in official documents. What is considered a legacy for the French of the Western world is not necessarily of the same value for the “French of the Pacific”, for whom the preservation of natural heritage is more crucial than any large scale sporting event of international prominence and recognition.

Referring to the tourism visions tied to the Olympic surfing events, Hironui Johnston (Technical Adviser for International Transport and Telecommunications, formerly Special Adviser to the French Polynesian Ministry of Tourism) highlighted the paradox facing the

²⁶⁵ Romuald Pliquet, “Teahupo'o Locals Are Voicing Environmental Concerns About Hosting Olympic Competition in 2024”, The Inertia, 2020.
<https://www.theinertia.com/surf/teahupoo-locals-are-voicing-environmental-concerns-about-hosting-olympic-competition-in-2024/>

²⁶⁶ Marie Delaplace and Pierre-Olaf Schut, *Planning the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 106.

local community: «*The area (West Tairapu) has no vision for its tourism development...They want jobs to keep their young people but they also want to keep their customs,*» perfectly illustrating the fundamental clash between the Westernized Olympic Games' promises of international visibility and tourist influx on the one hand, and the indigenous resident's prioritization of cultural preservation and their ancient traditions protection.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁷ Marie Delaplace and Pierre-Olaf Schut, *Planning the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 102.

3.2 The Chronicle of the Olympic Preparations and an Environmental Impact Analysis

“I am happy that we have the Olympic surfing [...] but, sometimes, when I see the suffering of my family, I hate France.”

-Roniu Tupana (Mayor of Teahupo'o)²⁶⁸

This section delves into the timeline of the Olympic Games preparation, analyzing financial data and expenditures, the role of local politicians and their collaboration with Paris 2024, and the planning and construction of the Olympic infrastructure. A primary focus is placed on the tensions surrounding the establishment of an aluminum judging tower, which brought to light the absence of a comprehensive environmental impact study. This issue sparked widespread opposition within a segment of the local community, garnering support from international surfers and fueled by the persistent mobilization of the local association VAOT TEAHUPOO. The analysis concludes by examining the compromise solution, which, following intense pressure from locals, resulted in the construction of a smaller, more environmentally friendly tower in an area with a less extended coral colony, ultimately allowing for the smooth execution of the Olympic surfing events as planned.

Financial data

In December 2023, the Polynésie 1ère TV station shared information indicating that the overall cost at that time was 8 billion XPF, or more than 70 million euros. The French government's financial contribution of up to ¼ of the sum illustrated the (neo)colonial ties. The Country ('Pays' as French Polynesia is referred to in Tahitian media) contributed 4.8 billion XPF to finance the majority of the public investments. The judges' tower alone cost 550 million XPF (about 4.6 million euros), with France funding half of the project. Overall, the French government allocated a contribution of 2 billion XPF to support key infrastructure projects, including public safety initiatives, covering 70% of the Teahupo'o Marina's expenses, 33% of the footbridge construction, 37% of the Rose estate's development, and 50% of the judges' tower controversial project ²⁶⁹ (the project was finalized with a more

²⁶⁸ Hannah Beech, "Olympic Surfing Comes to a 'Poisoned' Paradise," *The New York Times*, July 30, 2024.

²⁶⁹ Axelle Mésinèle, Mereini Gamblin, "JO 2024 : combien ça coûte vraiment à la Polynésie", France Info- La 1ère, December 2023.

<https://la1ere.franceinfo.fr/polynesie/tahiti/polynesie-francaise/jo-2024-combien-ca-coute-vraiment-1450082.html>

modest architectural design, culminating in a total cost of 4.6 million euros –over 500 million Pacific francs. This edifice incorporated a projected cost of around 30 million CFP francs for both construction and dismantling).²⁷⁰

(The French State supports Tahiti with 832 million F CFP)



*Figure 25:"L'épreuve de surf", Haut-commissariat de la République en Polynésie française.*²⁷¹

Political changes

On 30 April 2023, French Polynesia saw a change of political majority. While Teahupo'o's bid had been supported by Edouard Fritch (autonomist party), the pro-independence party (Tavini) won the territorial elections. A few days later, on 1st May 2023, Teahupo'o experienced unprecedented flooding, which was thought to be partly the result of work on a

²⁷⁰ Mareini Gamblin, "Teahupoo : la tour des juges enfin retirée du paysage, et après ?", France Info – La 1ère, October 2024.

<https://la1ere.franceinfo.fr/polynesie/tahiti/polynesie-francaise/teahupoo-la-tour-des-juges-enfin-retiree-du-paysage-1527010.html>

²⁷¹ "L'épreuve de surf", Haut-commissariat de la République en Polynésie française. <https://www.polynesie-francaise.pref.gouv.fr/Actions-de-l-Etat/Jeux-Olympiques/L-epreuve-de-surf>

new footbridge, part of the Olympic constructions.²⁷² On 12 May 2023, a new government was formed and the Tavini's positions on holding the Olympic Games in Teahupo'o did not always converge. The new Minister for sport, Naima Temarii, raised the possibility of cancelling the organization of the Games in Teahupo'o, while the new President, Moetai Brotherson later on (on 30 October 2023), stated: *"One of the major criticisms levelled at us today is the total lack of communication and inclusion of the population by the former government team. We would have done things completely differently. We would have first looked for every way to reuse what already exists [...] When we came to power, we said there was a much more suitable site for the Olympics, the Taharuu Beach spot in Papare. It is perhaps less spectacular and less legendary than Teahupo'o, but it is a beach break and it already has existing infrastructure; there was nothing needed to build."*²⁷³

Set up planning

A press conference on infrastructure related to the hosting of the Paris 2024 surfing events in Teahupo'o was held on Thursday, May 2, 2024, in West Taiarapu. The progress of each site was presented in detail by those responsible during a sea tour.²⁷⁴

²⁷² Agence France-Presse, "Des inondations frappent le site olympique de surf à Tahiti", La destination d'information de Radio-Canada, May 2023. <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/sports/1981092/jeux-olympiques-surf-tahiti-indondations>

²⁷³ David Michel, "Moetai Brotherson (président de la Polynésie française) : « On ne peut pas faire ces Jeux contre la population »", L'équipe, October 2023. <https://www.lequipe.fr/Jo-2024-paris/Surf/Actualites/Moetai-brotherson-president-de-la-polynesie-francaise-on-ne-peut-pas-faire-ces-jeux-contre-la-population/1428840>

²⁷⁴ Anne-Charlotte Lehartel, "JO 2024 : où en sont les aménagements ?", Tahiti Infos, May 2024. https://www.tahiti-infos.com/JO-2024-ou-en-sont-les-amenagements_a223676.html



Figure 26: Cartography of the Olympic Installations as per Cellule TUARO NUI, “Épreuves de surf des Jeux Olympiques De Paris 2024 à Tahiti - Teahūpo'o”, Livret d’information- Ministère des sports et de la Jeunesse et de la prévention contre la Délinquance, October 2024.

The surf forecast determined the four competition days (27-30 July). The timeframe for the competition was established as July 27th through August 5th (the competition window was of 9 days due to the nature of the sport, which depends on weather conditions). The forecast predicted good weather at the start of the competition with windy surfing conditions later on (the prediction was subsequently confirmed and the competition days were pushed until later in the window).²⁷⁵

A total of 48 surfers (24 women and 24 men) from 21 countries were scheduled to compete. It is noteworthy that of the four athletes comprising the French Olympic team, two, Vahine Fierro and Kauli Vaast, were of French Polynesian origin.²⁷⁶ Among the 21 distinct nations

²⁷⁵ Isabel Yip, “Olympic surfers take on one of the world's deadliest waves at ‘the place of skulls’”, NBC News, July 31, 2024. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/olympic-surfing-teahupoo-place-skulls-waves-rcna164339>

²⁷⁶ “Excitement Builds for Surfing at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games in Teahupo'o, Tahiti”, International Surfing Association (isasurf), June 2024. <https://isasurf.org/excitement-builds-for-surfing-at-the-paris-2024-olympic-games-in-teahupoo-tahiti/>

represented, six made their debut in Olympic Surfing history, including Canada, China, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Spain.²⁷⁷

The logistical protocol for the surfing competition, as detailed in an interview with Ben Thouard, involved distinct placements for key personnel. Judges and coaches were slated for assignment to a dedicated aluminum tower within the lagoon, while all members of the press, encompassing both journalists and photographers, were scheduled to operate from adjacent boats. Thouard was the singular exception to this media arrangement, as he was authorized to be positioned in the water, ensuring his photographic output could be instantly transmitted to global news agencies.²⁷⁸

When Tim McKenna was asked about his role in Tahiti as a photographer of the Olympic events, he further explained: *«I was asked by the ISA to be one of the official photographers to cover the Surfing events. I was therefore part of a team of four photographers that covered the event for the ISA. We would cover every heat from the Media boat 1 and from the water. It was a fun and interesting experience, especially when Kauli won»* (information obtained through interview conducted by the author one year after the Olympics, in the summer of 2025).

It is, also, noteworthy that, given the Teahupo'o waves break against a shallow coral reef over a half mile from the shore, athletes and Olympic entourage would have to take a boat to get to the starting location.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁷ "Excellent Performances Highlight Incredible Scenes as Surfing Opens in French Polynesia for Paris 2024 Olympic Games", International Surfing Association (isasurf), July 2024.
<https://isasurf.org/excellent-performances-highlight-incredible-scenes-as-surfing-opens-in-french-polynesia-for-paris-2024-olympic-games/>

²⁷⁸ Mary Cunningham, "Ben Thouard has a unique view of the 2024 Summer Games: Underwater in Tahiti, photographing surfing", CBS News, 29 July 2024.

²⁷⁹ Mary Cunningham, "Inside the Olympic venue 10,000 miles from Paris: Tahiti", CBS News, August 2024.
https://sports.yahoo.com/inside-olympic-venue-10-000-140013559.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xILmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAK-U-hsMJiGRdulh-2dHkbXI1DBTBoU9QUauhFGFMUYxVtVLzcG2UD77sLX-0dHDgRwrFkSZjoZHBUSjqryDgVI-dApX5PYI87wyIhXbo5_xqTjM15EwhrpRMCHfSDz0ExBLX7VdQv5OXh2afMEytHN5poSp9Qi3dF_RNWyBX7jk

Audience Outlook

Despite the initial upheaval caused by the issue of accommodation for the attendees expected on the island for the Olympic surfing, the event was ultimately not open to the public, as evidenced by the official Olympic ticketing brochure.

In a randomly selected ticket acquisition guide provided to the author, the sport of surfing was notably omitted from the list of ticket sales. The corresponding explanation was situated at the bottom right of the leaflet, marked by an asterisk:

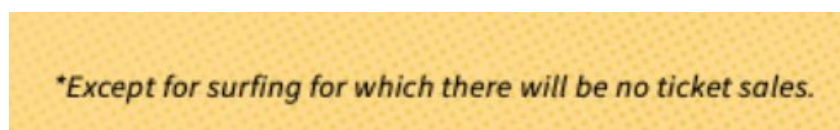


Figure 27: Photograph of an asterisk at the bottom of a Paris 2024 Olympic Games ticket brochure, clarifying the omission of surfing from the list of available ticketed sports.

«From the shore you can't see anything! You have to take a boat to go see it...From the shore you can only see the tower... and the wave is behind the tower. You wouldn't be able to spot a surfer and even if, it's like a tiny dot...it's not worthwhile watching from such a distance! I just measured on Google maps; the wave is 618m out from the closest shore» (personal communication with Bernhard W., June 2025).



Figure 28: A photograph depicting the wave behind the tower (provided to the author from the primary archival material of the renowned photographer Tim Mckenna).

Given the fact that it was almost impossible for an individual to watch the competitions onshore, spectators were given the opportunity to watch the spectacle on TV or streaming platforms. Giant TV screens in special ‘fan zones’ were promised to the audience, in order to enjoy every minute of the competition. As per a press release from the High Commission of the French Republic in French Polynesia, two additional screens had been scheduled to be placed beyond Teahupo’o to broadcast the competitions live: “to allow the public who does not have access to Teahupo’o to participate in the event, two fan zones will be created in Papara (Atimaono) and Pape’ete (Paofai)” and “Throughout the event, the population of Tahiti will be able to watch the competition live and enjoy various athletic, cultural, and environmental activities, organized free by the Country”.²⁸⁰

«There was something like...a village! No one lived there...more like a “thematic park”, where the giant screen was placed, so the spectators could come! They held a mini opening ceremony there as well», a local source informed the author. (Anonymous, interview by the author, Teahupo’o, August 25, 2025)

²⁸⁰ "L'épreuve de surf", Haut-commissariat de la République en Polynésie française. Accessed on August 3, 2025. <https://www.polynesie-francaise.pref.gouv.fr/Actions-de-l-Etat/Jeux-Olympiques/L-epreuve-de-surf>



Figure 29: Mobile phone photographs provided to the author from the archives of the interviewee, Horai Taiore.

The local Tahitian from Teahupo'o, Horai Taiore, explained to the author that before the Olympics the so-called thematic park (in *figure 28*) was a parking area located somewhere between the artificial wave (*figure 20*) and the bridge (*figure 29*), which was also renovated for the 2024 Olympics.

Domaine Rose

In an effort to uphold its commitment to sustainable Olympic Games, Paris 2024 utilized the “Domaine Rose” as a temporary support and athlete catering facility. This marked a significant departure from the typical model of permanent residential infrastructure characteristic of Olympic Villages. The 3,000 sq. meter site, situated between residential areas and essential agricultural zones, was equipped with demountable white tents to provide dining, medical services, rest areas, and a gymnasium. However, the site's preparation involved the controversial excavation and backfilling of 110,000 cubic meters of soil with gravel to stabilize the marshy terrain. This development proved contentious because the land was traditionally cultivated for taro, a crucial traditional crop that yielded an annual harvest of 50 tonnes for local consumption. The conversion was particularly significant given Tahiti's reliance on importing over 80% of its food and the vulnerability of its local agricultural community. Consequently, local advocates initially urged the restoration of the site to agricultural use, emphasizing its vital role in local livelihoods. Yet, the financial investment that was required for the initial soil stabilization and the projected comparable cost of subsequent gravel removal led to a re-evaluation of the site's future. The Olympic Committee and the government proposed exploring alternative uses that would maximize benefits for the local community following the conclusion of the Olympic Games. These proposals included

developing the area for greenhouses or a sports field, thereby supporting local farmers and youth while effectively leveraging the existing groundworks.²⁸¹

Cruise Ship as Olympic village

Onshore, initially the construction of an Olympic Village with the smallest possible footprint was proposed, primarily entailing modular homes capable of being repurposed as social housing after the Games conclude.

«We wanted to bring together all the media and players from the various departments to give all the answers in a transparent approach. The work is heavy in terms of coordination and investment: being able to deliver these Games on time is a commitment by the Country and all the companies involved.» confided Christian Wang Sang, who was in charge of monitoring the work within the Tū'aro Nui unit.

However, back in August 2023, it was revealed that the Paris 2024 organizers hired a cruise ship to house athletes and officials for the Olympic surfing event at Teahupo'o. The decision to accommodate Olympic surfers on a cruise ship was publicly announced by Tahiti's Minister of Youth and Sports, Nahema Temarii, who also highlighted that the ship was the only possible accommodation less than 45 minutes from the competition site, as required by the Paris 2024 specifications.²⁸² Due to the lack of adequate local facilities and the extremely limited hotel and lodging capacity, the decision to use a cruise ship, the 'Aranui 5', emerged as the most viable and sustainable solution. The organizers even considered to renovate a long-unused local hotel, but –given that the hotel had remained abandoned for almost 26 years- this plan proved impractical.²⁸³

«There is not enough housing to accommodate athletes so they wanted to rebuild an abandoned hotel –if I am not mistaken- 30km away. But that was too much work and hassle and so they opted for the cruise ship to house everyone...which was a very good move in the

²⁸¹ Tiare Tuuhia, "The long environmental fight behind Tahiti's Olympic surfing events", BBC, 2 August 2024. Accessed on October 29, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240731-how-tahiti-locals-fought-back-against-olympic-surfing>

²⁸² Duncan MacKay, "Cruise ship to accommodate surfers in Tahiti during Olympics", Inside the Games, August 2023. <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1139553/olympic-surfers-to-stay-on-cruise-ship>

²⁸³ Evan Quarnstrom, "Surfers Will Stay on a Cruise Ship During the Olympic Surfing Event at Teahupo'o", The Inertia, November 2023. <https://www.theinertia.com/surf/paris-surfers-olympics-cruise-ship-teahupoo-2024/>

end but did detach the Olympics rather away from the land» (personal communication with Bernhard W., June 2025)

While cardboard beds made their appearance in Paris as the best proposed eco-solution for providing sleeping quarters for Olympics 2024 athletes, some 10,000 miles away, in Tahiti the first-ever floating Olympic Village was ready to house the Olympic surfers. The decision to anchor Aranui 5 off the coast of Tahiti, besides the compliance with the Paris 2024 specifications²⁸⁴, reflected also a commitment to sustainability and environmental stewardship.

The choice to use a cruise ship minimized the need for new shore-based infrastructure and reduced road traffic, thereby taking significant steps to protect the island's fragile ecosystem. Paris 2024 further underscored its dedication by commissioning an impact study and outlining actions to balance a possible carbon footprint, as confirmed by Temarii's statement in the newspaper '*L'Équipe*'. The 'Aranui 5' supported the commitment to sustainability by employing cutting-edge technology for enhanced energy efficiency, along with robust waste management systems and water conservation measures dedicated to preserving Tahiti's pristine environment.²⁸⁵

Pedestrian bridge PK0

«There was a pedestrian bridge here for years. They renovated this bridge only for the Games because it was the main access to the site closest to the wave» as Bernhard W. stated during a personal correspondence with the author.

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The Olympic construction projects included the erection of a structural steel pedestrian bridge (44 metres long and 3 metres wide), designed and implemented to ensure full accessibility for individuals with reduced mobility. The project –which worth 390 million francs– was

²⁸⁴ The specific requirement that the Olympic Village had to be around 45 minutes away from the competition sites was never stated directly. However, official Paris 2024 communications emphasize the compactness of the event, noting that “85% of athletes will stay within 30 minutes of their competition venue” and that “80% of completion venues are within a 10 km radius of the Village”.

“Paris 2024 presents an optimized Olympic Games venue concept”, Paris 2024 Press, October 2018.
<https://press.paris2024.org/news/update-paris-2024-presents-an-optimised-olympic-games-venue-concept-b6d8-7578a.html>

²⁸⁵ Duncan MacKay, “Cruise ship to accommodate surfers in Tahiti during Olympics”, Inside the Games, August 2023.
<https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1139553/olympic-surfers-to-stay-on-cruise-ship>

supposed to last 16 months. According to Hana Galenon, technical advisor to the Ministry of Major Projects, the inauguration would take place before Tahiti Pro, "the week of May 13th". As for the old footbridge –which was crumbling, but still used by residents and visitors to the area– it would be demolished after the WSL event.²⁸⁶

« [...]...so a bit of context; After the bridge there is no public road access. Look on Google street view...Teahupo'o is from the bridge onwards only accessible via 4x4. The bridge is a pedestrian bridge. Those who live on the other side have 4x4 drives to cross in the river bed. This is chosen by the local population on purpose, first, to justify their otherwise totally useless 4x4 car, and second, to naturally limit accessibility...people cruising around with their cars, public drinking, noise, crime, stealing etc.». Bernhard W. further elaborated, supplementing his account by sending a photograph as evidence of the current state of the bridge.



Figure 30: Pedestrian Bridge Pk0, June 2025. (Photo taken by interviewee, Bernhard W.)

Information Unit

Moreover, around December 2023, the municipality of West Taiparou announced the creation of an information unit dedicated to all the construction works. As a result, a native of

²⁸⁶ Anne-Charlotte Lehartel, "JO 2024 : où en sont les aménagements ?", Tahiti Infos, May 2024. https://www.tahiti-infos.com/JO-2024-ou-en-sont-les-amenagements_a223676.html

Teahupo'o, who was in charge of sustainable development studies, was available to provide inhabitants with information about the undertaken work.

The Olympic Flame ceremony

The Olympic Flame was planned to leave Teahupo'o on June 13th 2024, for a symbolic tour of the districts that were directly involved with the Games. 124 relay runners would carry the flame to To'ata in Pape'ete, where it would stay during the competition.²⁸⁷ "We are more relaxed because the work has progressed quite well, except for the work on the marina, which is a bit delayed," said Pascal Luciani, a spokesman for the Paris Olympics Games organizing committee in Tahiti. "The next deadlines are the delivery of the tower, estimated on May 13, and a first test with Tahiti Pro. After Tahiti Pro, we will test the technical equipment and networks in the tower to make sure everything is working properly. And we won't miss the passing of the flame!" he concluded, referring to the Olympic Flame ceremony on June 13.²⁸⁸

The Aluminum Tower controversy

What reignited discontent and tensions on the part of the local community, was the announcement of the construction of an aluminum Judges Tower, which was scheduled to be built in September 2023 and was intended to replace the wooden tower used until then. Built by Chris O'Callaghan (former technical director of the Billalong Pro) and David Moana in 1999, the wooden tower was used every year in WSL events (sometimes in extreme conditions, without major alterations). After the Tahiti Pro, was taken down and stored away in containers. Then, the following year was taken out, any repairs and replacements were made, and it was reassembled in the lagoon.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ "Teahupo'o: Surfing Venue for Paris Olympics – See, feel, surf the legendary wave", Tahiti Tourisme, The Islands of Tahiti, August 2023.

<https://www.tahititourisme.com/teahupoo-surfing-venue-for-paris-olympics/>

²⁸⁸ Anne-Charlotte Lehartel, "JO 2024 : où en sont les aménagements ?", Tahiti Infos, May 2024.

https://www.tahiti-infos.com/JO-2024-ou-en-sont-les-amenagements_a223676.html

²⁸⁹ Mat Arney, "The Cost of a Contest: Teahupo'o's Towers and The Olympics", Surf Simply, December 2023. <https://surfsimply.com/magazine/the-cost-of-a-contest-teahupo%E2%80%99s-towers-and-the-olympics>



Figure 31: The wooden tower.(Photograph provided to the author from the primary archival material of the renowned photographer Tim Mckenna).

However, on the occasion of the 2024 Olympic Games (which, being the biggest sporting ‘mega events’, are accompanied by strict specifications and bureaucracy), Paris 24 together

with the French Polynesian authorities and the Haut-Commissariat considered that the wooden tower no longer meets the safety standards. Without providing any documents nor publicly sharing studies attesting to this non-compliance (despite numerous requests by local activists), they estimated that the existing tower's foundation has been weakened (mainly by erosion).

“As the current judges' tower does not meet current safety standards, it will no longer be used and must be replaced if Teahupo'o is to continue to organise surfing events, whether for the Olympic Games or any other competition. The second issue is that the tower must be able to guarantee good conditions for the refereeing of the competition, in particular by offering the judges the necessary visibility over the entire wave.”, Paris 2024 declared in its official statement within a press release.²⁹⁰

The idea of judging and broadcasting the event from shore or boats in the channel was also ruled out due to visibility, safety concerns and fear of coral damage. Using technology (like drones) to judge was also rejected by organizers without any explanation: “The Teahupo'o wave is 750m from the nearest point on land. The judges therefore do not have sufficient visibility of the wave from the shore, and this distance does not allow television coverage of the required quality. In addition, the angle offered from the shore does not ensure a good view of the entire wave and the surfers' sessions. [...] Boats would be located on the side of the wave: it would be impossible to observe the competition properly and capture all the surfers' sessions with the required quality and angle; For boats located in the lagoon: visibility would be obstructed by successive waves, safety conditions would not be guaranteed in the event of a heavy swell, and the draught of the boats required could damage the coral.”

²⁹⁰ “Confirmation of the organization of Olympic Games surfing events at the Teahupo'o site with a new, more moderate judges' tower”, Paris 2024 Press, November 2023.

<https://press.paris2024.org/news/the-polynesian-government-paris-2024-and-the-haut-commissariat-confirm-the-organisation-of-the-olympic-games-surfing-events-at-the-teahupoo-site-with-a-proposition-of-a-new-more-moderate-judges-tower-eafc-7578a.html>



Figure 32: Jet ski rescue teams watch the WSL Shiseido Tahiti pro surfing event from boats at Teahupo'o in August 2023. Photograph: Jérôme Brouillet/AFP/Getty Images. ²⁹¹

In September 2023, the VAOT association was unofficially informed of a 20220 study that the existing footings of the wooden tower could be reused to build the new refereeing tower, since major earthworks or pile-driving were not feasible on this site.²⁹² “There have been using, judging, filming and doing lives from this actual (wooden) tower for the professional WSL (World Surf League) for the last fifteen years” said Matahi Drollet, a world famous local surfer, in a video message during the October 15th protest against the aluminum tower. “The impact and the risk are too important for only three days of contest.” In addition, the WSL stated (in an emailed statement) that it had used the wooden tower “with the full support and approval of the Tahitian government” highlighting that “it is important for Paris 2024 to engage and listen to the local community as they contemplate their decisions related to the Olympic competition and this iconic wave.” ²⁹³

²⁹¹ “Tahiti surf tower sparks protests against Olympics ‘kooks’ before Paris 2024”, The Guardian – Reuters, October 27, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/oct/27/tahiti-surf-tower-sparks-protests-against-olympics-kooks-before-paris-2024>

²⁹² Marie Delaplace and Pierre-Olaf Schut, *Planning the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 111.

²⁹³ “Tahiti surf tower sparks protests against Olympics ‘kooks’ before Paris 2024”, The Guardian – Reuters, October 27, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/oct/27/tahiti-surf-tower-sparks-protests-against-olympics-kooks-before-paris-2024>

The outcomes of the aforementioned study were notably omitted from subsequent discussions. Nevertheless, in late August 2022, the same consultancy firm proceeded to develop a project proposal for the construction of a new judges' tower founded on entirely new structural bases, without providing any accompanying justification or referencing the findings of the prior study.²⁹⁴ Since “the option of constructing a new wooden tower would have been impossible to carry out in the time available” (as mentioned by the ‘Inside the Games’ reporter, David Rubio Salguero), the proposed solution was a new removable 14m aluminum structure on 12 new permanent foundations in the reef at a cost of US \$5m. The new foundations required at least 56 holes to be drilled into the reef. The tower was expected to accommodate up to 40 people, meeting the security standards and having permanent pipes and cables connecting it to shore through an 800m service channel to provide electricity, high-speed internet and running water for toilets on the tower. The structure would, also, include an air conditioned room for internet servers and electronic terminals.²⁹⁵

Beneath the Waves: Environmental Concerns and Studies for the Teahupoo Reef

While the legendary Tahitian waves have garnered the primary focus of the metropolitan administration's publicity, an equally valuable treasure is situated sub-surface: the coral reef habitat. Made up of animals called coral polyps, the reef provides a home to thousands of other animal species, including “more than a thousand fish species, some of which are found nowhere else on Earth,” according to Alan Friedlander, senior marine ecologist for National Geographic's Pristine Seas.²⁹⁶

In the proposed tower location was documented a presence of over 1,000 corals from 20 species.²⁹⁷ Corals are fragile and sensitive, and damage from construction and anchoring could make them more vulnerable to marine heat waves. It takes years for a coral to recover

²⁹⁴ Marie Delaplace and Pierre-Olaf Schut, *Planning the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 111.

²⁹⁵ Mat Arney, "The Cost of a Contest: Teahupo'o's Tower and the Olympics," Surf Simply, accessed June 2, 2025. <https://surfsimply.com/magazine/the-cost-of-a-contest-teahupo%E2%80%99s-towers-and-the-olympics>.

²⁹⁶ Melissa Hobson, “The Olympics chose Tahiti for its famous waves—but some surfers aren't happy about it”, National Geographic, June 24, 2024. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/olympics-surfing-tahiti-coral-reef-controversy>

²⁹⁷ Marcie Grabowski, “Olympic tower construction at Teahupo'o, Tahiti could damage reef ecosystem”, School of Ocean and Earth Science and Technology, March 13, 2023. <https://www.soest.hawaii.edu/soestwp/announce/news/olympic-tower-tahiti-damage-reef/>

from damage, since “the skeleton of corals is very similar to human bone” and grows very slowly, according to Carlos Duarte, professor of marine science at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology. Even after two decades, it would not be the same as the original reef—most coral reefs took around 5,000 years to reach their current size—nor will it have the same biodiversity. “After two decades, what you have is not exactly what you lost,” he highlighted.²⁹⁸



Figure 33: Photograph provided to the author by the renowned photographer Tim Mckenna from his primary archival material.

²⁹⁸ Melissa Hobson, “The Olympics chose Tahiti for its famous waves—but some surfers aren't happy about it”, National Geographic, June 24, 2024. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/olympics-surfing-tahiti-coral-reef-controversy>

What are the risks of the case in question?

I. Direct harm

Utilising methodologies such as 3D photogrammetry, scientific assessments identified substantial risks to the delicate coral reef ecosystem of Teahupo'o. Concerns were raised regarding direct damage from construction activities, such as drilling 133 holes into the reef's pristine corals and dredging for barge access, which was projected to damage an estimated 2,500 square meters of reef.²⁹⁹

The "Community-Based Monitoring for Rapid Assessment of Nearshore Coral Reefs Amid Disturbances in Teahupo'o, Tahiti" study

Researchers from the University of Hawai'i (UH) at Mānoa, UH Hilo, and Arizona State University teamed up with community members from Vai Ara O Teahupo'o and used 3D photogrammetry techniques to create high-resolution habitat maps of three sites that will be impacted by dredging to accommodate barge transport of tower materials. The resulting mosaics were analyzed to quantify species diversity, coral colony count, coral colony size, and percent of the ocean floor covered by live coral and other living organisms.³⁰⁰

The study, "Community-Based Monitoring for Rapid Assessment of Nearshore Coral Reefs Amid Disturbances in Teahupo'o, Tahiti", was published in 'Remote Sensing' (Feb. 2024), assessing the importance of protecting the valuable reef, both as an integral part of the ecosystem and a resource for the local community. The resulting data showed that these sites support healthy and diverse coral communities that contribute to the ecological function of the larger reef system at Teahupo'o. In the 322 square meters (about the size of a tennis court) where the tower would be located, they identified the presence of 1,003 corals from 20 different species, indicating this site is a thriving coral habitat.³⁰¹

²⁹⁹ Ash Murphy, "The New Teahupo'o Surf Tower is an Olympic Sized Setback for Environmental Protection at the 2024 Paris Games", Manchester Metropolitan University (2024).

³⁰⁰ Michele Broder Van Dyke, "Study shows Olympic tower construction could damage Tahiti reef ecosystem", Spectrum News, March 14, 2024. <https://spectrumlocalnews.com/hi/hawaii/news/2024/03/14/documentary-surfers-olympic-games>

³⁰¹ Marcie Grabowski, "UH Hilo MEGA Lab: Olympic tower construction could damage Tahiti reef ecosystem", UH Hilo Stories, March 20, 2024. <https://hilo.hawaii.edu/chancellor/stories/2024/03/20/mega-lab-olympic-tower-construction/>

In addition to an assessment of the reef in Tahiti where the Olympic structure will be built, the team mapped the lagoon area where the reef is being dredged to accommodate barge transport of tower materials. This dredging could directly impact 2,500-square meters of the reef (about half the size of a football field). If this were to occur, the authors report, it could cause a financial impact of at least \$1.3 million by damaging the live reef habitat.

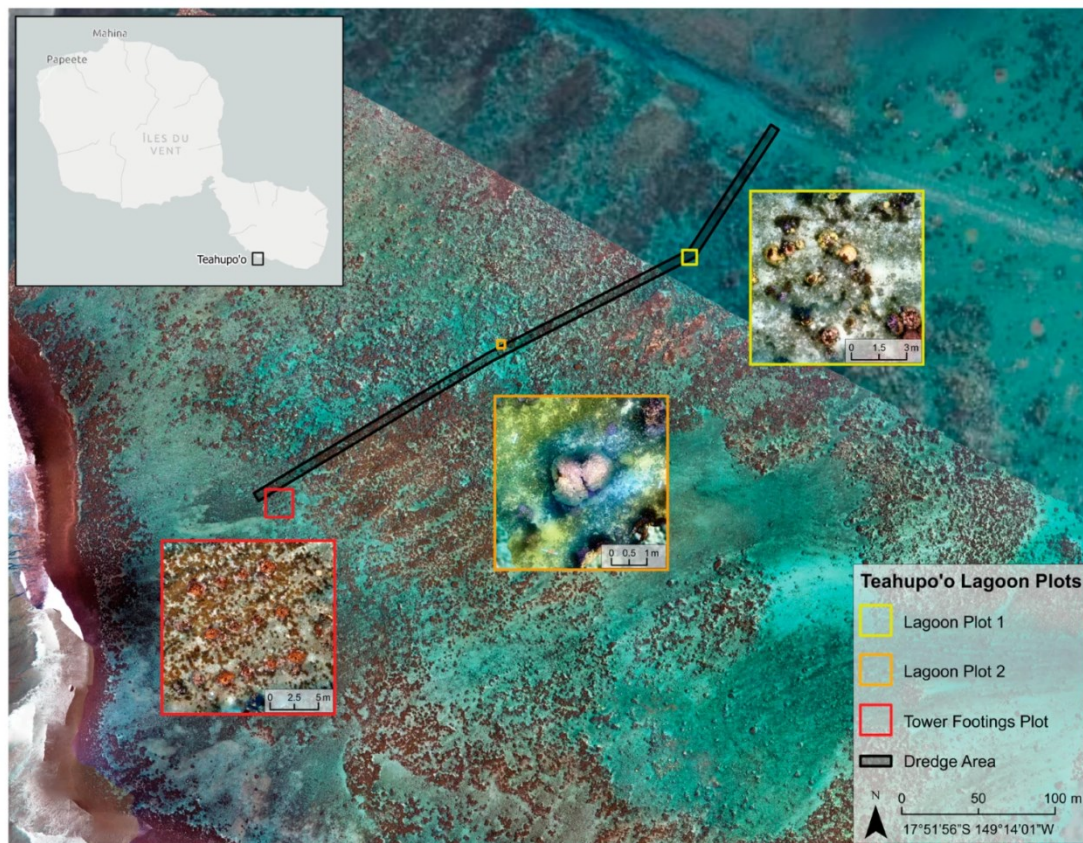


Figure 34:“Imagery and orthophotos of the Teahupo‘o Lagoon and the three study site locations: Tower Footings Plot, Lagoon Plot 1, and Lagoon Plot 2.The inset orthophotos were generated by the community-based surveys and the larger lagoon orthophoto was rendered from UAV imagery. The proposed dredge area is a 6 m wide path from shore to the tower footings, highlighted by the grey rectangle. (MEGA Lab/UH Hilo)” ³⁰²

³⁰² MEGA Lab is run by founder John Burns, a research scientist primarily studying coral health and disease; specifically, he is investigating the physiological impacts of disease on affected corals and how coral mortality affects the ecology and biology of coral reef ecosystems.

Marcie Grabowski, “UH Hilo MEGA Lab: Olympic tower construction could damage Tahiti reef ecosystem”, UH Hilo Stories, March 20,2024. <https://hilo.hawaii.edu/chancellor/stories/2024/03/20/mega-lab-olympic-tower-construction/>

The team's impact estimates are conservative –only accounting for direct impacts and not including the potential financial impacts for communities who depend on these resources or the impact on the much greater lagoon area if water quality is affected.³⁰³

“Although these organisms' value will never be fully represented through a capitalistic lens, based on U.S. valuations used by the Hawai'i Division of Aquatic Resources, our data show the value of just the corals and algae at this small portion of the reef is estimated to be worth at least \$170,000,” said Haunani Kane, co-author, assistant professor of Earth Sciences in the School of Ocean and Earth Science and Technology at UH Mānoa, and MEGA Lab member.³⁰⁴

Even the shadow created by the platform could be harmful because “coral reefs are critically dependent on light for photosynthesis”, Duarte stated. Coral reefs, also, contribute to shaping the kind of waves that Teahupo'o is famous for, causing waves to break as water reaches the shore. In a video supporting the campaign against the aluminum tower, professional surfer Matahi Drollet argued that the tower could “modify or completely change the wave and -in the worst case-make it disappear in a few years”.³⁰⁵

These fragile marine invertebrates also provide a home to a wealth of biodiversity and, when damaged, become significantly more vulnerable to heatwaves. Anchoring the tower or installing pipework for its toilets could leave scars on the reef that would take years to recover.

«Every time we modify the environment we see, not immediately, but years later, issues arising and it is too late to fix them. Everyone benefits from the coral reefs. They are the lungs and rainforest of our oceans, and the oceans produce more than half of the oxygen we breath everyday. We have been planting corals for many years, and trust me, it is a long and complicated process to plant just one single coral. The truth is, coral could be completely gone by 2050. To the Paris 2024 Committee, the Olympic Games are an example of shared

³⁰³ Marcie Grabowski, “UH Hilo MEGA Lab: Olympic tower construction could damage Tahiti reef ecosystem”, UH Hilo Stories, March 20, 2024. <https://hilo.hawaii.edu/chancellor/stories/2024/03/20/mega-lab-olympic-tower-construction/>

³⁰⁴ Marcie Grabowski, “Olympic tower construction at Teahupo'o, Tahiti could damage reef ecosystem”, EurekAlert!, Publication from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, March 13, 2024. <https://www.eurekalert.org/news-releases/1037638>

³⁰⁵ Mat Arney, "The Cost of a Contest: Teahupo'o's Tower and the Olympics," Surf Simply, accessed June 2, 2025. <https://surfsimply.com/magazine/the-cost-of-a-contest-teahupo%E2%80%99s-towers-and-the-olympics>.

values and should lead the way. What will we tell the next generation, that for three days of competition we could have destroyed one of the most important ecosystems on our planet?» (Titouan Bermnicot-CEO, Coral Gardeners).

II. Indirect harm

1) The “shadow effect”

Coral reefs are highly dependent on light as the primary energy source for photosynthesis performed by their symbiotic dinoflagellates, commonly referred to as zooxanthellae. This photosynthetic process is fundamental to coral health, growth, and calcification, supporting reef productivity and resilience. Carlos Duarte’s argument that the very shadow cast by the aluminum tower might indirectly harm the coral reef aligns with well-established ecological principles that underscore light availability as a limiting factor in coral vitality.³⁰⁶

Light attenuation caused by shading reduces the photosynthetic capacity of symbionts, leading to diminished energy production and potentially reduced calcification rates.³⁰⁷ This can impair coral growth and weaken the reef structure over time. Rogers (1979) demonstrated experimentally that shading significantly reduced growth rates of the dominant coral species *Acropora cervicornis*, indicating that long-term shading poses a real threat to coral development. This finding is particularly pertinent when artificial structures such as platforms cast shadows, compromising reef exposure to optimal light levels.³⁰⁸

Nevertheless, recent studies reveal a nuanced relationship between shading and coral health. While excessive shading is detrimental, controlled shading can mitigate photodamage under thermal stress by reducing the light-induced oxidative stress that contributes to coral bleaching. Bleaching results from the breakdown of the symbiosis between coral and algae under combined stressors of heat and excessive light. Strategic shading may alleviate some

³⁰⁶ Melissa Hobson, “The Olympics chose Tahiti for its famous waves—but some surfers aren't happy about it”, National Geographic, June 24, 2024. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/olympics-surfing-tahiti-coral-reef-controversy>

³⁰⁷ Andrea Tagliafico, et al. “The Effects of Shade and Light on Corals in the Context of Global Stressors.” *Frontiers in Marine Science* 9 (July 11, 2022). <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/marine-science/articles/10.3389/fmars.2022.919382/full>

³⁰⁸ Carolyn S. Rogers, “The Effect of Shading on Coral Reef Structure and Function.” *Coral Reefs* (1979). https://www.aoml.noaa.gov/general/lib/CREWS/Cleo/St.%20Croix/salt_river76.pdf.

impacts of global warming, but unplanned or persistent shadows from infrastructure do not mimic these optimized conditions and often reduce light below essential thresholds for photosynthesis.³⁰⁹

The ecological consequences of platform shadows are inherently complex, as the effects of shading are highly species-specific. Research demonstrates that some coral species benefited from shading under thermal stress, while others exhibited negative responses. This variability is critical, as it indicates that platform shadows can lead to shifts in the coral community composition, potentially altering local reef biodiversity and overall ecosystem function.³¹⁰

Indirect effects of shading also include altering local microhabitats and benthic community structure. Reduced light availability can hinder the growth of photosynthetic organisms such as crustose coralline algae, which are crucial for reef cementation and larval settlement. Additionally, shading may encourage the proliferation of heterotrophic or shade-tolerant species, further impacting reef ecological balance.³¹¹

In conclusion, the shadow cast by platforms represents an indirect but critical environmental stressor for coral reefs, primarily through light limitation that disrupts photosynthesis. While shading can have mitigating effects against bleaching in certain contexts, the overall consequence of persistent and unregulated shading from artificial structures generally results in diminished coral growth and reef resilience, with potential shifts in community composition and ecosystem function.

2) Ciguatera fish poisoning

Furthermore, the construction of the aluminum tower was estimated to carry the risk of a potential increase in *Gambierdiscus toxicus* (a harmful algae named after the Gambier Islands of French Polynesia that lives adhered to damaged coral reefs in tropical seas). This marine

³⁰⁹ Paula Butcherine et al. "Intermittent Shading Can Moderate Coral Bleaching on Thermally Stressed Corals." *Frontiers in Marine Science* 10 (September 19, 2023). <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/marine-science/articles/10.3389/fmars.2023.1162896/full>.

³¹⁰ Sarah L. Ellis et al. "Shading Responses Are Species-Specific in Thermally Stressed Corals." *Frontiers in Marine Science* 11 (September 12, 2024). <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/marine-science/articles/10.3389/fmars.2024.1333806/full>.

³¹¹ Letizia Pinchetti. "Sustainable Coastal Development: A Comparative Analysis of Environmental Impacts Between Floating Platforms and Dredging." Master's thesis, Politecnico di Torino (2023), 78-81.

microalgae is, in turn, responsible for causing ciguatera fish poisoning (or *ciguatera*)³¹² –a clinical syndrome provoked by toxins transferred to the human body following the consumption of contaminated fish. More precisely, these toxins, known as “ciguatoxins”, are transmitted by dinoflagellates³¹³ of the species *Gambierdiscus toxicus*, when herbivorous fish species, after ingesting dinoflagellates, accumulate them in their musculature, liver, and viscera. Subsequently, larger marine carnivores eat the contaminated fish and concentrate the ciguatoxins, which are then transferred to humans through the food chain, causing fatigue, any kind of pain, nausea, vomiting, tingling fingers or toes etc. within 48 hours after consumption.³¹⁴

More than 157 neurological, neuropsychiatric and systemic symptoms have been reported. Chronic symptoms include seizures, depression, anxiety, and memory disturbances. In at least 20% of *ciguatera*-affected persons, these symptoms persist for months or years after the initial poisoning. While most symptoms are unspecific and could also hint towards other food poisoning, a classic symptom for *ciguatera* is cold allodynia –the sensation that cold things feel hot to the touch and vice versa.³¹⁵

«The whole thing with building a big aluminum tower in the sea and ciguatera is a bit indirect. Ciguatera is caused by toxins produced by microscopic algae in the genus Gambierdiscus, which thrive on seaweed that colonizes dead or dying coral. The process of dredging, drilling, and pile-driving to install the tower’s foundation can damage or kill coral. Dead or stressed coral reefs in turn create an ideal environment for the proliferation of the microscopic algae.»

³¹² Ciguatera is form of food poisoning caused by toxins produced by dinoflagellates, a large group of protists that occur in marine and fresh water habitats. The toxins accumulate in the tissues of marine fish and invertebrates that eat the dinoflagellates and produce the poisoning when they, in turn, are consumed by humans and other animals. <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/sites/default/files/resource/Ciguatera.pdf>

³¹³ The dinoflagellates form a large and diverse group of microscopic, usually unicellular organisms that are classified as protists (cellular organisms that cannot be classified as fungi, animals, or plants). They generally have two whip-like body projections (the flagellae) of unequal size that are used for locomotion and which result in a characteristic spiral swimming motion. Some dinoflagellates are photosynthetic and free-living, others are autotrophic and symbiotic with marine animals and protozoa, some are predators on protozoa, and a few forms are parasitic. Some species produce neurotoxins which can kill fish and accumulate in organisms that can then be eaten by humans and other animals.

<https://www.nifa.usda.gov/sites/default/files/resource/Ciguatera.pdf>

³¹⁴ “Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs)”, Department of Health and Human Services- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Accessed on August 20, 2025. <http://medbox.iiaab.me/modules/en-cdc/www.cdc.gov/nceh/ciguatera/default.htm>

³¹⁵ “Ciguatera Poisoning”, World Health Organization- Department of Food Safety and Zoonoses, November 2020.

Then, you have the food chain kicking in. Small, herbivorous fish come along and gaze on all those 'algae' and microorganisms. That's how they first get the 'ciguatera toxins' into their systems. And this is where it gets serious: bioaccumulation. The bigger, predatory fish eat those smaller, contaminated fish. As they do, the toxins don't just disappear; they build up in their tissues. The more contaminated fish they eat, the more concentrated the toxins become.

So, when people catch and eat these large, top-of-the-food-chain fish, they can get ciguatera. In a nutshell, the aluminum tower doesn't directly cause ciguatera, but its process of installment creates the conditions that lead to the growth of these toxic organisms and then we see their movement up the food chain», as Camille L., explained to the author during a marine conservation in Nusa Penida, Bali 2025.

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Scientific studies, also, underline vulnerability under climate change. They indicate that climate change through increasing ocean temperatures exacerbates the ciguatera fish poisoning problem, creating favorable conditions for the proliferation of toxic microalgae (yet, as for August 22, 2025 –when the article was published– there is no conclusive evidence to demonstrate that these organisms are more widespread compared to the past).³¹⁶ As a result, the factor of the ocean warming could potentially interact cumulatively with the coral necrosis and destruction during the installation of the aluminum tower, creating the ideal conditions for a *ciguatera* outbreak.

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Ciguatera fish poisoning is able to cause detrimental effects to the local communities; In Teahupo'o, fish precisely are the primary resource, while the wider Tahitian region imports over 80% of its food in general. The aforementioned fact highlights the critical need to safeguard the local ecosystem and preserve the area's nutritional resources.³¹⁷ The dependency of coastal communities on lagoon ecosystems is exemplified by the subsistence and commercial fishing practices of individuals like Mormon Maitei, a 22-year-old local fisherman, who is engaged in subsistence and commercial spearfishing within the lagoons, a

³¹⁶ Jean-Michel Hauteville, Sara Kirkpatrick and Freeman Rogers, "Could Dying Reefs Fuel Ciguatera Poisoning?", Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, August 22, 2025.

<https://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2025/08/caribbean-ciguatera-fish-poisoning-coral-reef-decline/>

³¹⁷ "The long environmental fight behind Tahiti's Olympic surfing events", Illuminem Briefings, August 3, 2024. <https://illuminem.com/illuminemvoices/the-long-environmental-fight-behind-tahitis-olympic-surfing-events>

practice that serves as both his family's primary food source and a means of economic livelihood through the sale of surplus catch. Consequently, the decline of these vital natural systems is not merely an environmental issue but a profound social and economic crisis, with direct and severe implications.

3) Alteration of the Wave

Coral reefs like Teahupo'o are not only vital marine ecosystems but also critical in shaping the unique wave dynamics prized by local communities and surfers internationally. According to ecological and physical oceanographic studies, coral reef morphology intricately controls wave energy dissipation, refraction, and breaking patterns, which create the distinctive waves coveted for surfing.³¹⁸ Any alteration to reef structure –such as the construction of artificial infrastructure– changes the hydrodynamics, often resulting in diminished wave quality or even wave loss, which directly impacts local cultural heritage and global surf tourism economies.³¹⁹

Although less known to the broader public and political bodies, not only the aluminum tower but also the bridge construction initiatives threatened equally the wave located at the mouth of Teahupo'o with disappearance. This seemed to come as no surprise to Tahurai Henry (world famous local surfer and representative for the Teahupo'o surf community for the 2024 Olympics), who critically stated: "These are things they cannot comprehend from their offices in Paris", implying that the village at 'the end of the road' had long been forgotten by public authorities and Paris. This became evident, after all, with the lack of due diligence on the part of the Olympic organizing committee.³²⁰ Tahurai Henry's concerns align with emerging literature on coastal developments that overlook indigenous knowledge and cultural ecosystem services, resulting in environmental degradation and sociocultural displacement.³²¹ The lack of integration between Olympic planners and the Teahupo'o community exemplifies the phenomenon of "decision-making from afar," where distant authorities

³¹⁸ William O.C. Symondson et al. "Coral Reef Morphology and Its Role in Wave Dynamics: Implications for Surf Break Integrity." *Journal of Coastal Research* 40, no. 2 (2024): 345-360.

³¹⁹ Gregory B. Mann and Oliver D. Galland. "Impacts of Coastal Infrastructure on Surfing Waves and Cultural Heritage." *Marine Policy* 142 (2023): 105024.

³²⁰ Rendy Cowan, "Pour Kelly Slater, la tour des juges 'n'a aucun sens'", Tahiti Infos, November 27, 2023. https://www.tahiti-infos.com/Pour-Kelly-Slater-la-tour-des-juges-n-a-aucun-sens_a220863.html

³²¹ Davis, Elizabeth, and François Durand. "Indigenous Knowledge and Coastal Development: Bridging Cultural and Environmental Conservations." *Environment and Society* 13, no. 1 (2022): 75-94.

impose infrastructural projects without adequately grasping site-specific environmental and cultural contexts, often heightening local resistance and ecological risks.³²²

Additionally, the disappearance or alteration of natural surf breaks can have cascading socio-economic effects on coastal communities dependent on surfing-related livelihoods, inclusive of tourism and cultural identity.³²³ This further underscores the necessity for environmental impact assessments that extend beyond biophysical factors to include culturally significant ecosystem functions.

In sum, the aluminum tower's presence would not only jeopardize the geomorphological processes that sustain Teahupo'o's world-class waves but also risk eroding an interwoven cultural heritage esteemed by Tahitian communities and global surf culture alike.

³²² Timothy L. Henderson et al., "Decision-Making from Afar: Governance Challenges in Coastal Infrastructure Projects." *Marine Governance Review* 18 (2023): 101-118.

³²³ Callum Jones et al., "Surfing Livelihoods and Coastal Community Sustainability: Cultural and Economic Perspectives." *Antipode* 53, no. 4 (2021): 1022-1045.

Turmoil at the ‘Wall of Skeletons’



Figure 35: Peaceful protest against the tower construction. Photo courtesy of Thomas Belvicaqua.³²⁴

According to the professor of marine science, Carlos Duarte, the aluminum tower construction should extend beyond merely avoiding damage to the reef. The International Olympic Committee's (IOC) commitment to the Sports for Nature³²⁵ pledge mandated an effort to enhance the reef's health beyond its pre-competition state. Duarte asserted that the design of an infrastructure capable of harming a highly vulnerable ecosystem, such as coral reefs, was fundamentally inconsistent with the principles of this pledge.³²⁶

The controversy rooted in the Olympic preparations underscored a fundamental tension between the economic ambitions of hosting a global event and the imperative to preserve fragile ecosystems and indigenous communities' interests. Despite assertions from French Polynesian officials about prioritizing ecology and sustainable development, critics argued

³²⁴ Georgina Seal, “Reef damage from 2024 Olympics surfing venue is avoidable (commentary)”, Mongabay, December 8, 2023. <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/12/reef-damage-from-2024-olympics-surfing-venue-is-avoidable-commentary/>

³²⁵ Sports for Nature is an international initiative that aims to leverage the power of sports to protect and restore nature. Its main goal is to encourage sports organizations to take actions that have a positive impact on nature by 2030 and beyond. <https://sportsfornature.org/framework/>

³²⁶ Melissa Hobson, “The Olympics chose Tahiti for its famous waves—but some surfers aren't happy about it”, National Geographic, June 24, 2024. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/olympics-surfing-tahiti-coral-reef-controversy>

that the project's execution contradicted these principles, particularly concerning the "no harm" and "precautionary" ones.

The most salient, pronounced and coordinated backlash from the local community emerged when Paris 2024 and the government of French Polynesia built on land (the official final construction was planned to be placed in the sea and embedded in the reef) a new aluminum judges' tower, which was much heavier than the wooden one and required new foundation (in order to meet the 'Olympic specifications and the standards required for insurance purposes'). The tower –which was planned to accommodate 40 people- was equipped with servers, relays, and back-up batteries for live broadcasts of the competition around the world, an air-conditioned room and toilets.³²⁷ An underwater pipeline crossing 800 m of lagoon was also expected to be established for the toilets.

Given the absence of an environmental study ensuring its placement, when it was presented to the local residents in mid-September as an architectural seal of the Olympic Games' legacy in Polynesia, provoked strong protests. Local residents, surfers and environmentalists were outraged at the scale of destruction being suggested for just a few days of competition.

³²⁷ Charlie René, "Jeux olympiques : la nouvelle tour des juges coûtera au moins 547 millions", Radio 1, July 31, 2023. <https://www.radio1.pf/jeux-olympiques-la-nouvelle-tour-des-juges-couter-a-moins-547-millions/>



Figure 36: Construction of the aluminum tower (Source: VAOT association).

As reported by international and local media, and multiple news outlets, as well as according to interviews conducted by the author, there have been several major mobilizations. It is concluded by the author that the most significant was held in October 2023, instigated by local organizations [with Vai Ara O Teahupo'o (VAOT) being the most active of all]. However, this was not an isolated event. In contrast, the October protest was followed by similar marches and expressions of opposition.

Positioned chronologically within a period of intense demonstrations, on 15 October 2023, the VAOT association spearheaded the most consequential march opposing the new judges' tower. Bringing together several hundred people (local residents and international surfers), the peaceful demonstration, including a protest march accompanied with traditional singing and a human chain, had a strong cultural dimension, calling for "respect for nature and traditions".

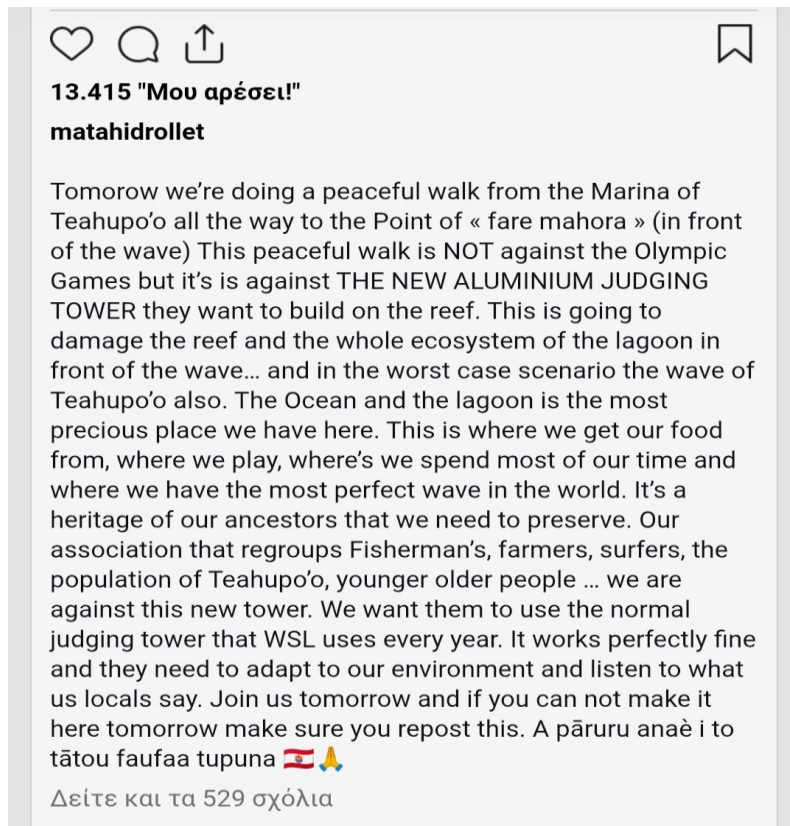


Figure 37: Screenshot taken in October 15, 2023 from the official Instagram account of Matahi Drollet, world famous local surfer and prominent member of VAOT association.

Surfers placed a sculpture on the foundations of the current tower, as “an offering from the earth to the ocean, as a sign of unity, protection and tapu”. Although the Organizing Committee (OCOG) had stressed from the outset that Paris 2024 had put “environmental responsibility as a key focus of its bit”, around 500 people in a remote island of French Polynesia openly questioned the Paris 2024 promises, highlighting the ecological impact of this incomppliance and denouncing the lack of consultation and transparency in the management of this crucial issue.³²⁸ A long period of conflict between the majority of the local community and the event organizers followed, but since the turmoil was taking place on the other side of the world, little information was reaching Europe, where Paris was preparing to celebrate frenetically the great event of the Olympics.

³²⁸ Aymeric Fiaudrin, “JO 2024. Une manifestation à Tahiti contre la construction d’une tour des juges pour le surf”, Ouest-France, October 19, 2023. <https://www.ouest-france.fr/jeux-olympiques/jo-2024-une-manifestation-a-tahiti-contre-la-construction-dune-tour-des-juges-pour-le-surf-3f53c6f6-6e4c-11ee-97d6-d90367762e60>

In a YouTube video published on 19 October 2023, Matahi Drollet , one of the most active and outspoken Teahupo'o's top pro surfers, called for ecological awareness and mobilization against the construction of the aluminum tower, highlighting the environmental risks involved:

*“The problem is simple, in order to have the Olympics in Teahupo'o, Paris 2024 wants to replace the normal tower with the new aluminum tower that has new concrete foundations. Just because they want air-conditioning, toilets, this new construction is going to destroy a big part of the reef. The risks are simple and nasty: destruction of the reef and a very bad impact on the marine ecosystem that could stress the whole marine life and spread what is called ciguatera. Ciguatera is a disease that poisons all the fish. Teahupo'o is a town of fishermen who eat their own fish and live of selling them. And last but not least, it could modify or change our wave, and in the worst scenario, make it disappear in a few years”.*³²⁹

A handwritten petition was launched in October 2023 and then a digital one (December 2, 2023) on behalf of the residents and visitors of Teahupo'o. Relayed on social networks by Matahi Drollet, the petition, written in three languages (English, French and Tahitian), called on the local government to abandon the tower and the underwater pipelines. More than 150,000 people have signed the online petition by the first week of November ³³⁰ (today the total number of signatures is 258.335 with the last person signing “two months ago” based on data collected on July 1, 2025).

*“Mātou , te feiā e noho tāmāu nei i Teahupoo , mātou te mau rātere no Māōhi nui e no te ara, te ani nei mātou I te Faatereraa o te Hau fenua , ia faaōre-roa -hia i te ôpuaraa o te paēpaē hiōpōāraa a te Tōmite o te tataūraa hōrue o te ao nei JO 2024, ia òre te papa o te tairoto ia paohia , ia òre te āuri ia faatāravahia i raro i te tai , ia faaōhipahia rā te paēpaē tahito no te tataūraa hōrue o te ao nei te pihia JO 2024”*³³¹

³²⁹ Kimoka Pearl, “Teahupo'o Needs Your Help”, Youtube, posted on October 19, 2023. <https://youtu.be/-Bd4uMGFHc8>

³³⁰ Mat Arney, “The Cost of a Contest: Teahupo'o's Tower and the Olympics”, Surf Simply, accessed June 2, 2025. <https://surfsimply.com/magazine/the-cost-of-a-contest-teahupo%E2%80%99s-towers-and-the-olympics>.

³³¹ Association Vai Ara Teahupo'o, “FAATURA IA TEAHUPO'O (DON'T GIVE MONEY, JUST SIGN)”, petition on Change.org. <https://www.change.org/p/faatura-ia-teahupo-o>

[Translation]

“We, the undersigned residents and visitors of Teahupoo and Māohi nui, ask the Government of the Country to renounce the new Arbitration Tower of the 2024 Olympics, the drilling of the platform, the underwater pipelines, and propose to use the usual wooden tower for the surfing competition of the 2024 Olympics.”

The campaign's website alleges that the project commenced "without any ecological impact study" and cautioned about the "dire consequences of damaging the reef by coral drilling." Aimata Levy, vice-president of the association Vai Ara O Teahupo'o, further underscored this absence of an ecological impact report provided by Paris 2024 organizers. Levy unequivocally stated, “For sure we will not accept any new foundations in the lagoon”, drawing a parallel between the organizers’ stated concern for those in the Judges’ Tower and the unaddressed security of the families “who live around and [use] this lagoon every day”, thereby highlighting a critical disparity in safety considerations.³³²

It was on the occasion of one of those protests, when Josh Lambert, former president of the Teahupo'o Surf Club, stated that “The Olympics people, they are what we would call in the surf world “kooks”. They are not surfers and they don’t understand how things work in surf.”, “If they do that (the aluminum tower construction), they will kill the wave that all our kids learn to surf on...”³³³

Around early December, when the initial indications of ecological degradation began circulating online, many pro surfers, such as 11-time world champ Kelly Slater, took a stand and voiced their support for Matahi Drollet and the local community. Five out of the fourteen surfers who had already qualified for next year’s Olympics supported publicly the local community’s mobilization on social media: Vahine Fierro, Johanne Defay (France), Carissa Moore (USA), Kanoa Igarashi (Japan) and Felipe Toledo (Brazil).³³⁴

³³² “Tahiti surf tower sparks protests against Olympics ‘kooks’ before Paris 2024”, The Guardian – Reuters, October 27, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/oct/27/tahiti-surf-tower-sparks-protests-against-olympics-kooks-before-paris-2024>

³³³ “Tahiti surf tower sparks protests against Olympics ‘kooks’ before Paris 2024”, The Guardian – Reuters, October 27, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/oct/27/tahiti-surf-tower-sparks-protests-against-olympics-kooks-before-paris-2024>

³³⁴ Georgina Seal, “Reef damage from 2024 Olympics surfing venue is avoidable (commentary)”, Mongabay, December 8, 2023. <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/12/reef-damage-from-2024-olympics-surfing-venue-is-avoidable-commentary/>

‘Silence’ among the Olympic athletes

As the Pacific seemed to tremble with the voices of demonstrators, Olympic surfing athletes, dispersed across the globe, appeared to be preparing undeterred and at a frenetic pace for the 2024 Olympic surfing events.

The perceived “silence” and lack of public protest from the Olympic athletes was publicly rebutted by Jérémy Florès (a Frenchman born in Réunion, widely regarded as the most successful European surfer of all time, and the head coach of the French Olympic Surfing Team in Teahupo’o) via his personal Instagram account. His intervention was specifically aimed at providing a rationale for the seemingly reserved stance taken by both the native Tahitian representatives competing for France and other qualified participants, who faced mounting criticism over their limited engagement with the controversial infrastructure development.

Florès position advocated for the depoliticization of the athletes’ role and the redistribution of responsibility to the event’s governing bodies. His social media statement served as a crucial commentary on the ethical and political complexities surrounding the Paris 2024 Olympic Surfing event.

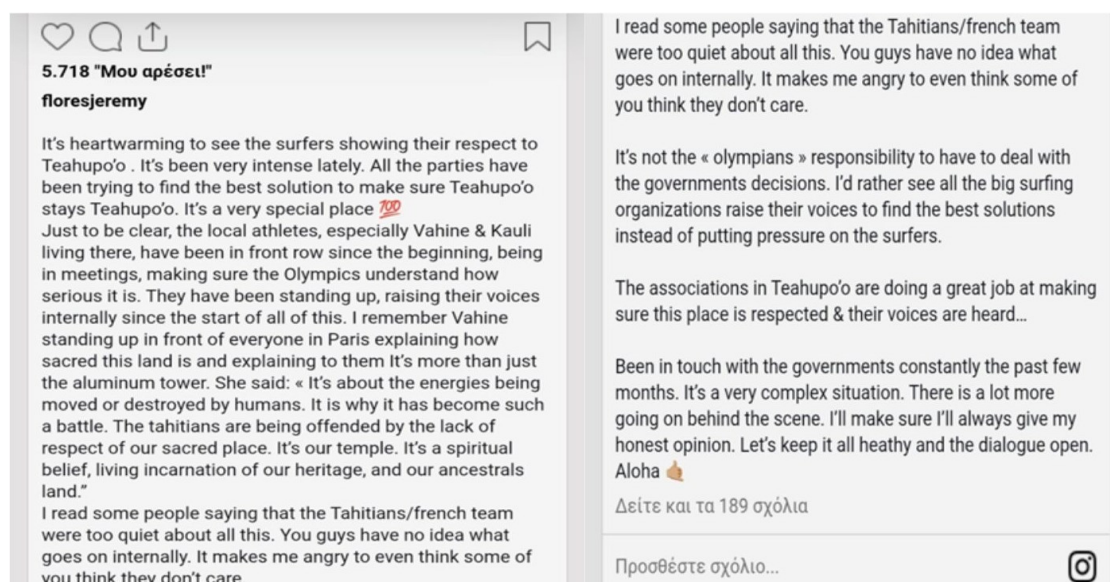


Figure 38: Screenshot of Olympic coach, Jérémy Florès, responding to the athletes' stance on the matter.

The core of Florès argument is encapsulated in his assertion: “It’s not the “Olympians” responsibility to have to deal with the government’s decisions”, where he emphasized that professional Olympians –as carriers of athletic and cultural capital– should not be burdened with the political and administrative oversight of structural, political, and logistical issues, shifting the responsibility for resolving infrastructure projects to the governmental and international bodies (IOC, ISA, French Polynesia Government, Paris 2024).

Moreover, in the same statement on social media, he particularly addressed the criticism of silence from local athletes and Olympic contestants (such as Vahine Fierro and Kauli Vaast – representatives of France) by clarifying that their opposition was channeled through internal advocacy: “The local athletes [...] have been in the front row since the beginning, being in meeting, making sure the Olympics understand how serious it is. They have been standing up, raising their voices internally from the start of all this. I remember Vahine standing up in front of everyone in Paris explaining how sacred this land is and explaining to them it’s more than just the aluminum tower.”

Finally, Jérémy Florès issued a critique of the governing institutions, stating: “I’d rather see all the big surfing organizations raise their voices to find the best solutions instead of putting pressure on the surfers.” Through this appeal, which can be understood as a call for enhanced Environmental Governance Leadership, he effectively relocated the moral responsibility for environmental consciousness from individual athletes to the influential sports organizations, urging these entities to leverage their resources and institutional authority to develop sustainable alternatives and to address the political complexities that extend beyond the capacities of any single athlete.

Treading the path of an upcoming compromise

Notwithstanding the moderate stance adopted by most Olympic surfing competitors, following the October 15th demonstration and the success of the petition, the local authorities first asked for expert appraisals for the possibility of using the old tower and then proposed moving the competition to Papara, Southwest of Pape’ete. Paris 2024 refused this solution, as the choice of Teahupo’o was made partly on the reputation of its wave. As the local government was committed to Teahupo’o, cancelling the surfing competition in French

Polynesia would have had major local financial repercussions. The President, Moetai Brotherson, stressed that: “On ne peut pas faire ces Jeux contre la population” (We can’t do these Games against the people), clarifying that “We have to work with them (meaning the locals), [...] given the scale of the protest. So we will have to make an effort to reach out to these protesters, to reassure them and tell them that we’re really looking at all the proposals they make”.³³⁵

On 17 November 2023, a new agreement between the Polynesian Government, Paris 2024 and the Haut-Commissariat was found to build a lightweight tower with the same characteristics in terms of span, height, number of people, weight and surface area as the wooden tower for the WSL competitions. Its reduced size limited the need for new boreholes and the depth of drilling required.

“The Tower was slightly reduced in size so they could use less invasive drilling system. A channel was created so the boats would not damage the reef.” (personal online communication with Tim McKenna, July 2025).

According to the Paris 2024 press release, the new judges’ tower project involved *“Reducing the surface area of the new tower by 50m² to bring it back to the size of the old wooden tower (150m²); reducing the weight of the new tower (9 tonnes as opposed to the 14 tones initially planned) to bring it down to the weight of the old wooden tower and reduce the load on the foundations; reducing the number of people and equipment on the tower during the Games to coincide with the number of people present for the WSL (25 to 30 people compared with 40 in the initial project); adopting a temporary solution for the supply of fibre and electricity, with provision for the removal of the sublagonal cable after the Games (the initial route of this cable was specifically designed to run between the coral reefs, without generating any impact); removing drinking water and wastewater connections; reinforcing measures allowing to monitor the construction site by the public authorities responsible for environmental protection, by environmental study organisations and representatives of associations”*.

³³⁵ David Michel, “Moetai Brotherson (président de la Polynésie française) : « On ne peut pas faire ces Jeux contre la population »”, L’Équipe, October 30, 2023. <https://www.lequipe.fr/Jo-2024-paris/Surf/Actualites/Moetai-brotherson-president-de-la-polynesie-francaise-on-ne-peut-pas-faire-ces-jeux-contre-la-population/1428840>

«[...] The main concern was, probably, a big trench that was supposed to bring water, electricity and internet. This was scrapped for a temporary system that would not require to dig a trench. Also the drilling depth was reduced by half to not interfere too much with Fauna. There was a lot of misinformation!», emphasized Tim McKenna, referring to the critical design points that sparked the controversy surrounding the aluminum tower (personal online communication with Tim McKenna, July 2025).

Logistical operations were also optimized for minimal ecological disruption. A new shallow-draught (20 cm) motorized barge would facilitate equipment transport, specifically designed to navigate the lagoon without risking contact with coral structures. Furthermore, the conventional drilling apparatus has been superseded by a submerged drilling rig, a technology with a proven track record in Polynesian waters for the installation of ecological anchors. This specialized equipment was planned to circumvent the need for a barge-mounted setup, further reducing surface disturbance during drilling operations.

The foundation design itself was the culmination of rigorous environmental and geotechnical assessments conducted in 2022 under the aegis of the ‘Institut Jeunesses et Sports de Polynésie Française’ (IJSPF). Créocéan, an environmental consultancy, provided comprehensive environmental impact analyses throughout the design and construction phases. In addition, apiGEO, a technical design office, performed geotechnical studies to meticulously characterize the subsoil, confirming a stratigraphy of bedrock (minimum 4m), followed by a sand layer, and then another bedrock stratum. These studies underpin the decision to employ a micropile drilling process, a methodology commonly adopted in Polynesian coral environments that obviates the need for large-scale excavation.

Crucially, the placement of these new foundations had been strategically planned for areas identified as having sparse coral coverage. For unavoidable interface zones, a strict coral relocation protocol, developed and field-tested by Créocéan in numerous prior tourism and maritime development projects, will be implemented. Although the existing corals would be moved, and cuttings would be taken to ensure they can regrow, Titouan Bernicot, CEO of Coral Gardeners, claimed that the process of replanting and planting new corals is a long and

challenging process meaning that the removal of the coral will have damaging effects for years to come.³³⁶

The new foundation studs were designed to integrate with the existing structural footprint, ensuring the tower's exact original positioning. Moreover, these new structures were intended to serve as substrates for future coral colonization and growth, a process to be actively accelerated through a dedicated cuttings programme, mirroring the observed ecological integration of the existing foundations.

A critical comparative environmental assessment performed by Créocéan definitively established the superiority of new construction over renovation in terms of overall environmental impact. Reinforcing the existing piles would have necessitated the destruction of extant living coral cover, the extensive insertion of steel reinforcement (288 x 32mm spiral irons to a depth of 1.5m), the consumption of double the concrete volume, and a significantly larger operational footprint.

In conclusion, the adoption of a lighter tower design coupled with the implementation of new, permanent foundations represented an optimized engineering solution. This approach was not only projected to ensure the tower's structural longevity and the continued viability of Teahupo'o as a venue for future sporting events but also exemplified a proactive commitment to minimizing environmental degradation within a vulnerable marine ecosystem. This integrated strategy was further validated by the expectation of achieving ten-year certification, a prerequisite for insurance and long-term operational sustainability.

According to James Cowan, director of the IJSPF (Institute of Youth and Sports of French Polynesia), this tower that primarily designated for the annual World Surf League competitions, "can also be deployed at other sites, whether aquatic, terrestrial, or mountainous, though this would necessitate the installation of foundations. The cabling has been securely positioned within an invisible, watertight enclosure submerged underwater and will remain in situ."³³⁷

³³⁶ Georgina Seal, "Reef damage from 2024 Olympics surfing venue is avoidable (commentary)", Mongabay, December 8, 2023. <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/12/reef-damage-from-2024-olympics-surfing-venue-is-avoidable-commentary/>

³³⁷ Mareini Gamblin, "Teahupoo : la tour des juges enfin retirée du paysage, et après ?", France Info – La 1ère, October 2024.



Figure 39: The Aluminum tower (Photograph provided to the author from the primary archival material of the renowned photographer Tim Mckenna).

This operational modification was subject to *in situ* verification by local associations, underscoring the community engagement in environmental stewardship. The agreement also mentioned the continuation of the work “*in a spirit of dialogue and transparency with the communes concerned, representatives of environmental associations, the local surfing community and the inhabitants, to make the Games a success for Tahiti and its population*” (...) “*The associations will very shortly be invited to come and check this route during an in situ test with the new barge, loaded with drilling equipment (...)*”. They would also be invited on a permanent basis “*to attend any stage of the work at which they deem it necessary to be present*”.³³⁸

<https://la1ere.franceinfo.fr/polynesie/tahiti/polynesie-francaise/teahupoo-la-tour-des-juges-enfin-retiree-du-paysage-1527010.html>

³³⁸ Polynesian Government, Paris 2024, and the Haut Commissariat. "The Polynesian Government, Paris 2024, and the Haut Commissariat Confirm the Organisation of the Olympic Games Surfing Events at the Teahupoo Site, with a Proposition of a New More Moderate Judges Tower." Press Paris 2024. Accessed June 4, 2025.

Almost four years after Paris 2024 announced its choice of Teahupo'o, the press release finally assured monthly public meetings in Teahupo'o from January 2024 onwards and the opening of an Olympic Games information office at Pk0. Trials were scheduled for 4 December 2023. Moreover, Paris 2024 stated that the documents requested by the public were provided on 24 November.

While the problems seemed to have been resolved, the public was still not convinced, since no study has been provided to prove the compliance problems regarding the wooden tower. On 27 November Matahi Drollet, published a new video on social networks contesting the project. Signatures on the petition soared to 169,000 on 29 November 2023. But the situation was getting worse, even within the surfing community. Accusing for not taking a stand against the new judges' tower, some were threatened with being banned from surfing at Teahupo'o.³³⁹

On 1 December 2023, as pre-construction tests commenced, the company in charge of drilling tried to sneak onto the site with the barge used to transport the drilling rig, without informing the associations. The president of VAOT, who was on site with an American team, filmed the destruction of coral live. A relevant video in 'Saveteahupoo' Instagram account shows the barge, verified by witnesses as belonging to the local government, inspecting the proposed tower's site. The barge repeatedly gets stuck on the coral reef and attempts to free itself by revving the engines. The barge damaged numerous coral reefs and became blocked after breaking its own propeller. The video also depicts the damage done to corals by the propeller: large groups of colorful coral have been sliced off, revealing the white skeleton within. This directly refutes the claim by the Olympic Committee statement that the smaller barge would eliminate "any risk of damage to the coral."³⁴⁰

<https://press.paris2024.org/news/the-polynesian-government-paris-2024-and-the-haut-commissariat-confirm-the-organisation-of-the-olympic-games-surfing-events-at-the-teahupoo-site-with-a-proposition-of-a-new-more-moderate-judges-tower-eafc-7578a.html>.

³³⁹ Vaitiare Pereyre, "Tour des juges : Raimana Van Bastolaer se fâche", Radio 1, November 29, 2023.

<https://www.radio1.pf/tour-des-juges-raimana-van-bastolaer-se-fache/>

³⁴⁰ Georgina Seal, "Reef damage from 2024 Olympics surfing venue is avoidable (commentary)", Mongabay, December 8, 2023. <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/12/reef-damage-from-2024-olympics-surfing-venue-is-avoidable-commentary/>

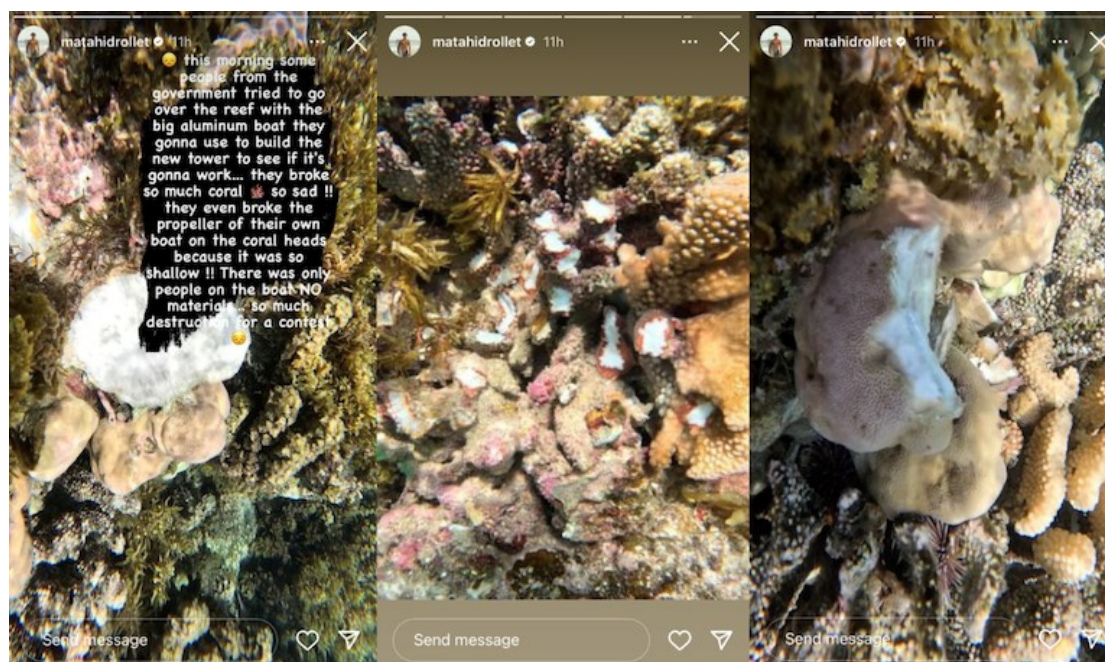


Figure 40: Screenshots of Matahai Drollet’s December 1, 2023, Instagram story depicting damage to the coral reef caused by the barge.

It was later proved that the barge was empty, and groundings occurred at high tide, raising questions about the damage that would be inflicted on this fragile ecosystem if the barge would have been fully loaded, or at anything other than high tide. The next day, the President of French Polynesia, Moetai Brotherson, joined in the ceremony of forgiveness to nature in Teahupo’o and decided to suspend the tests, a move welcomed by ISA (International Surfing Association).

Seven months prior to the Olympic Games and five months before the scheduled test event for the surfing competition, the situation reached an impasse, marked by an escalation of protests that gained international prominence. Prominent professional surfers, including renowned figures such as Kelly Slater and Carissa Moore, publicly aligned themselves with the protest movement. Furthermore, Chris O’Callaghan, the designer of the original wooden judges’ tower, actively defended the structure, contesting claims of its non-compliance with safety or regulatory standards.

«In 2013 we had a Code Red, and the tower held. We had a million dollars’ worth of equipment on the tower, there was no time to remove it, and the tower didn’t move. So when I hear people talking about standards, I ask myself what standards are they talking about. My

standard is Code Red (“ma norme à moi, c’ est le code rouge”)», stated O’ Callaghan on Radio 1 (the first independent radio station established in Tahiti in 1981).³⁴¹

Pascal Luciani, serving as the local representative of the World Surf League (WSL) and a member of the Paris 2024 office based in Pape’ete, indicated that the WSL was contemplating the cessation of the surfing competition at Teahupo’o due to the inability to insure the wooden judges’ tower. As the insurance issue gained prominence, additional reports emerged suggesting that the WSL was experiencing financial difficulties attributable to notably poor merchandising sales at the Teahupo’o venue. These financial considerations appeared to constitute a central element of the controversy surrounding the arbitration tower. Despite the mounting speculation, the WSL had not issued any formal public statement addressing these concerns.

On 10 December 2023, a public meeting convened with the attendance of the President of French Polynesia and all relevant stakeholders. During the meeting, President Brotherson emphasized that the construction of the judges’ tower—significantly reduced in scale in response to criticisms from local associations—was essential for the continuation of future surfing competitions. Documents were then presented highlighting instances of non-compliance related to previous structures and urged participants to endorse the proposed solution of a lighter, more environmentally considerate tower. Notably, some local residents who had benefited financially from the World Surf League’s economic influx supported this position, aligning themselves with the local authorities due to the substantial financial stakes involved. This left the VAOT association as the sole dissenting voice against the aluminum tower’s construction.³⁴²

«It was only a very small amount of local people that managed to make a lot of noise. Basically people that didn’t want the OLYMPIC GAMES and were trying to find excuse to stop the event. The large majority of locals wanted the event. [...] Their actions (referring to the VAOT association) obliged the government to rethink and downscale just days before the

³⁴¹ Caroline Perdrix, “Teahupoo : « Ma norme à moi, c’est le code rouge », dit l’un des constructeurs de la tour en bois”, Radio 1, December 9, 2023. <https://www.radio1.pf/teahupoo-ma-norme-a-moi-cest-le-code-rouge-dit-lun-des-constructeurs-de-la-tour-en-bois/>

³⁴² Marie Delaplace and Pierre-Olaf Schut, *Planning the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 115.

deadlines. Of course with dialogue this could have been negotiated earlier.» (Tim McKenna, private correspondence in July 2025).



Figure 41: Timeline of local authorities' stance.

Teahupo’o, Summer of 2024: The Olympic Waves Roar Echoes All the Way to Europe and Beyond

The final days ahead of the Teahupo’o Olympic momentum

On July 11, 2024, just ten days before the official commencement of the Olympic Games period, Radio 1, the historic French Polynesian radio station, reported on the feverish preparations being undertaken by both official bodies and the local community, making particular mention of the unveiling of a bronze statue by Evrard Chaussay, representing the legendary surfer Vēhiatua i te māta’i, and the regulation of pedestrian flow among those present, as well as the special preparations taking place in private properties of locals that were to host representatives of the International Surfing Association (ISA) and Paris 2024 stuff.

More specifically, regarding the management of transit in the area, in addition to the 500 individuals granted ‘daily access’ to the designated fan-zone, a minimum of 1,200 accreditations had been issued for the Olympic period (27 July-5 August 2024). This distribution was evenly split, with half of the recipients being local stakeholders and the other half comprising international participants. This accredited cohort included 48 athletes, approximately 90 team officials, 30 technical officials, 85 broadcasting technicians, around 100 journalists, 709 members of the Paris 2024 staff, and 267 volunteers.

Max Wasna, President of the Tahitian Surfing Federation, conveyed a palpable sense of anticipation: "We have team members dedicated to logistics who are fully prepared; there's widespread eagerness for the events to commence." Municipal teams, supported by the high commission, had been disseminating access passes to village residents, who would be in close proximity to the significant operational infrastructure during the Games.

Roniu Tupana-Poareu, the delegated mayor of Teahupo'o, underscored the protocol for residents: "While all permanent residents have received passes, secondary homeowners have not. We have thoroughly explained to Teahupo'o residents that circulation within the village presents no issues, provided they consistently carry their access pass. This requirement is in effect at all times, commencing from the Teahupo'o town hall, and strict adherence is mandatory for passage." ³⁴³

Viewership of the 2024 Olympic surfing

During the official competition period, the Olympic Surfing events achieved significant viewership globally, according to audience measurement sources. In France itself, the surfing competition was watched by nearly 19.3 million viewers across all France television channels and time slots (including live and replay), with 13 million tuning in live. Specific finals, despite their late timing (from 11:00 p.m. to 4:30 a.m., marked as ‘Nuit du surf’, which is translated into ‘The Night of Surf’) due to the time difference, drew up to 357.000 simultaneous viewers (12.8% audience share, above the channel’s norm).³⁴⁴

³⁴³ Waldemar de Laage, “Sous le regard de ses habitants, Teahupo’o achève sa mue avant les JO”, Radio 1, July 11, 2024.

<https://www.radio1.pf/sous-le-regard-de-ses-habitants-teahupoo-acheve-sa-mue-avant-les-jo/>

³⁴⁴ “Audiences Jeux Olympiques Paris 2024 -Succès d'audiences pour le surf”, FranceTV, August 9, 2024. <https://www.francetvpro.fr/contenu-de-presse/67961241>

Furthermore, on social and digital platforms for the local French Polynesian broadcaster (Polynésie La 1ère), there were 73,700 live TV video views just during August 5 and 6, with 5.2 million video views for surfing highlights on social media since July 24 and a single victory clip (the one of Kauli Vaast) tallying 2 million Instagram views.³⁴⁵

«Of course Teahupo'o delivered an amazing show for the Olympics and a local Tahitian even won the gold medal. [...] It was a dream come true for a native of French Polynesia, with a population of only 280,000 people, to have an athlete win Gold. It was a great moment for France and the French surf team, but also for the local community. The young generation will be thriving to emulate what their champions did during this event and I think we will see many more Tahitians in the French Olympic team in the years to come». (personal communication with Tim McKenna, July 2025)

However, the most remarkable example regarding the appeal of the Olympic Surfing events was, by far, that of Brazil. In Brazil, with no soccer team present at the Olympics, surfing – featuring world-class famous competitors like Gabriel Medina- became a focal point for national sporting pride, attracting an exceptional large audience. More specifically, on August 5th, 47.5 million Brazilians tuned in to Globo, the broadcaster, to watch the finals and medal ceremonies, surpassing even volleyball and gymnastics viewership that day.³⁴⁶

«I think it was a success on all fronts and Teahupo'o will probably be the best Olympic surf event ever. It will be hard for Trestles2028 and even the Gold Coast 2032 to compete with the quality of waves of the Tahitian reef break», stated Tim McKenna through online exchanges with the author in July 2025.

“Poisoned Paradise”: The controversial article in The New York Times

On July 30, 2024, the temporary suspension of the Olympic surfing events, due to unsuitable wave conditions (which ultimately necessitated an extension of the competition window until

³⁴⁵ “PARIS2024: Audience success for surfing”, Eurosima, Accessed on August 23, 2025. <https://www.eurosima.com/en/paris2024-succes-dauidences-pour-le-surf/>

³⁴⁶ Evan Quarnstrom, “Brazilian Viewership for Final Day of Olympic Surfing Breaks Records” The Inertia, August 11, 2024. <https://www.theinertia.com/surf/brazilian-viewership-for-final-day-of-olympic-surfing-breaks-records/>

August 5th), happened to coincide with the publication of *The New York Times* “tribute” to Teahupo’o’s nuclear legacy, controversially labeling the surfing venue as “poisoned paradise.”

“Fifty years ago this July [...] another wave visited this hamlet: This time was an invisible and airborne one: a surge of radiation escaping from a nuclear weapon test conducted by France in this far-flung reach of their republic.” ³⁴⁷

The article, titled “Olympic Surfing Comes to a ‘Poisoned’ Paradise,” shifted the focus from the Olympic surfing events to the historical legacy of the 1974 French nuclear test in the area. According to the article, declassified French military documents had recorded some of the highest radiation readings in Teahupo’o. The journalists’ explicit intent was to highlight the twin realities in Teahupo’o: surfing paradise and cancer hot spot. Yet, as anticipated, the piece triggered strong resentment among several French Polynesian leaders. Officials like Tony Géros (President of the Polynesia’s Territorial Assembly) and Moetai Brotherson (President of French Polynesia) widely condemned the article as disrespectful and damaging to the local community, asserting that it unfairly tainted the international excitement surrounding the Olympics by reviving a historical political issue.³⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the resulting public controversy effectively redirected global attention to the enduring history of nuclear testing in the region and its continued colonial repercussions for its residents.

Teahupo’o one year Post-Olympics: A “Happy End” in sight?

Approximately one year later, following interviews conducted with locals in the summer of 2025 –roughly one month before the Tahiti Pro 2025 commenced– most of them confirmed that the tower remains in situ (“still here”, “it has remained in place!”, were some of the answers I received). Several Tahitians assured that the tower persisted despite the Paris 2024 press release promises. Furthermore, one interviewee volunteered to visit the site and provide the aforementioned photograph:

³⁴⁷ Hannah Beech, “Olympic Surfing Comes to a ‘Poisoned’ Paradise,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2024.

³⁴⁸ Patrick Decloitre, “Tahitians Angry Over New York Times Olympic ‘Poisoned Paradise’ Story,” *Asia Pacific Report*, August 4, 2024. Accessed October 31, 2025. <https://asiapacificreport.nz/2024/08/04/tahitians-angry-over-new-york-times-olympic-poisoned-paradise-story/>.



Figure 42: A candid photograph taken by a local interviewee in the context of an interview conducted by the author.

The photo (*figure 42*) was provided to the author in order to substantiate the interviewee's personal assertion that the tower was never removed. Indeed, the picture does show the tower in the distance. However, its capture date of July 1, 2025, suggests an alternative interpretation. Given this timeline, it's more probable that the tower was recently repositioned in preparation for the 'Tahiti Pro 2025' surfing competition.

Behind this misconception regarding the deconstruction of the Tower lies a sound rationale. In fact, according to journal resources, the tower was dismantled after the 2024 Olympic Games. However, it was re-erected for world-class and regional competitions so frequently that it eventually took on the appearance of a permanent structure.

«It was taken down! I remember it that it was gone! But they do put it back up for competitions...and there are many» (Bernhard W., personal correspondence with the author).

The local TV station's publication on October 5, 2024 reported the dismantling of the controversial Tower: "Une semaine et demi après le début du démontage, la tour de juges n' apparaît plus dans le paysage du village de Teahupo'o." (A week and a half after the start of the dismantling process, the judges' tower is no longer visible in the landscape of Teahupo'o village). At the same time, there were rising concerns about reassembly costs, that only an

organization like Paris 2024 could cover. However, Moetai Brotherson even considered using the tower for the championships in Taapuna or Rangiroa.³⁴⁹

«They are even thinking of leaving the Tower all year round so they don't have to assemble and disassemble every year at great cost and more risks of coral damage with all the boat transfers. [...] The latest talks are to leave it permanently. It would save the government US\$ 400,000 every year in assembly and disassembly», highlighted Tim McKenna in a personal communication with the author in July 2025.

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According to an article published on July 23, 2025, in Tahiti Infos, the post-Olympic assessment of tourist arrivals indicated little change, despite local investments in bungalows and accommodations. Surfers remain the main visitors during the Tahiti Pro competitions period, while other tourists tend to come only for day trips and prefer to stay overnight in nearby locations. Local accommodation owners noted that although the event increased tourists interest, this did not translate into substantial tourism revenue.³⁵⁰

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As regards the coral reef status in 2025, post-construction monitoring has not documented broad destruction escalating beyond the initially damaged area. No peer-reviewed post Olympic studies have yet been published as of July 2025. Therefore, no ecosystem collapse has been observed.

«The environmental impact is minimal considering all the other type of constructions that happen in French Polynesia: Creations of marinas, channels for navigation, roads, hotels or just storms of heavy rain episodes that bring tons of residues and mud in the lagoons», stated Tim McKenna, evaluating the aluminum tower's construction one year after the Olympics (personal online exchanges with Tim McKenna, August 2025).

Finally, Tim McKenna, during private correspondence with the author in July 2025, further secured that: *«Coral reef will soon be covering the concrete base giving the coral an opportunity to grow in an area it would have not grown without the tower. In the grand*

³⁴⁹ Mareini Gamblin, "Teahupoo: la tour des juges enfin retirée du paysage, et après ?", France Info – La 1ère, October 2024.
<https://la1ere.franceinfo.fr/polynesie/tahiti/polynesie-francaise/teahupoo-la-tour-des-juges-enfin-retiree-du-paysage-1527010.html>

³⁵⁰ Anne-Charlotte Lehartel, "Hébergement à Teahupo'o, un an après les JO", Tahiti Infos, July 23, 2025.
https://www.tahiti-infos.com/%E2%80%8BHebergement-a-Teahupo-o-un-an-apres-les-JO_a231806.html

scheme of things compared to marine constructions around the world, it is very minimal». However, the long-term legacy of the Olympics in Teahupo'o remains uncertain.

Summary

Through systematic literature review, qualitative interviews, and environmental assessments, this chapter explored the deployment of the 2024 Olympic surfing competition as a contemporary instrument of neocolonial power. It highlighted the tensions between local communities and Paris 2024 stakeholders against the backdrop of Olympic infrastructure projects, revealing significant ecological risks and social marginalization tied to the event. The data demonstrated how global sporting spectacles can function as mechanisms of cultural appropriation and environmental degradation cloaked in the rhetoric of sustainability. This chapter anticipate further discussion in Suggestions and Conclusions, where findings are summarized and future research avenues are addressed.

XI. Discussions

This section critically engages with the empirical findings and theoretical underpinnings presented throughout this thesis, offering a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted impacts stemming from the 2024 Olympic surfing events in Teahupo'o, Tahiti. The findings, drawn from an analysis of socio-political dynamics, environmental policy decisions, and historical context, affirm the hypothesis of this study. At the core lies the intricate intersection of neocolonial power structures, ecological vulnerability, and indigenous cultural frameworks, exposing how global mega sporting events can function as stages where local realities and international agendas collide.

A salient finding centers on the enduring imprint of neocolonial governance evident in the decision-making and infrastructural development processes. The organization of the Olympic surfing venue was marked by a conspicuous exclusion of indigenous voices, perpetuating metropolitan prioritization over local ecological and socio-cultural concerns. This governance model replicates historical colonial hierarchies, safeguarding metropolitan economic and symbolic interests, while exposing delicate ecosystems, such as the Teahupo'o reef, to significant environmental risks. Accordingly, the neocolonial legacy manifests not only in political and administrative asymmetries, but also in the environmental domain.

The imposition and controversy surrounding the aluminum judges' tower, including its construction despite vigorous local and environmental opposition, exemplifies environmental injustice; local communities shoulder the full burden of ecological degradation while broader benefits accrue externally. The Olympic infrastructure, especially the aluminum tower's foundations drilled into living coral, inflicted immediate physical damage and altered the delicate reef dynamics that sustain Teahupo'o's world-renowned waves. The shadowing from the tower—as evidenced by environmental studies—further reduces photosynthetically critical light, potentially impairing coral growth and reef resilience. These impacts amplify pre-existing environmental pressures, such as rising sea temperatures, coral bleaching, and the proliferation of ciguatera algae, heightening the risk of ciguatera poisoning, a significant public health hazard for local fishing communities dependent on marine biodiversity for sustenance and cultural continuity.

This environmental dimension is deeply inseparable from the socio-political fabric marked by France's historical spatial alteration and nuclear testing, which was followed by the imposition of tourist infrastructure in French Polynesia, introducing a continuum of ecological violence and cultural dispossession. The symbolism of risking Teahupo'o's natural heritage for a temporary sporting spectacle evokes the same patterns of disregard for Polynesian Fenua (land) as seen in the past, reinforcing a perception of disposability of indigenous spaces in service of metropolitan interests.

Simultaneously, the socio-political disruption inherent in the Teahupo'o case underscores the limits of local agency within neocolonial frameworks. Local resistance movements against infrastructural impositions echo historical struggles for self-determination typified by figures such as Pouvanaa a Oopa. These modern mobilizations highlight the ongoing expectation of compliance toward metropolitan projects seen as beneficial by distant centers, often at odds with local ecological values and cultural sovereignty.

The event also illuminates the function of Global Sporting Events as sophisticated instruments of neocolonialism. The choice of Teahupo'o transformed a culturally sacred natural site into a commodified spectacle for global consumption, facilitating cultural appropriation through branding that obscured limited local governance and ongoing colonial legacies, thereby sanitising the colonial relationship for a global audience. The administrative and bureaucratic mechanisms validating metropolitan authority over infrastructure tenders, security, and environmental oversight further consolidate the structural constraints on local autonomy, consistent with the United Nations classification of Tahiti as a Non-Self-Governing territory since 2013. This exemplifies how Global Sporting Events can lead to environmental injustice and extend colonial power asymmetries under the guise of globalization and sustainable development.

Following this line of reasoning, as mentioned above, the Olympic selection places Teahupo'o's surfing legacy firmly within the "Age of Globalization." Throughout the examination of events and tensions in Teahupo'o, there is a strong underlying sense that globalisation in this case is neither benign nor neutral, but rather a mechanism through which neocolonial powers assert soft power. By injecting massive, high-stakes international capital and attention (as substantiated by the dispatch of athletes from across the globe,

each representing particular brands and athletic apparel corporations, and the high viewership of the Olympic surfing events, even in unexpected ‘markets’ such as Brazil), the event accelerates internal social change and economic transformations, potentially diluting the traditional sense of local stewardship over the Fenua and Moana, and replacing it with an imperative towards international tourism and sporting industry compliance.

It is worth noting that interviews with local residents conducted by the author indicated a generally favorable perception of hosting Olympic Games officials and personnel in exchange for remuneration, coupled with a wider sense of pride in their region’s global projection. On top of that, the international publicity and the circulation of high-production images (such as the viral photograph of the surfer Gabriel Medina) amplified global interest in Teahupo’o as a destination, turning the landscape into a marketable focal point for a global audience, strategically targeting the surf community and surf culture.

Moreover, the dual role of surf culture offers an insightful lens into these tensions. While indigenous Mā’ohi epistemologies and practices embed surfing within spiritual and ecological reciprocity, the integration of surf culture into Westernized international sporting mega-events paradoxically facilitates commodification and marginalization. The mobilization of global surfers, as allies against perceived environmental and cultural injustices during the Olympic preparations, reflects both the potential and limits of cross-cultural solidarity. However, the commercial pressures and branding interests inherent in the Olympic spectacle also reveal how surf culture can become complicit in neocolonial exploitation, contributing to the transformation of indigenous landscapes into consumable commodities. This ambivalence demands deeper empirical and theoretical attention, spotlighting surf culture as both a site of resistance and reproduction of neocolonial dynamics.

Given the complexities, the study acknowledges certain limitations, including reliance on secondary data –press releases, public declarations, and media reporting- due to geographical constraints of conducting primary on-site research in Tahiti, and the relatively short post-event timeframe limiting longitudinal environmental and socio-economic assessments. Furthermore, aside from the Hawaiian Laboratory that published a study on the coral reef and some individual private actors, primarily surfers, it appears that there was no significant mobilization from the global community and international environmental

organizations beyond the local level. This phenomenon can, at first glance, be attributed to the geographic isolation of Teahupo'o; Environmental concerns geolocated in a small village in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with a relatively small permanent population overshadowed by the expansive global scale promotion of the Olympic Games by Paris during the same period and carried comparatively minimal momentum.

Additionally, apart from the geographic remoteness and limited population size of Teahupo'o that constrained visibility and global media amplification, the temporality of the Olympic surfing events should be taken into consideration. Competing global environmental agendas tend to focus on more prominent or acute ecological disasters (such as climate change or biodiversity loss), which means that the temporality of such sporting events often deprioritizes smaller-scale but locally significant cases. Resource limitations, both financial and strategic, may also further constrain local NGOs and locals' ability to mount opposition against a major international event with strong political and financial backing. This limited global engagement not only contextualizes the environmental and socio-political dynamics herein, but also constituted a notable impediment to the scope and depth of this research. Nevertheless, the findings –accompanied by interviews with ten locals and Teahupo'o residents- provide robust critical insights and point toward key research and policy priorities, thereby opening pathways for future research.

In conclusion, the 2024 Olympic surfing event at Teahupo'o crystallizes the persistence of neocolonial power structures manifesting through environmental appropriation, cultural commodification, and political marginalization under the guise of global sport. It serves as a critical case study illuminating the contradictions inherent in negotiating local autonomy and environmental stewardship within contemporary globalized neocolonial contexts. The event reflects broader systemic challenges requiring interdisciplinary academic inquiry and sustained political activism oriented toward decolonization, ecological sustainability, and social justice. Future international sporting policies must decisively decenter metropolitan interests to prioritize indigenous rights and ecosystem protection, ensuring such global spectacles do not perpetuate historical patterns of dispossession and ecological harm but instead foster genuine, inclusive legacies rooted in respect for people and environment.

XII. Future research directions

While this study has provided insightful analysis into the neocolonial dynamics and their environmental and socio-political impacts in French Polynesia, it has also revealed several avenues that warrant further scholarly attention. In particular, the short post-event timeframe offers a fertile ground for future research on the reef itself and the broader outcomes of Teahupo'o case study in general.

One year post-Olympics, the outcomes on the health of the Teahupo'o coral reef and the emergence of phenomena, such as *ciguatera*, remain uncertain due to the temporal proximity to the events. Therefore, the creation and adoption of medium- and long-term frameworks for monitoring the environmental impacts associated both with infrastructure projects and the overall tourism and sporting activities in the area are imperative. Specifically, ecological monitoring of the Teahupo'o coral reef to assess post-Olympic restoration and environmental change could include a longitudinal study tracking the health of the Teahupo'o coral reef for 3-5 years post-Olympics, with particular emphasis on monitoring the effects of the tower removal and any associated pollution/destruction. It is crucial the restructuring of these policies to adapt to the particularities of the area, taking into account the unique spiritual role of "mana" in the relationship of inhabitants with the land and sea, while simultaneously responding to contemporary challenges of climate crisis and ocean warming.

Future research could expand upon the conceptual frameworks deployed here by applying them to other postcolonial or semi-autonomous overseas territories, thereby assessing the generalizability of the findings. For instance, a comparative study contrasting the Paris 2024/Tahiti model with other major sporting events hosted in politically non-autonomous regions could identify universal patterns of neocolonial governance and environmental risk.

Along with these comparative studies, longitudinal studies –tracking social changes beyond the immediate Olympic event timeframe– would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the enduring effects of mega-sporting events on indigenous communities and ecosystems. In this context, further exploration into the voices and agency of indigenous

youth and women within these communities could also illuminate underrepresented perspectives and enrich the discourse on cultural sustainability and resistance.

Additionally, the current study's qualitative methodology, including interviews with locals, Teahupo'o residents and stakeholders, could be complemented by quantitative approaches, such as economic cost-benefit analyses, which would strengthen the empirical basis for policy recommendations. More precisely, the aforementioned background reveals the necessity of comprehensive socio-economic analyses of benefit distribution between local communities and external actors –specifically, a detailed analysis of the distribution of economic benefits within the local Tahitian community versus international/French corporations, assessing whether the promised economic impact materialised locally.

In addition, an in-depth examination of the decision-making roles played by International Sports Federations (such as the International Surfing Association) and the International Olympic Committee, especially concerning environmental safeguards related to the imposition of specific infrastructure requirements in highly sensitive locations, is imperative to understand governance failures and opportunities for reform. Similarly, it remains crucial to conduct a critical analysis of the design and implementation of environmental policies accompanying the Olympic and other large-scale sporting events. This is key to examining the real correspondence between commitments to "sustainable development" proclaimed by organizers and the environmental reality experienced by local communities.

Policy-wise, the findings underscore the necessity of incorporating indigenous knowledge and legal rights into environmental governance frameworks. This includes legislative measures for granting indigenous communities veto power over environmentally impactful projects to ensure ecological justice and cultural sovereignty. Additionally, transparency, accountability, and genuine civil society engagement must become prerequisites to prevent performative sustainability efforts prone to greenwashing.

Moreover, given that the reaction in this particular case was geographically and socially circumscribed –consisting mainly of local individuals and associations, as well as the surf community– the study recommends an in-depth examination of the roles played by the international community, global authorities, organizations, and multinational companies in governance mechanisms in these areas. Such an examination would highlight distinct

influences and opportunities for redefinition of policies governing power relations and natural resources. Ultimately, by expanding the range of stakeholders, the aim is to promote decolonization policies that center indigenous epistemologies and restore autochthonous relationships with the environment.

Finally, the interplay between global sporting institutions, local governance structures, and transnational corporate interests remains an area ripe for investigation, particularly regarding accountability mechanisms and pathways to decolonial environmental governance. Addressing these complex interactions through interdisciplinary collaboration promises to advance both theoretical and practical efforts towards justice and sustainability in postcolonial contexts.

XIII. Conclusions

Staging the study within the summer of 2025, approximately one year after the Teahupo'o Olympic Surfing events, it seems like Paris 2024 kept the promise of dismantling the aluminum tower. However, this, in itself, is far from being considered as a "happy ending" in sight. The 2024 Olympic surfing events, held in a small Tahitian fishing village, exemplify the intricate entanglement of neocolonial power dynamics, environmental vulnerability, and indigenous cultural identity in a contemporary global spectacle. One year post-Games, the dismantling of the controversial aluminum judges' tower marks a partial fulfillment of prior promises, yet does not signify the resolution of deeper ongoing ecological and socio-political concerns. While initial environmental assessments and local monitoring suggests that reef damage from Olympic infrastructure was localized and that broader coral ecosystem remains resilient –fortified in part by the traditional *rāhui* system of marine protection- the long-term implications remain uncertain, particularly amid intensifying climate pressure and the risk of harmful phenomena, such as *ciguatera* fish poisoning linked to reef disturbance. This highlights the critical need for ongoing vigilance and adaptive management beyond the conclusion of the Olympics.

The organizing committee for the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris exhibited a remarkably high level of concern for sustainability, specifically aiming to halve the carbon impact compared to past Games. This commitment was reinforced by the promise that 95% of the infrastructure would be either temporary or already existing. Consequently, after discussions with the Polynesian Government, infrastructure projects were substantially limited; for instance, athletes and their teams in Teahupo'o were housed on a cruise ship anchored in the bay rather than in a newly constructed miniature Olympic Village on the island.³⁵¹

Despite this strong focus on environmental programs –and although "sustainability" was brought to the forefront– Olympic history seemed to repeat itself, frequently sweeping environmental difficulties and environmental management issues under the rug. While Paris undeniably made a concerted effort to enhance environmental responsibility and mitigate

³⁵¹ Georgina Seal, "Reef damage from 2024 Olympics surfing venue is avoidable (commentary)", Mongabay, December 8, 2023. <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/12/reef-damage-from-2024-olympics-surfing-venue-is-avoidable-commentary/>

ecological impact, the initial plans for the judging tower became a prime example of 'greenwashing'. For instance, the stated commitment to 95% temporary or existing infrastructure failed to account for the true impacts of construction and the invisible infrastructure scheduled to be drilled into the seabed.

The environmental and social tensions surrounding the aluminum tower's construction unveiled limitations in sustainability commitments, exposing gaps in transparency, consultation, and due diligence toward indigenous landscapes and epistemologies. The construction process, including drilling foundations into the reef without comprehensive environmental impact studies accessible to the affected communities, generated significant local opposition, mobilized by indigenous residents, environmental organizations, and prominent surfers alike. The subsequent negotiated downsizing and redesign of the tower – aimed at reducing environmental harm– highlighted both the potential of adaptive governance and the persistence of power imbalances embedded within neocolonial frameworks. Such governance challenges caution against superficial sustainability claims without meaningful local participation and accountability.

Fundamentally, the Olympic spectacle in Teahupo'o reinforced patterns of metropolitan control over peripheral territories, echoing France's historical colonial and neocolonial practices in French Polynesia. The decision to stage the surfing competition thousands of miles from Paris, centered on a culturally and ecologically sacred site, symbolized a form of contemporary territorial appropriation cloaked within global celebration and “sustainable development” rhetoric. Despite the event's ostensible inclusion of local voices and indigenous identity, the asymmetrical power dynamics remained evident in the initially exclusionary planning processes and the prioritization of metropolitan economic and symbolic interests over indigenous sovereignty and environmental integrity.

The community's deep connection to 'mana', the spiritual force animating Teahupo'o's unique wave and surrounding ecosystems, underscores the cultural stakes at play. This intangible heritage, intertwined with tangible environmental assets such as the vibrant coral reef, cannot be readily disentangled from the ecological consequences of infrastructural interventions and mega-sporting events. The potential alteration or loss of the wave itself—as critical cultural and natural capital—provoked concern that transcends purely biophysical impacts, reflecting broader anxieties about indigenous erasure and environmental injustice.

Moreover, the Olympic saga at Teahupo'o highlighted the tensions surf culture embodies globally: while rooted in indigenous Polynesian spiritual practices underscoring respect and ecological attunement, surfing's commodification and integration into Westernized international sporting mega-events often marginalizes these origins. The Olympic Games' presence in Tahiti both celebrated and disrupted this legacy, prompting reflection on the dual role of sport as a potential medium for environmental advocacy and cultural affirmation versus a vehicle for neocolonial exploitation and environmental degradation.

In sum, this thesis reveals that the 2024 Paris Olympic surfing events in Tahiti are a paradigmatic case of modern French neocolonialism manifesting through environmental appropriation under the guise of global sporting celebration. The project's environmental costs, though mitigated in part by community resistance and adaptive measures, underscore the enduring vulnerability of indigenous lands within neocolonial spatial orders. The Olympic event acted as a "Trojan horse," simultaneously casting an alluring image of unity and diversity while perpetuating asymmetrical power structures and ecological harm.

This study contributes substantively to academic discourse by empirically connecting neocolonial power relations with environmental degradation in a postcolonial sporting context, foregrounding indigenous epistemologies and local voices often marginalized in dominant narratives. It invites critical reassessment of global sporting practices and policies to prioritize decolonial strategies that center ecological stewardship and indigenous sovereignty in host territories.

Ultimately, safeguarding Teahupo'o's delicate reef, its powerful waves, and the cultural vitality of the Mā'ohi people requires sustained vigilance, inclusive governance, and a recalibration of development paradigms that reject extractive logics. Future Olympic Games policies in general must prioritize inclusive governance frameworks that reject extractive development models. In this specific case, the Tahitian fable urges a transformative approach to environmental justice, one that recognizes the inseparability of nature and cultural heritage in the continuing legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism. Only by embracing such holistic, equity-centered frameworks can future international events respect and preserve indigenous lands and waters rather than reproduce historical patterns of dispossession and

ecological decline. As Carlos Duarte allegedly stated in response to the awareness raised during the 2024 Olympics about the importance of protecting the Teahupo'o coral reef:

*«What started being a bad news story can end up being a good news story. I think that it should be the flip side that we should strive for».*³⁵²

³⁵² Melissa Hobson, “The Olympics chose Tahiti for its famous waves—but some surfers aren't happy about it”, National Geographic, June 24, 2024. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/olympics-surfing-tahiti-coral-reef-controversy>

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