

Guardians of the ocean

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The Olympics brought fresh challenges, with locals fighting to reduce the impact of new Games infrastructure, including insisting that a new tower on the reef to judge the surf contest be scaled back to reduce its environmental impact.

RESTORE THE RAHUI

The reef — “the oxygen we breathe”, explained David — is at the heart of the surf and the village, a unique, living structure that not only creates the perfect waves, but is a larder, a playground and a workplace for almost everyone who lives there.

Ten years ago, however, the reef was struggling.

Plagued by over-fishing and hit more frequently by damaging storms, a decision was made by the community to re-introduce a *rahui* over a 768-hectare area south of the village, banning fishing and other activities.

“In the older culture, it was the king who decided these things and you couldn’t go against it. If you did, you would be killed,” and many people were afraid of the concept, said Rochette, who manages the Teahupo’o *rahui*.

The approach has been modernised and democratised, with the communities across French Polynesia now instigating *rahui* and deciding how to operate them to sustain their environment and resources.

South of Teahupo’o, buoys are set out to mark the *rahui* limits, and locals monitor the zone to ensure compliance. They say the impact has been mostly positive, with the reef thriving and fish stocks improving.

GUARDIANS OF THE OCEAN

Scrambling over streams and paths of broken coral, Rochette tells the story of a sacred rock and its role in ancestral fishing rituals, recounts battles that turned the lagoon red with blood and details how surfing was introduced here by twin brothers.

While the cultural aspects have been significant, ascribing an economic value to the environment has also been very important.

Cliff Kapono, a Hawaiian coral scientist, surfer and Polynesian activist, worked with locals to map and value the economic impact that works around the Olympics could have on the reef and lagoon using an established formula.

Kapono’s MEGA Lab estimated a direct economic impact of US\$170,000 for disturbing and destroying corals at the judging tower site and US\$1.3 million in total for the wider reef disruption around Teahupo’o from dredging and other works.

Beyond the economics, the idea of being guardians of the ocean was intrinsic to the Polynesian philosophy, Kapono said.

“There are people and communities across Polynesia that are strongly

defending their reefs,” he elaborated. Whether they get hit by the Olympic people, or over-fishing, or nuclear testing, there are people that are going to stand up in these communities.

“For us in Polynesia, that’s who we are, that’s our roots,” concluded Kapono, adding solemnly: “This is now the war we fight. We fight for our environment.”

Reuters



Matilde posing for a portrait.



A woman selling fish outside her house near Teahupo’o, Tahiti.



Fish swimming at a coral reef inside a *rahui* or restricted area in Teahupo’o, Tahiti, French Polynesia.