

## THE DYNAMIC FUTURE OF RAPA NUI

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### STATIC OR DYNAMIC PROTECTION OF HERITAGE?

It is a common human aspiration and expectation – both of research scientists and of tourists – that a site that has been once studied or visited should remain practically untouched forever, easily recognizable and almost identical to the first time that it has been approached by them. Changes and progressions are seen very suspiciously.

With this perspective, local populations should simply act as static curators of their cultural and natural heritage to keep it as untouched and fixed as possible. The place where they live should remain a protected and closed system, almost impermeable to outside influences of the rest of the world. Concerning the economic welfare or at least the subsistence of local people, in the absence of inherent and endogenous development, it is often expected that the central government assists and subsidizes them in order to ensure their basic needs.

This does not work, at least in developing countries. In the absence of endogenous community development, in the absence of local empowerment and entrepreneurial capacity to undertake the initiatives and innovation corresponding to their own aspirations, in a closed system with few interactions with other cultures, even worse, in a subsidized system where local initiative becomes unnecessary, irrelevant or pointless, a given culture faces a total collapse leading to its extinction. A culture, like a species or an ecosystem, should constantly evolve and adapt to new emerging conditions in order to survive with its own specificity.

Furthermore, a local community that has accordingly lost its cultural identity, its evolutionary memory, its *raison d'être*, a sense of pride of its history as a trigger for a better future, cannot care less about protecting its own natural and cultural heritage. Experience of the two large UNESCO programs, the international network of biosphere reserves and the Convention on the Cultural and Natural Heritage of the World, as well as empirical evidence on the Nordic Amerindian – largely subsidized – populations, shows that protection of heritages and vitality of cultures are only possible when innovative and appropriate development is ensured through worldwide access to information by local communities and the subsequent local empowerment (di Castri 2003). This approach has been illustrated by concrete examples in reference to Polynesian islands (di Castri 2002a).

Static and closed protection of heritage has become even more utopian and inappropriate in this period of globalization and rapid change, with high mobility of humans, species, genes, resources, goods and capital, along with the rapid transition from the industrial to the global information society (di Castri 2000).

Only the constant evolution and strengthening of a culture – and its adaptation to continuous and unpredictable change – can ensure sustainability to both the economic devel-

opment and the dynamic protection of heritage (di Castri 2002b).

When I first visited Rapa Nui in 1961, the island was mostly characterized by a ranch of some 60,000 sheep. The ranch was centered in Vaitea but widely spread everywhere, including around *ahu* and *moai*, with impressive soil erosion and by the miserable status of a local population confined in the village of Hanga Roa that looked like the poorest Chilean squatter settlement (di Castri 2002c). The prevailing Australian merino sheep and eucalyptus plantations were very far from evoking a Polynesian culture and landscape and the splendor of the Rapanui civilization (di Castri 2001 and Figure 1).



Figure 1. Rapa Nui in 1961, at the time of the Hacienda Vaitea that was managing practically all activities on the island. The photo shows the ranch of Australian merino sheep, with the Australian eucalyptus plantations in the background. No one at that time had the slightest inkling as to what the future might hold for Rapa Nui (Photo by F. di Castri).

Since then, during my subsequent frequent visits and field work, I have experienced a formidable rate of change in Rapa Nui: the regular air connections up to the occasional landing of Concorde aircraft, the end of the sheep ranch, the establishment and the rapid expansion of an international tourism, the Rapanui language taught at school, the new regulations of the “indigenous law”, the construction of a modern Museum, the great advances in archeological research and restoration, the local governorship given to Rapanui natives, the emergence of an entrepreneurial capacity in Rapanui people, the shift toward an economic wealth that is comparatively higher than in continental Chile thus stimulating uncontrolled immigration from the mainland of Chile, the proliferation of private cars and – above all – of taxis (too many), the opening up to the world through a very dense concentration on the island of connections to the Internet and the bloom of so many web sites on Rapa Nui.

During my last visit in December 2002 and January 2003 – a visit full of contacts with local and Chilean authorities, tourism operators and farmers of tropical products, educators and all kinds of people showing large gaps concerning their welfare conditions and even their aspirations – I have detected trends implying that the rate of change in Rapa Nui will

be even higher in a short and medium-term future. Change will include massive transformation of Rapanui landscapes, new land-tenure systems, dispersal and new distribution of human settlements, and emerging development and governance patterns. The new face and landscape of Rapa Nui – from social, economic, cultural, political and ecological viewpoints – are likely to become very different from the ones that we have been used to seeing and perceiving during the last few decades.

### DRIVING FORCES OF CHANGE IN RAPA NUI

Before entering details, it should be stressed that change and succession of changes are inherently non-linear processes, with discontinuous trends and rather unpredictable behavior. In a non-equilibrium system, which is very complex and with many interactions and conflicting interests, as is the one of Rapa Nui (but this applies as well to non-equilibrium, complex systems in thermodynamic, biochemical, economic and ecological terms, as most of the systems of the world), the behavior is necessarily of a chaotic nature. Only a technical connotation – and not necessarily a pejorative one – is given here to the term of *chaotic system and behavior* (di Castri 1986, 1991). It is only to stress that all previsions on the future of Rapa Nui have inherently a great deal of unpredictability. They represent rather dynamic surprise-rich scenarios with a great range of variables. Linear trend-oriented models, as the one proposed by Bahn and Flenley (1992), cannot apply to this situation.

With this in mind, the five most important driving forces for change in Rapa Nui are – at present – as follows:

- The strong aspiration of local population for land ownership and occupation, out of the fiscal lands fixed and taken by Chile in 1933.
- A great expansion and a new generation of tourism based on quality, as exemplified by the ongoing discussion on the 5-star hotel.
- The cultivation of the newly recuperated lands with tropical products (fruits, vegetable and flowers) for local, Chilean, and the foreign export market.
- The sizeable immigration of people from continental Chile, in search of economically wealthier conditions.
- A great aspiration of the Rapanui community for greater empowerment in decision-making processes, leading, hopefully, to a high degree of political autonomy (not of independence nor local sovereignty over the island).

### LAND OCCUPATION

There is a great, understandable and legitimate attachment in all Polynesian civilizations – and in Rapa Nui also – on a continuous ownership and occupation of lands from their ancestors. In Rapa Nui, the “wild” and non-authorized occupation of fiscal lands has been a common feature for several years, not actively stopped and even somewhat tolerated by the Chilean authorities. The most extreme aspiration was to occupy the very lands that belonged directly to their closest ancestors. Considering the intricacies of Rapanui genealogies and the fact that these lands would have almost unavoidably corresponded to archaeologically-rich sites facing *ahu* and *moai*, this was a rather inapplicable aspiration. Instead, the Chilean government has decided, during the last two years, to distribute fiscal lands, at an exten-

sion of a 5-hectare estate per family and with full ownership titles, to Rapanui people. The first land distribution that has already taken place corresponds to 1,900 hectares. The second one, that will follow soon, will extend to another 1,500 hectares. The distributed lands cover discontinuously a rough triangle, having its base approximately from north of Maunga Orito to north of Maunga Toa Toa, and going up to the western-northern part of the island – north of Ahu Tepeu. Some parts of the Hacienda Vaitea have been distributed, but not the zone of Terevaka. This is not an area of high archeological relevance, but without doubt, some valuable archaeological information has been and will be lost by plowing and settling this area.

This has been a rather chaotic process, undertaken in haste to demonstrate – under pressure – that the Chilean government was ready to redistribute land to the original Rapanui owners. The 5-hectare estates were randomly allotted. Some of them cover good lands with some provision of water for irrigation. Some others are too stony, with poor soil and even with eucalyptus plantations. None of them has provisions for energy, potable water or waste disposal and treatment. No assistance has been given to the new settlers on what could be rationally done with these lands. The already visible result is that almost everything could be found in these newly owned lands: tropical cultivation of fruits (pineapple, cherimoya – *Annona cherimolla* - etc.), of vegetables and corn, some livestock grazing, or simply nothing. Some rather pretty new houses alternate with miserable squatter settlements. The entire zone is full of barbed wire fences and padlocks, so that it has become almost impenetrable for tourism trekking and horse riding.

If no rapid regulations are taken as regards the land planning and land-use in this huge zone, and on the conditions and architectural style to build a house, this will soon become the single most ugly and unpleasant area of the overall island, with a visual and ecological impact far worst than the proposed – and apparently rejected – golf course. The situation is not yet irreversible, but close to it. Furthermore, I am unaware of any plan or decision for land planning and regulations in the overall area. Use of solar energy and collectors of rain water (or extractors of underground water), combined with modern and rather inexpensive techniques for waste treatment, could help solving the problem of future housing. The population of Rapa Nui will no longer be restricted to the sites of Hanga Roa and Mataverí. Practically all the island will progressively become inhabited, as in a faraway past, with the exception, hopefully, of the main archaeological sites.

### TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Given the exceptional tourism potential of the island, it is unavoidable, and to a certain extent desirable, that international tourism will still progress considerably on Rapa Nui. On this point, we face a paradox. As tourism is organized at the present in Rapa Nui, and considering the huge disorder in land planning, human settlement (including hotels) and the organization of the overall space of the island, Rapanui tourism is close now to its carrying capacity (18,000 – 20,000 tourists per year) and faces serious problems of sustainability (di Castri 2002b). Nevertheless, with improved planning and a better understanding of current trends of the tourism sector (di Castri and Balaji 2002), international tourism should at least double its present capacity

in Rapa Nui, still maintaining the character of a cultural, selective (and often high-cost) tourism, and avoiding the paradigm of mass tourism that would lead to a virtual tourism collapse in Rapa Nui at a medium and long-term time. Nevertheless, this trend would imply a total reorganization of present tourism patterns in Rapa Nui.

The main desirable trends for tourism in Rapa Nui are a sharp increase in the quality of services and the attractiveness of hotels and *residenciales*, the tourism diversification towards other areas and other themes too, and a shift from a short-term stay tourism (the traditional four days as an average) to a destination tourism with a 10-15 day period of stay or more (di Castri 1999a).

The recent debate on the 5-star hotel in Rapa Nui, and the more improbable "floating cruiser hotel", should be seen under this perspective. It would be highly desirable that a number of 5-star hotels be established or upgraded in Rapa Nui – with participation of and control by Rapanui investors and tourism operators – also as a benchmark for increasing the quality of services in all other hotels and *residenciales*. Nevertheless, one should not envisage a 5-star hotel as those huge and large hotels illustrating the mass tourism and prevailing, for instance, in Las Vegas, Honolulu, Palma de Mallorca or even Santiago de Chile. This would be a total disaster for tourism in Rapa Nui and, most likely, it would not be economically viable. Within the new paradigm of cultural high-level tourism, a 5-star hotel is the one best inserted in the local environment. It makes considerable use of local artists for its installation, designed architecturally to evoke the local culture in the outside space and at the interior of the cottages. It is without environmental nor visual impact whatsoever, ecologically friendly, being very dispersed in space and with only one-floor building and cottages, with flowered and green areas. It makes large use of renewable energy, beautifully integrated in the local landscape, but of course very comfortable, with high quality services and all modern facilities, including easy access to international phone and the Internet for all clients. Geographically and culturally closed examples of this kind of hotels, increasingly spread-out around the world, are those built three-years ago in Nuku Hiva and Hiva Oa (Marquesas Islands). A number of Rapanui handcrafters and sculptors participated to their building and internal decoration.

It is likely that some of these hotels will be located, in a non-distant future, in areas out of Hanga Roa and Mataverí.

### TROPICAL AGRICULTURE

Some of the newly allotted lands, as well as some of the previously occupied lands, are very suitable and fertile for tropical agriculture, particularly concerning fruits and flowers. There is now a great fancy in Rapa Nui for producing fruits for export. In general, the cultivation techniques and the technical assistance are adequate. However, the problem on how much of these products are marketable and sellable, and on how they could be elaborated otherwise, remains largely unknown. The local market, including tourism, is too small for such a new proliferation of products. Their quality is very valuable for international markets, but few studies – if any – exist on international benchmarking and marketing, including the Chilean continental market, and especially taking into account the transport constraints and costs.

The problem is aggravated by the fact that no storage facilities, including refrigeration, exist in the island for this type of product – in order to overcome the aspect of too high a concentration in a given season – and that few prospects are explored for some elaboration of these products in the island itself, in form of juices, marmalades, dried and candied fruits, etc. for an export market, as it is done for instance in Mo'orea (French Polynesia). Under present circumstances, a considerable amount of these tropical products from Rapa Nui will be just wasted and thrown out.

### IMMIGRATION FROM THE CONTINENT

Rapa Nui has become, as an average, much wealthier – economically speaking – than continental Chile. This is in spite of the fact that Chile has, comparatively, the wealthiest economy of South America. It is expectable that the gap between Rapa Nui and Chile will continue to increase in favor of Rapa Nui, since tourism is the most important economic sector of the world, and continental Chile is not advanced enough in this respect.

The economic development of Chile, nevertheless, is also characterized by an increasing gap between the rich and the poor. Incidentally, this happens also in Rapa Nui (but not in French Polynesia), while at a lower degree than in Chile. It is quite expectable that many poor people from continental Chile are looking at Easter Island, and this will occur increasingly, as a place where income would be greater and life conditions better. Of course, Rapanui islanders that are renting rooms and houses to *Conti* people also facilitate this immigration. In any period of rapid economic expansion, it always happens that local people are unable to perform some job (in the field of services) or – even more frequently – are unwilling to take care of unpleasant and ancillary work that they were used to do in the past.

If no regulations are foreseen to reduce or to stop this immigration from the mainland of Chile – and this is not easy since the Chilean Constitution ensures all citizens uncontrolled entry to all the national territory – Rapa Nui will be progressively flooded and invaded by people from the continent. The value systems, family organization, social customs and aspirations, and even food become more and more those of continental Chile (the "Chilenization process"), instead of the original Polynesian Rapanui civilization. These effects will be greatly accelerated.

Concerning language, which is the essential condition to maintain a living culture, at this moment less than 10 % of young Rapanui (probably no more than 7 %) can claim to have Rapanui as their first mother tongue. They learn Rapanui at school, almost in the same way as a foreign language. It is much too common to observe a group of middle-age Rapanui talking in their own language, but shifting immediately to Spanish when they address a young child, very often their own son or daughter. It should be noted that, in 1973, the percentage of Rapanui children going to school not knowing and speaking the mother language was evaluated at a 77 % level. This is almost a language collapse, in spite of the remarkable job performed by several Rapanui educators.

Today tourism is a culturally-driven economic sector. If Rapanui language and culture decline, even international tour-

ism would be drastically undermined (di Castri 1999a, 2002a).

#### ASPIRATION TO LOCAL EMPOWERMENT AND DECISION-MAKING AUTONOMY

A lot of discussion is ongoing at present, mostly within the context of the Commission for the Historical Truth of Rapa Nui (created by the Chilean Government last year, at the instigation of Rapanui themselves), on the desirability of another political status for Rapa Nui vis-à-vis of Chile. Independence and local sovereignty over the island do not seem to represent a workable and desirable solution. Most independent small islands are in a status of economic and social development, and also of cultural vitality, much lower than the equivalent "dependent" islands (McElroy and Mahoney 2000). Conversely, a larger degree of decision-making autonomy, in aspects such as education, health, land-use planning, financial and export aspects, and control of human migratory flows, could be feasible or at least realistically debatable in Rapa Nui. Some political leaders in Chile have already made statements in favor of some greater degree of autonomy.

It should be stated that, granting autonomy to islands situated far from the mainland and holding different cultural and ecological attributes and history, is a common and frequent fact in the present world's conditions. See for instance the autonomy of French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Guadeloupe and Martinique, the Canary and Balearic Islands, the Galapagos, Corsica and Sardinia, Jersey and Guernsey, and numerous other islands. To a certain extent, it is the best way for an island to give a specific and appropriate response to the challenges of globalization (di Castri 2000).

It would not be strange if an island with such an exceptional history as Rapa Nui can enjoy conditions of autonomy. Belonging, as it does, to a vast civilization – the Polynesian – that has influenced so much culture in Europe, through philosophical (see Diderot and Rousseau) and artistic (the surrealism, see di Castri 1999b) movements, an island furthermore showing at present a large economic expansion.

Two other facts need consideration. First, and in spite of the fact that Chilean professionals have an excellent university training and research capacity, their knowledge, awareness and know-how concerning the management of a small oceanic tropical island, an island holding in addition a quite different Polynesian culture and idiosyncrasy, is inherently very scanty. Many repeated mistakes have been made on species and breeds by voluntary introduction or inadvertent invasion (even the Brahma zebu exists now in Rapa Nui), on erosion control and reforestation. Species introduction and invasion is, at present, one of the most crucial ecological and economic problems in the world (Perrings *et al.* 2000), and is very acute in Rapa Nui.

Second, there is now in Rapa Nui an upsurge of local, spontaneous initiatives, as well as the establishment of local Rapanui associations with a legal status. A tourist-cultural village, conceived on the example of the Tiki Village at Mo'orea (French Polynesia), is under construction near the southeastern coast. The *Henua Rapa Nui* indigenous association is planning the establishment and construction in Vaitea of a tourist-cultural center called "Mundo Rapa Nui", and is also considering the restoration of the buildings and other installations of the old Hacienda Vaitea. The *Mata Nui a Hotu Matu'a o Kahu-Kahu o*

*Hera* corporation looks at the creation of a Rapanui Language Nest and at the protection of the intangible cultural heritage of Rapa Nui. *E Toru Ha Nua Nua Mea* indigenous association is spontaneously taking care of the preservation and restoration of some archaeological remnants in the southern-eastern coast from Vaihu to Anakena (mostly *manavai*, *haremoa*, *hare vaka*, *umu pae*, *pipi horeko*); even if it is not excluded that some mistakes have been made during these restorations, because of lack of appropriate and continuous archaeological control and supervision. It is unquestionable that several areas of this coast look at present very clean and particularly attractive. Finally, the consultant firm AMBAR from Santiago is about to deliver to the Government of Chile a three-volume report on "Strategies and actions for the conservation, use and sustainable exploitation of the heritage resources of Easter Island".

It should be stressed that the success of an autonomous status would largely depend not only on reliable information but mostly on a new sense of responsibility and of pride and awareness of their history and their cultural and natural heritage by Rapanui themselves. The transition from a situation of being virtually assisted by a welfare state to a condition of local empowerment and decision-making responsibility is not an easy one. It is usually painful during the first stages, but it is the only possibility for a given culture to reach a status of maturity and self-reliance. In any event, much debate will go on in this matter during the following months, with unforeseeable results and consequences. A seminar covering the three aspects of development, capacity building and autonomy will take place at the end of April 2003 on Rapa Nui, with the evoking title of "Rapa Nui: The Third Millennium".

#### CONCLUSIONS

Having visited once again Rapa Nui, after two years of absence (but with close and continuous contacts by e-mail, and two visits to Europe by Edgar Hereveri and Ema Tuki from CONADI while attending international workshops on island management and development), I have noticed a lot of improvements: in educational aspects, including an impressive Educational Village that is being built near the old leper colony (Gobierno de Chile *et al.* 2001); in tourism development, with great improvement in the quality of services, and more diversified foods with numerous locally-produced fruits and vegetables; and in several other aspects, including the new beautiful market for handicrafts, the new arrangement of the Museum that comprises now a library and a data-computerized room for visitors and students, as well as a better management and maintenance of Hanga Roa. The number of connections to the Internet – that is at present the best indicator of development – has increased almost exponentially. Concerning the UNESCO-Japan project, it has already started, it works mainly – for the time being – to prevent coastal erosion in Vaihu, but it is too soon to evaluate its impact, outcome and potential achievements.

As already noted, numerous new activities, with an uneven degree of feasibility, have been proposed on several topics, including those by indigenous people and several new associations. All this emphasizes the very dynamic condition of Rapa Nui – at present – and the extraordinary blooming of initiatives and projects. Almost inherent to the dynamism of its development, one can easily visualize several aspects of disorder and of

chaotic behavior, especially in land use planning and ecosystem management, for both cultivated and natural ecosystems. There is no clear vision on how Rapa Nui should look in the future. Alternative scenarios for development and landscape management are missing.

A strong aspiration for a greater Rapanui autonomy in decision-making processes, taking into account the high specificity – in both ecological and cultural terms – and the diverse potential of the island when compared with the mainland of Chile, is probably the current theme. To the extent that a process of greater island autonomy goes hand in hand with clearer and better planned development objectives, with more relevant capacity-building targets and – above all – with an active sense of responsibility and local empowerment of the overall Rapanui community, I could envisage rather optimistically the future of Rapa Nui in its culture, its social structure and its economic development.

Admittedly, all the above prerequisites are difficult to be met suddenly under the present human society of Rapa Nui, so there may be plenty of internal quarrels, contrasting aspirations and naiveté. However, the economic attributes of the island are potentially so rich and promising, under the current world economy, that a rapidly evolving development change can be reasonably expected, with unforeseeable cultural, social and environmental impacts. They will depend on the control, regulation, know-how and empowerment of Rapanui representatives and leaders. They seem to be aware of their mission and their responsibility.

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#### FOOTNOTE

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