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The Pacific environment – sustaining our livelihoods and natural heritage in harmony with our cultures.

BLUE DAYS PROJECT SYNOPSIS

Tourism is one of the major engines of economic growth in the Pacific region, and marine species-oriented ecotourism, an undeniably growing sector, is only waiting to be structured. The aim is to develop a new niche that is economically promising based on a long-term view, in the territorial waters of species that are both emblematic and vulnerable. Hence, blue ecotourism has a meaning for Pacific island countries; i.e. to combine economic growth, respect for natural resources and for the heritage of Oceania culture.

In this project, ecotourism means an economic sector based on wild natural species. Such tourism is considered as sustainable and the challenges are economic, environmental and societal; the three pillars of sustainable development. It is respectful towards marine species and their habitats, and towards knowledge and traditions. It ensures economic spin-offs for the benefit of local communities.

The Blue Days Project, initiated by the Government of French Polynesia, set up and coordinated by SPREP, plans to gather 100 stakeholders from the region and from other areas of the world, to share a common vision: **"To offer the Pacific the opportunity to become a destination of excellence for marine ecotourism because of its biological richness, its responsible practices and its living culture."** The partners supporting SPREP are the Ministry of Tourism, Ecology and Culture, DIREN, GIE TT, PROGEM management office and professionals.

This is a long-term project since it will also propose to ratify a later multi-annual programme that will answer the questions of and encourage initiatives from professionals, tourism promoters, local communities, naturalists, scientists (from any discipline) as well as representatives of member countries.

The Blue Days will be organised before the meeting of tourism ministers which SPTO organises every other year and which is planned in 2015 in French Polynesia too: they could ideally convey a message to governments, mainly if they follow each other in time. In addition the Blue Days will be an opportunity to carry out a mid-term review of countries' action plans in the regional framework 2013 – 2017 relating to marine species proposed by SPREP.

Finally, the Blue Days will come after a series of meetings held in French Polynesia in 2014 and 2015 about sharks and men (IRCP), sustainable tourism (INTEGRE), whale watching (CRIOBE), ecotourism and turtle follow-up (SPREP). The former two workshops are actually planned to be part of the Blue Days. These include debates and findings that will feed the three themes of the meetings about ecotourism based on marine species:

- Practices of professionals with remarkable examples between man and animals: for these activities based on investment and on traditional knowledge, what are the trends, the training and recognition needs?
- The state of knowledge and innovating results for the profession coming from scientific research and expertise in the area of blue ecotourism, marine species, and the impact of

ecotourism on biodiversity: what is the value of the services rendered by ecosystems and species? What are the needs in terms of regulation and management of species and of marine areas? How such an economic niche may be developed?

- The structuring and development of blue ecotourism in the Pacific: what role for NGOs, civil society, agencies, governments, politicians, and tourism promoters? What conditions for its settlement: any models? What is the comparative advantage of the Pacific and the specificities of each territory: competition or synergy?

The organisation of the Blue Days has relied on many partners since the visit of SPREP (Pascale Salaün¹) in July in Tahiti: scientific, financial and professional partners shared their vision, submitted proposals and agreed on the main guidelines. The follow-up committee set up a scientific committee in order to guaranty the quality of the presentations. The follow-up committee proposed dates for the Blue Days that can fit in the annual agenda of salient events and also meets sponsors' requirements: from the 28th to the 30th of May, the "Species" Blue Days and from the 1st to the 5th of June 2015 the "Original" Blue Days (the date has been confirmed but duration of workshops may be modified according to budget).

Beyond the structuring of the project, the meetings in July generated some awareness and finally a process of comparative views on this new economic niche whose stakes converge towards a greater respect for natural resources, greater profit for local communities, and greater growth for countries... It also shed light on the necessity to spread good practices to the whole profession or even to public policies.

While SPREP is coordinating the project, a French Polynesia-based event promoter will be selected, and a Pacific consultant will draft the later programme and many local service providers will be involved. French Polynesia is lined up to be a pole of excellence in matters regarding the preservation of species and good professional practices. Countries will come out of the Blue Days informed, perhaps involved in decisions, if they are not already integrated into a regional network.

The project is co-financed by the Government of French Polynesia in the amount of €85,000, by the Pacific Fund in the amount of €30,000, and by SPREP and many partners including the French Government (R&T), CRIOBE, DAIEP, GIE Tahiti Toursime, and Air Tahiti Nui, which has already committed itself in a remarkable way. Partners' co-financing² still need to be calculated or validated and the ideal budget that would allow to invite about 100 participants and draft a later programme, is around €200,000. The event promoter will also be a multi-task service provider and will in particular manage co-financing, under a financial agreement and precise and demanding specifications.

This project has enormous potential for dialogue and innovation and constitutes a showcase of outstanding experiences and lessons learnt. Air Tahiti Nui proposes to create an ecotourism trophy that would enable to subsidise a project promoter who is original, respectful of the environment and promotes Polynesian history and culture. GIE TT is currently designing a discovery tourist package combining marine species, diving, hiking, nautical sports, and cultural discovery, which will be launched during the Blue Days. The Eco-label Chart of the Tourism Ministry will be applied to the Blue Days and venues will be selected according to their eco-certification. A recreation day on the

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² Financial partners involved are GIE Tahiti Tourisme, the French Government (CMRT), CRIOBE and DAIEP. Potential partners could be EDT, PEW Foundation, and Vini and Air Tahiti to open up outer islands operators.

water will make it possible to share with stakeholders about the reality of the profession and discuss about the assets and potential improvements. Other issues linked to ecotourism will be tackled: waste management, bio security and the impact of climate change on species on which ecotourism is based.

This should attract many stakeholders in order to promote this new sector of activity.