



FROM ICE TO ATOLL: WHY FRENCH POLYNESIA NEEDS A HEALTHY SOUTHERN OCEAN

BY TITOUAN BERNICOT

Looking out over the pristine coral reefs and bright turquoise lagoon fringed by palm trees, it's hard to believe that French Polynesia could have a connection, be influenced even, by an icy, frozen continent thousands of miles away.

And yet, it is true. The waters surrounding Antarctica are the lifeblood to the life that we know in the South Pacific. The cold water of the Southern Ocean is dense and its sinking to the ocean floor drives ocean currents that warms and upwells, bringing key nutrients to our seas to support our ecosystems.

Antarctica itself is one of our key defences in the biggest threat to our coral in French Polynesia - climate change - which warms water temperatures everywhere and ultimately causes the coral to bleach before it dies. The Southern Ocean regulates the global climate, and even absorbs oceanic carbon dioxide helping to reduce the warming.

Many species of wildlife, humpback whales, sperm whales and sea birds migrate from our waters to the Southern Ocean and have become an important part of our heritage. The wildlife make these long journeys from our waters to feed on krill in the Southern Ocean, the small crustacean, upon which almost all Antarctic wildlife relies.

But their food source is under threat. Krill fishing by a handful of countries is at risk of undermining the integrity of the Antarctic ecosystem. Those countries send industrial trawlers that run near non-stop for

months at a time to suck up the foundation of the food web. Without krill, the whales may struggle to survive. And for what? So krill can be used in omega-3 supplements, to feed farmed fish and for pet food, despite the fact that the integrity of the ecosystem is crucial to life thousands of miles away.

At Coral Gardeners, we're on a mission to restore local ecosystems, one coral at a time. We grow and plant resilient corals to bring life and biodiversity back to the reef. The ocean gives us everything, and now it needs us to give back. Climate change and overexploitation have already caused deep damage; now it's time for restoration. The idea that some still seek to exploit areas of untouched wilderness for profit is hard to understand.

We must ensure that the voices from around the ocean are heard on matters that affect us all, and not only, those with commercial interests in our natural resources. We are pushing the planet to a dangerous tipping point, how long until it says enough is enough?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Titouan Bernicot is a marine conservationist from French Polynesia who founded the organization Coral Gardeners in 2017 after witnessing the decline of coral reefs around his home island. His mission is to restore coral reefs by combining cutting-edge science and technology with a unique, community-led approach, inspiring a global movement to protect the ocean.

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