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Algae invasion in Toahotu



"To my knowledge, this is the first time this has happened to this extent," confided a resident of PK 5 (Credit: Anne-Charlotte Lehartel).

Tahiti, August 22, 2024 – In the Mitirapa area of Toahotu, the beaches are regularly covered with a thick carpet of *Turbinaria ornata* and *Sargassum*. While farmers collect some of this brown algae, access to the sea sometimes remains compromised for families. Several options are being considered: to act on their proliferation or exploit it.

This is a phenomenon that seems to be growing, although it is not, for the moment, comparable to the nuisances caused in the Antilles. In recent months, in the Mitirapa area, the beaches have been regularly covered with a thick carpet of algae. While the area is known to farmers, who collect some of it, the massive presence of this algae is not the most pleasant for families, who are sometimes forced to turn to other untouched sites.


Shunned by bathers

"It's like this every year, but I have the impression that there are more and more of them. Even when I go fishing by boat, I see a lot of them, all the way inside Puunui," confided a regular, parked on site. A local resident also expressed her surprise to us. *"To my knowledge, this is the first time to this extent. Children are used to swimming there, but at the moment, no one goes to the sea: we don't know what's in there and it doesn't make us want to. We let nature take its course so that it goes away with the swell,"* explained Teumere. *"We've been going to this beach since we were teenagers. When there's too much algae, we don't come swimming with*

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our children ,” added two other users.

However, when they arrive in abundance, the brown algae make some professionals happy, who help clean up the sites concerned. *“I come to collect seaweed when I have time, to bring potassium to my watermelons. I dry them well at home for two or three weeks, then I put them in the grinder to obtain a powder that improves the ripening of the fruit,”* explains a farmer from Taravao, who usually gets his supplies from Mitirapa, but also from the Faratea area.



In Mitirapa, some days the beach is impassable.

What solutions?

Asked about these tides of *Turbinaria ornata* and *Sargassum*, the deputy director of marine resources (DRM) recalls that it is a natural phenomenon linked to episodes of strong swell, the Mitirapa site being highly exposed, facing a pass. However, several factors contribute to amplifying this phenomenon. *“We have fewer and fewer herbivores in the lagoon, such as ume, maito, mārava, sea urchins, etc. Which means that we have a more significant algal proliferation all around the island ,”* notes Moana Maamaatuaiahutapu. In addition to overfishing, there are certain anthropogenic discharges, which would promote the development of invasive algae. *“The Country is working on repopulating herbivores. Several studies are being conducted in restoration aquaculture to be able to produce them and verify whether they will actually consume these algae, at the bud stage for the hardest of the two. There are other avenues, such as uprooting campaigns by associations, in Punaauia, for example, and levers for the exploitation of these algae.”*

A valorization program is notably under study by the Directorate of Agriculture (DAG). Xavier Moppert, head of research and development at Pacific Biotech, is also one of those who have been working on *Turbinaria ornata* for several years, following on from the thesis of specialist



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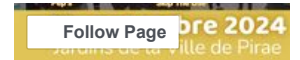
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Mayalen Zubia, lecturer in marine ecology at the University of French Polynesia (UPF). The focus is on this algae, which tends to smother reefs, but whose properties can have several applications. "Turbinaria has a high potassium and calcium content, correct nitrogen content, but low phosphorus content, and the alginate it produces is interesting. The more rigid the algae, the more it gels. There are several avenues: biostimulants for agriculture and horticulture, animal feed, cosmetics and biomaterials, such as bioplastics or in medical devices. Studies are being conducted with the UPF and Criobe to quantify the deposit that can be extracted to improve the marine ecosystem, without impacting it," explains Xavier Moppert. Next step: convincing manufacturers to invest in the sector.

02/09/2024



Written by Anne-Charlotte Lehartel on Thursday, August 22, 2024 at 7:52 p.m. | Read 3828 times



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