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The trial of a "massacre" of turtles in Manuae

Tahiti, September 2, 2022 - The correctional court judged Friday four poachers for a real turtle fishing campaign -particularly bloody- conducted in November 2019 in Manuae. The prosecution considered that it was now necessary to move to firm prison sentences on this subject. Deliberated on September 15.

"A real massacre." Friday morning, the president of the correctional court, Thierry Fragnoli, did not mince his words at the evocation of a file that one did not expect to discover during a simple single judge hearing. At the bar, four defendants aged between 22 and 44 years old were prosecuted for an unusual poaching of turtles of a scale rarely equaled in Fenua. And as a proof of the importance of the case, the prosecutor did not hesitate to ask for prison sentences against the traffickers. The representative of the public prosecutor, H el ene Geiger, conceded that these were "severe sentences", but they were intended to "show that for this type of environmental offence, we have raised the bar to the level of the issue".

Trails of blood

The

case had been discovered on November 21, 2019, during a surveillance flight of a plane of the Armed Forces of French Polynesia over the atoll of Mopelia in the far west of the Society Archipelago. While approaching the atoll, the military crew spotted and photographed a bloody scene in which about 15 people were busy cutting up at least as many turtles on a beach. Several ships were anchored nearby, shells and coolers were spread out on the

beach, but above all, long, clearly visible blood trails stretched across the sand and into the sea... "It must have been a nameless carnage", the president of the court let slip during his summary of the proceedings, at the beginning of the hearing.

The plane of the Armed Forces had then redone a passage, but to note that there was "nobody more on the beach". The turtle shells and coolers had been hidden under large coconut palms, but the traces of blood were still widely visible from the air. The army plane was also able to identify the registrations of three of the vessels present, a bonitier and two poti marara. An investigation was then carried out to find the owners of the vessels, who were originally from the island of Tahiti, and then to interview them and implicate five suspect fishermen.

Cigarettes against turtles On

Friday morning, four of these fishermen were sent back to the court. The fifth one, having left the territory in a hurry for the mainland, will be summoned and judged later. "I don't hide from you that the versions given in police custody, it was a lot of nonsense", started the president of the hearing, usually assigned to the instruction of the penal files. "I expect from you today a certain frankness. That each one takes its responsibilities." And nearly three years after the facts, the four men have generally complied. One of them quickly introduced himself as the instigator of the project. "I wanted to eat turtle meat, because I like it," he explained. But with about twenty poached green turtles representing nearly 350 kg of animal flesh, the man did not hide for a long time that he intended his fishing mainly for the resale on Raiatea or Tahiti. "I knew people in Mopelia. We decided to set a date. We filled the boats. We got some food and headed out."

But above all, it is the organization and conduct of this real poaching campaign that makes the case special. From Tahiti, the fishermen went to Raiatea to fill up, before heading to Mopelia where they literally recruited atoll residents in exchange for food. Pasta, rice and sugar were exchanged for labor that was obviously quite used to turtle fishing. After spending a night in Mopelia, the fishermen went to the neighboring atoll of Manuae to catch about 20 turtles. "There, there were people on the reef who wanted to

trade turtles for cigarettes," even the main defendant recounts. The animals were then brought back to Mopelia to be cut up, butchered and packed in bags... And that's when the fishermen and the inhabitants got scared when they saw the army plane, got rid of all the turtles and returned to Tahiti.

On the stand Friday, the three other defendants tried by the court generally confirmed this version of the expedition. Even if they affirmed that they did not know that they were going to fish turtles before setting sail from Tahiti. "I just came to do a fishing trip," explained the owner of one of the poti marara. "I thought we were going to Fakarava," the youngest, a simple sailor on the bonito, defended himself. Once on the spot, however, the three defendants admitted to having participated in the fishing, transporting and butchering of the turtles. "You knew that it was forbidden. You had the choice to refuse once you were on site", the prosecutor pointed out during her closing arguments.

"Also present at the hearing, the representative of French Polynesia intervened to announce the constitution of civil party of the Country in this file. The territory has a very repressive legal arsenal against turtle poaching and aims to make Polynesia a "sanctuary" for the protection of protected marine animals. The country's lawyer explained that the turtles were in the middle of their reproduction period at the time of the poaching and that the choice of Manuae was not made by chance: "It is a nature reserve classified by decree so that the turtles can quietly nest". The representative of the country asked for 15 million Fcfp in damages on behalf of French Polynesia.

As underlined, the prosecutor wished to insist on the seriousness of this case, but also on a change of penal policy on turtle fishing. The prosecutor announced the end of the pedagogical approach with the suspended sentences that have been given until now, and the beginning of a stronger repression by requesting 18 months of firm prison for the main fisherman and 12 months for the three others. "We must begin to understand the importance of what we want to protect," insisted the prosecutor. The defense lawyers, for their part, regretted that this case was chosen "to make an example". They also underlined a certain "hypocrisy" on the subject, by

evoking in particular the example of elected representatives of the assembly having announced openly to have already consumed meat of tortoise... The court put the case under deliberation. It will pronounce itself on September 15.

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