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Jean Kape, a life of good causes



TAHITI, 22 September 2021 - The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme has announced the winners of the Pacific Islands Environmental Leadership Awards. Jean Kape was rewarded for all his work devoted to environmental initiatives of excellence for the Pacific in general and French Polynesia in particular. A look back at a passionate career... and fascinating.

"We don't see French Polynesia too much on the chessboard of the great ocean," says Jean Kape. Also, the prize he has just received is a "pride" and an "honour". For the second year, the secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) has rewarded various personalities from the area for their actions in favour of the environment. Jean Kape, along with Tusanilefaia'ao Losefatu Reti in Samoa and Dick Watling in Fiji, received an award for all their work, projects and investments.

Fasan Chong, known as Jean Kape, is, in short, an emblematic figure of the culture and conservation of biodiversity in French Polynesia. He has been involved as a volunteer in the preservation of culture and nature since 1976 with numerous cultural and environmental associations. In 2012, he was decorated with the title of Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur, France's highest honorary decoration.

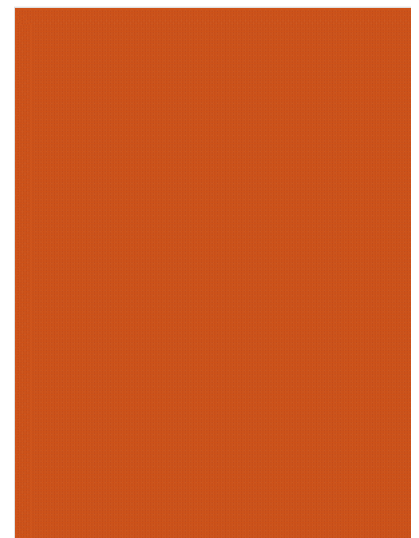
As a volunteer, he chairs the Tamariki-Te-Puka-Maruia and Te Reo o te Tuamotu associations and

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is the director of the Pa'umotu Academy, a cultural institution created in 2008. He is also an active member of a dozen cultural and environmental associations. He is also an active member of the Polynesian Ornithological Society (SOP Manu), of which he was vice-president for five years and is coordinator for the Pacific region of the French Committee of the IUCN. But behind this laconic portrait, taken up by the Sprep, are hidden anecdotes and notable encounters.

From Napuka to Tahiti

, Jean Kape was born in Napuka, in the Tuamotus. He settled in Tahiti in 1963 without really looking for it. Before him were born two brothers, after him, a sister. In 1960, the youngest of the family, who had become a father, went to the capital island to look for work and a roof over his head for his child and his wife. He wanted to offer his daughter an education worthy of the name. *"It must be said that the first teacher arrived in Napuka in 1956, when I was 10 years old,"* says Jean Kape.

In 1963, the youngest, who had left with his other brother, returned to Napuka to look for his wife and child. *"So I found myself the only boy with my sister and my mother. It was decided that they too would go to Tahiti. There was talk of me staying in the Tuamotu to take care of our land. Which suited me perfectly! I was happy there."*

Jean Kape, who had lived in Tahiti for a few weeks in the early 1960s, had no intention of leaving his island. He was only to accompany his brothers, sister, and mother to their new home before returning to Napuka. The island's teacher was also on the trip, as it coincided with the school holidays. *"I have paI spent time at his house because we were friends. I took the opportunity to visit Tahiti that I didn't know after all. Because even though I had lived there on the island for a while before, I was busy working all the time."*

When the teacher returned to Napuka once the holidays were over, Jean Kape wanted not to go home, but to go to school. *"It wasn't easy to get accepted into a school, because I had only taken three years of classes when I was already 17 years old! I was told that I was doing everything backwards because, at my age, young people were more likely to leave their schooling."* He achieved his goal, eventually finding teenagers his age or nearly his age who had doubled or tripled their year. *"The difference wasn't that big!"* He obtained his elementary school certificate.

"My desire to return was always there," recalls Jean Kape. He decided to apply to teach, hoping to get back with a job. *"Many only had the school certificate at the time and there was a great need for teachers in the islands."* He did an accelerated training, then found himself transferred to... Taenga. An isolated island, *"a little off the sea routes"*.

To make sure he could return home at the end of his mission, he jumped on the first boat even though the year was not yet over. *"I went directly to explain myself to the inspector once I arrived in Tahiti. I wanted to indicate why I left a few days before the end."* Jean Kape took the opportunity of this meeting to apply at his home in Napuka. But nothing went as he hoped. *"In fact, our meeting didn't go well at all, I resigned on the spot."*

A full

life Shortly after, in September 1965, he was hired by the Atomic Energy Commission, which was then in the process of recruiting. *"For a year, I found myself as a storekeeper for the purposes of the trials."* He regularly stayed in Moruroa before continuing with his military service in September 1966.

Then, and for five years, he worked at the Tahara'a Hotel as a storekeeper first and then very quickly as assistant to the head of the department and then as a chef. *"I found myself at the*

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head of the team that controlled the costs." In 1972, he signed up to join the police force where he remained until 2000. That year, his professional life came to a halt. He was able to concentrate entirely on his associative life, which he had been leading in parallel with his professional life since 1976!

"*A lot has happened in my life,*" he says. "*A lot of people have turned to me for advice.*" Almost every time, Jean Kape has responded to the requests with all the goodwill that characterizes him, becoming more and more committed.

One day in 1976, Yoshiko H. Sinoto introduced himself to Jean Kape. "*The search authorizations for the islands were delivered in my office. Sinoto wanted to go to Reao to study the marae. He said there were 69 of them on this small atoll and it intrigued him.*" Archaeologist Yoshiko H. Sinoto worked for the Bishop Museum in Hawaii with Kenneth Emory, an emblematic figure of the institution. "*Sinoto asked me where I was from. When he heard Napuka, he made big eyes! He said to me, do you know Kenneth Emory? He arrives in a few days and wants to go to Napuka!*"

This is how Jean Kape became interested in archaeological work, but also in history, culture and heritage. Jean Kape has long acted as an intermediary between researchers and his compatriots. He provided translations when necessary, he responded to the requests of archaeologists in search of elders, histories, testimonies, but also musicologists, sociologists... He quickly overcame his initial lack of confidence. "*From the first requests, I told Kenneth that I didn't have a diploma, that I couldn't help him. He replied: 'I need diplomas to talk about you. You don't need it to talk about yourself!'*"

Throughout his life, Jean Kape forged links, established networks, and gained knowledge. He became aware of all the richness of his island, then of all that of French Polynesia and then of the Pacific and its multiple territories. He wants to preserve all this wealth.



3 / 6 Décoré de la légion d'honneur en 2012.

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