

Fauna

Island ecology

Being so far from the main continents, land animal species are rather limited. During the Great Polynesian Migrations, pigs and dogs arrived on the double-hulled ocean canoes. Later, Europeans introduced cattle, horses, (from Chile) and rats. Reptiles include seven species of lizards and geckos, commonly called "margouillats".

There are some 120 species of birds that often make their nests on the ground on the low-lying islands. Some islands, such as Tetiaroa and Tikehau, have been turned into bird sanctuaries.

In sharp contrast to the land animal species, marine life is exceptionally rich and varied with over 800 species of lagoon and deep-sea tropical fish. Coral reefs are both a source of food and also vital protection for the dense, natural ecosystem.

Amongst the crustaceans, the most common are the land crabs or "tupa", their marine counterparts the "kaveu", lobsters,



and the delicious fresh water shrimp. Tahiti and her Islands: a Marine Mammal Sanctuary. Tahiti and her Islands now possess a biosphere reserve located in the Tuamotu archipelago in the commune

of Fakarava which has been recognized by UNESCO since 1977. Protecting whales and dolphins in its entire economic zone of 4 million square kilometres (1,544,402 sq mi), French Polynesia has been classified as a marine mammal sanctuary since May of 2002. On August 2003, the Minister of the Environment was presented with a certificate and a World Wildlife Fund cup in international recognition of the territory's actions to protect whales in the Pacific Ocean. Since 2002, activities which include approaching whales and other marine mammals are regulated and henceforth approach authorizations from the environmental authorities are mandatory.

Flora



An explosion of colors

Isolated in the central Pacific Ocean, the geologically young islands of French Polynesia were not very hospitable to the first

plant varieties that tried to establish themselves on the volcanic soil.

The original fauna was therefore fairly limited.

Over time, the imported varieties started to flourish and adapt marvelously in this unique island habitat to make Tahiti and the high islands a richly colored Garden of Eden.

Visiting the parks and botanical gardens (see sections on Tahiti, Huahine, Tahaa and Ua Huka) is a real voyage of discovery of the islands' extraordinarily varied flora.

Over the centuries, immigrants have introduced many useful "traditional" types of food, fabric and even medicinal plants. The first settlers of the islands, the Maori, discovered a range of food plants such as coconut, mape (Tahitian chestnut), uru (breadfruit), yams, sugar cane, bananas and golden apple. The early missionaries also introduced useful plants such as the tamarind, lemon, avocado, vanilla and mango as well as ornamental flowers, which, apart from the tiare-tahiti and the pua, have all been introduced from elsewhere.

Today, flowers are an integral part of the Tahitian way of life.

They are used to celebrate happy times and to beautify. All around the Papeete market, ladies weave flower crowns that Tahitians wear for special occasions, weddings, or simply for going out with friends in the evening.

