

Tides of time

The Lagoons of New Caledonia World Heritage site encompasses one of the most extensive coral reef systems in the world, with a wealth of diverse species and habitats



The translucent waters of New Caledonia's lagoons, which cover 24,000 square kilometers, or nearly 9,300 square miles, are pristine, "a garden of Eden where man's impact on the environmental quality has been very little."

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JAEGER-LECOULTRE

PEOPLE | Emmanuel Coutures, head of World Heritage for the South Province, New Caledonia

My job is dealing with people, says environmental officer, not just managing a site

Emmanuel Coutures is proud to call himself a fisherman. That is not an expected hobby for someone managing a marine World Heritage site — where protection of ocean life is a top priority — but neither Coutures nor the site for which he is responsible, the Lagoons of New Caledonia, are what one might expect.

Coutures is not from New Caledonia or the South Pacific; he was born in Bordeaux, France. But he always wanted to be a marine biologist and studied the subject at university. When he had the opportunity to pursue a master's degree, either in Paris or French Polynesia, "I made that choice fast," he recalls. He has been living and working in the South Pacific ever since. He wrote his thesis on New Caledonian lobsters, then worked with lobsters at a fishery in American Samoa. He is currently in charge of World Heritage for the marine service of the

environmental department of South Province, New Caledonia. The Lagoons of New Caledonia form one of the three most extensive reef systems in the world. They are unusual in part because they consist of six separate marine clusters managed by four local authorities — those of the North and South Provinces on Grande Terre, the biggest island in the archipelago; Loyalty Islands Province; and the government of New Caledonia — plus the French state. New Caledonia is a French Overseas Territory with special status.

Work on a project to seek World Heritage status began in 2000, but it foundered. In 2003, France decided to reopen the World Heritage proposal, and the project was accepted by Unesco in 2008.



Emmanuel Coutures, in charge of World Heritage for the South Province of New Caledonia.

A referendum on independence will be held in New Caledonia between 2014 and 2018. Until then, all decisions regarding the World Heritage sites must be made by the four New Caledonian authorities plus the French state, which has responsibility for dealing with Unesco.

Therefore, much of his job involves managing people rather than the sites themselves. Policies to preserve the environment have to be discussed not only with politicians, scientists and bureaucrats but also with those most directly affected. That may mean a sailor or captain from a southern tribe one day, a tribal chieftain from the north another day and a university professor from Nouméa in between.

"It is these people who are going to have to live with the decisions, so they are the

ones who are going to set the marks," he explains. Being a fisherman helps Coutures with this work. He knows the profession, its dangers and rewards. When he talks to locals, he speaks with practical knowledge. "They respect me for that," he says.

The Lagoons are different from many other marine sites in that their marine biodiversity is not at particular risk, and there are few endemic marine species, if any. On the land flanking the protected areas, however, 80 percent to 90 percent of the plants are endemic, that is, unique to that habitat. Although Coutures's team focuses on the marine part "because it is beautiful, because the landscape is superb," they are also mindful of the terrestrial treasures that need to be protected.

Both land and sea are threatened by nickel mining, the small territory's main source of wealth. A recently completed mine in the

south is located next to the World Heritage site, and it became a hot-button issue. Concerned about the environmental impact, the local population was up in arms. Work stoppages continued for six months. Indicators, guidelines and techniques were developed to address the concerns. The process is participative, involving local communities, with regular working sessions with the public, which is solicited for input on environmental concerns and reassured about safeguards to protect the site and surrounding areas.

"That's how we can really progress in building the country," he suggests. "It's not the marvelous environment; it's working with the people. I talk to people. I work with them during the week and then on the weekend I return to go fishing with them in their territory. And we manage to build something that is going to link all these people in this long-term project that is World Heritage." C.F.

About World Heritage

The aim of the World Heritage Convention, adopted by Unesco members in 1972, is "to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding universal value to humanity."

"Tides of Time" is a partnership among Jaeger-LeCoultre, Unesco's World Heritage Centre and the International Herald Tribune. The series presents some of the people who are helping preserve marine sites on the World Heritage List.

To see videos about World Heritage marine sites, visit the "Tides of Time" archive at whc.unesco.org/tidesoftime

The feminine side of Reverso, a classic timepiece

Heritage is not static. Something that is timeless may adapt or evolve over the years, but its essence remains undiminished. This characteristic is evident in the collections of Jaeger-LeCoultre, a partner with Unesco in the preservation of World Heritage marine sites.

Nowhere is this theme better expressed than in Jaeger-LeCoultre's Reverso watch, first developed in 1931 for English polo players. The watch's reversible case was designed to protect the crystal from shocks encountered in a polo match.

The Reverso was quickly embraced by women, who appreciated that the back of the case offered a way to personalize an intimate piece of jewelry. Amelia Earhart was an early admirer; she had the itinerary of her record first solo nonstop flight from Mexico to New York engraved on it.

Sometimes the Art Deco watch

face is recalled on the back with *sertissage neige* (snow settings), a painstaking technique developed by Jaeger-LeCoultre in which fine, tiny diamonds are pasted together and inlaid directly on the watch case. A watch owner can also specify her initials, a family crest, a zodiac sign or a special date, for example.

This year, 80 years after the Reverso's beginnings, Jaeger-LeCoultre is celebrating this timeless object that continues to evolve, the Reverso, by releasing a new line, including the Grande Reverso Lady Ultra Thin.

Jaeger-LeCoultre is also holding a contest online from June 27 to July 15. Visitors to its Web site, www.jaeger-lecoultre.com, can submit designs for an engraving, and the winning design will be used for a special Tides of Time edition of the Reverso. One of the watches will be auctioned, and the proceeds will go to a marine World Heritage site. C.F.

Lagoons of New Caledonia | Reef diversity and associated ecosystems

Extraordinary, untouched places and a wealth of diverse marine life

Captain James Cook gave the world its first written description of New Caledonia: "I am likewise of the opinion, that the whole, or greatest part, is surrounded by reefs or shoals, which render the access to it very dangerous, but at the same time guard the coast from the violence of the wind and sea; make it abound with fish; secure and easy and safe navigation along it for canoes etc.; and most likely form some good harbors for shipping."

The year was 1774, quite late in the annals of European discovery. Yet somehow the huge South Pacific island and its ring of reefs and lagoons had gone unnoticed by previous navigators.

To a large degree that's still the case. New Caledonia's coral necklace has long lived in the shadow of Australia's Great Barrier Reef. But obscurity means less development, and fewer hotels and cruise ships. That, in turn, translates into an underwater wonder that in many respects is even more pristine (and less explored) than its Australian equivalent.

The reef — an elongated ellipse that wraps around the French territory's main

island, Grand Terre, the Isle of Pines and several smaller landfalls — stretches roughly 1,500 kilometers, or 930 miles. Inside is one of the planet's largest and most biologically diverse lagoons: 24,000 square kilometers, or nearly 9,300 square miles, of translucent water.

Unesco inscribed the Lagoons of New Caledonia as World Heritage in 2008, not as a single entity but as a "serial site" of six separate marine clusters with their own unique characteristics.

New Caledonia's diverse concentration of reef structures (146 different types) equal or even surpass the much larger Great Barrier Reef in both coral and fish diversity. The reef complex is also unique because it is "free-standing" in the ocean and provides a variety of oceanographic exposures, including both warm and cold currents.

"The landscape is extraordinary," says Emmanuel Coutures, part of a team from five government authorities in New Caledonia charged with managing the World Heritage site. "One of the aspects of its amazing natural state is the exceptional biodiversity found there and nowhere else. It's still a

garden of Eden where man's impact on the environmental quality has been very little."

Among the nearly 6,000 marine species found there are healthy populations of large marine predators and big fish, as well as a number of emblematic or threatened species like sea turtles, whales and dugongs. Thirteen different types of whale have been recorded. Other emblematic species include whale sharks and great whites, trumpet triton and bellybutton nautilus, porcupine ray and big-eye tuna.

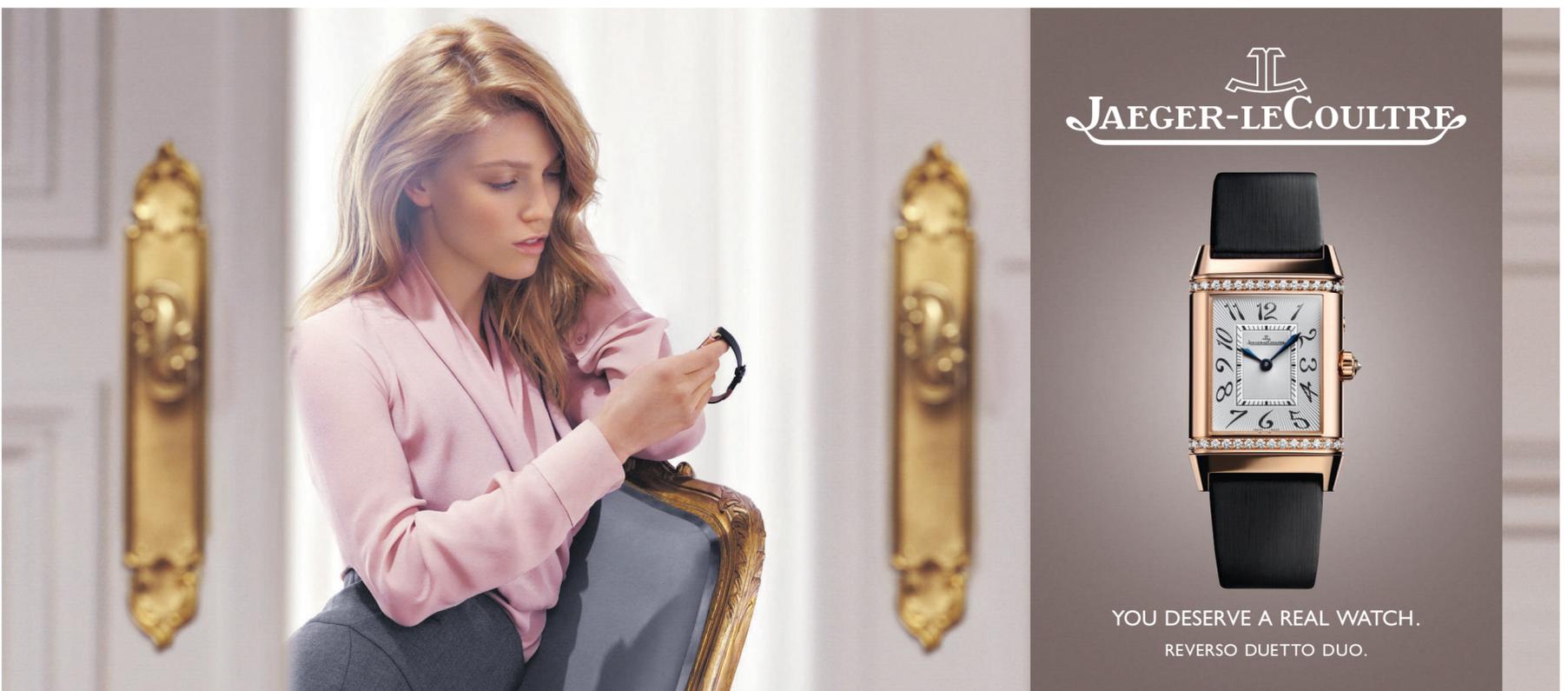
Because of New Caledonia's small population (250,000) and low population density, the reefs and lagoons are generally safe from human threat. "As soon as you leave the city, there is nobody and there is nothing," says Coutures. "There are untouched places where nobody can go."

Effluent from nickel mining on Grand

Terre, as well as agricultural runoff and erosion from overgrazing or forest fires, does make its way into the lagoons in places. Expanding urbanization is a concern around Nouméa, the territorial capital. And there has been some destruction of the mangrove forest that buffers the marine and terrestrial environments. The New Caledonian environmental authorities are actively involved with local authorities, communities and residents in addressing these issues.

Safeguards have also been put in place. The site-management committee is working with its local partners to adopt environmental codes, no-fishing zones, new standards for pesticides and fertilizers in watersheds, and enforcement infrastructure on both land and sea. For instance, the fine for poaching threatened species can exceed €8,000 (\$11,400). J.R.Y.

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