Field Trip to Ouen island - 7 septembre 2012

The Ouen island has about 80 inhabitants and streches over 3,713 hectares. The island suffers from its isolation despites its major assets.

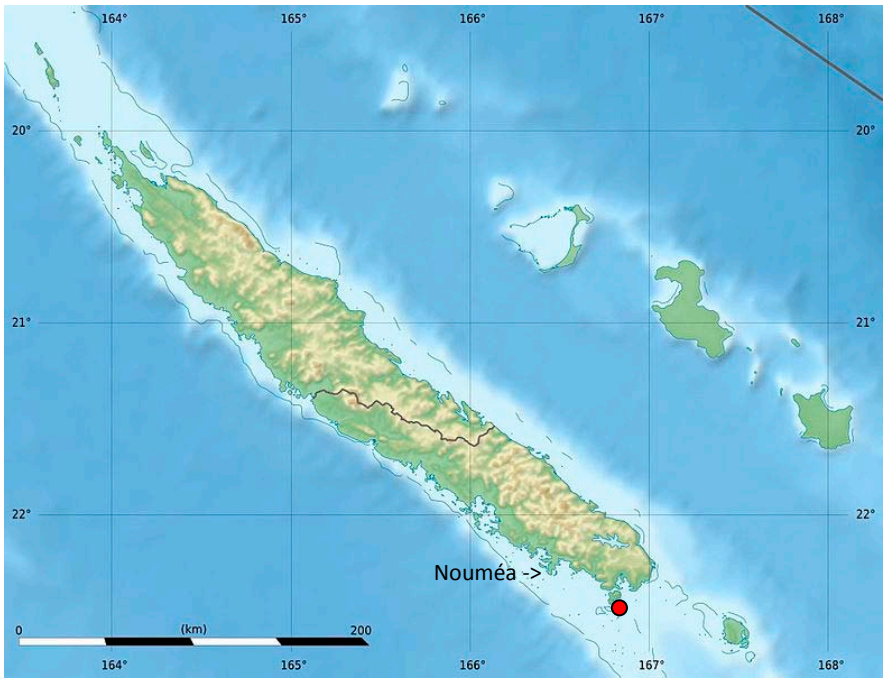
The islanders have recently benefited from a commitment to better consider isolated populations, a heritage conservation policy and the synergy of institutional and industrial stakeholders.



The participants to the SPREP conference will be welcomed by the Local Management Committee of Ouen Island which is an association founded in July 2010 as part of the conservation project of the Great South Lagoon area registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Ouen Island: its culture, strength and history

Ouen Island ("Ngwêê" in indigenous language) is depending on the municipality called **Mont-Dore**, in the Great South.



Located south of the Canal Woodin, halfway between Noumea and the Isles of Pines, this large island has traces of ancient Melanesian stands (3000 years) and was described in the nineteenth century by an English santalier.

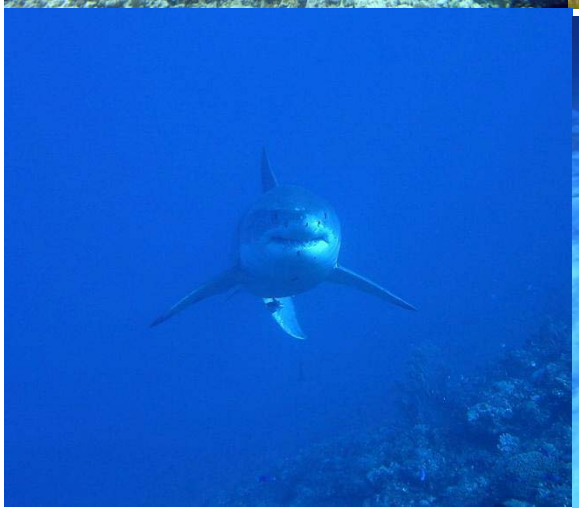
As a detached fragment of the landmass, it is a high land, with an indented coastline on the East and two deep inlets of Kumbe and Port-Kute. The island, covered with savannah and scrubland, has been reduced by erosion due to uncontrolled deforestation and pasture. The Ouen island, close to Noumea, is a good example of the Caledonian relief: good quality croplands cover less than 3% of the total area and are highly threatened by gully erosion.

Its population is concentrated in the village of Ouara, nestled in a coconut plantation. The population is almost entirely dependent on fishing. Local agriculture is based on the production of yam, cassava and a local variety of cabbage. In the Kanak tradition, yam is a sacred root that cannot be sold but only exchanged.

This area contains the highest biomass of fish in New Caledonia. We have registered a species of shark (*Aulohahaelurus kanakorum*), currently only known in this part of the world, cool water fish and unique species in New Caledonia. The passes of the Havannah and of the Sarcelle are boundaries for many species found exclusively on either coast. Thus, species which are adapted to strong currents meet there while they are rare or absent elsewhere.









Regarding the emblematic species, we note the presence of three species of sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas, Eretmochelys imbricata, Caretta caretta*) and five species of marine mammals (humpback whale: *Megaptera novaeangliae*; dugong: *Dugong dugon*; beaked dolphin: *Stenella longirostris*; bottlenose dolphin: *Tursiops truncatus*; minke: *Balenoptera acutorostrata*).

The region comprises 12 species of breeding seabirds and a remarkable density of Osprey which is exceptionnal for the avifauna. Out of these species, four did nest nowhere else in the whole lagoon surrounding the main island.

Several emblematic species have a special meaning in the culture of the Ouen islanders. The whale holds a particular place because its arrival in southern waters marks the beginning of the yam calendar. Besides, if one looks down at Ouen island from the sky, he may have the impression to see the tail of a whale in the shape of the fringing reef.

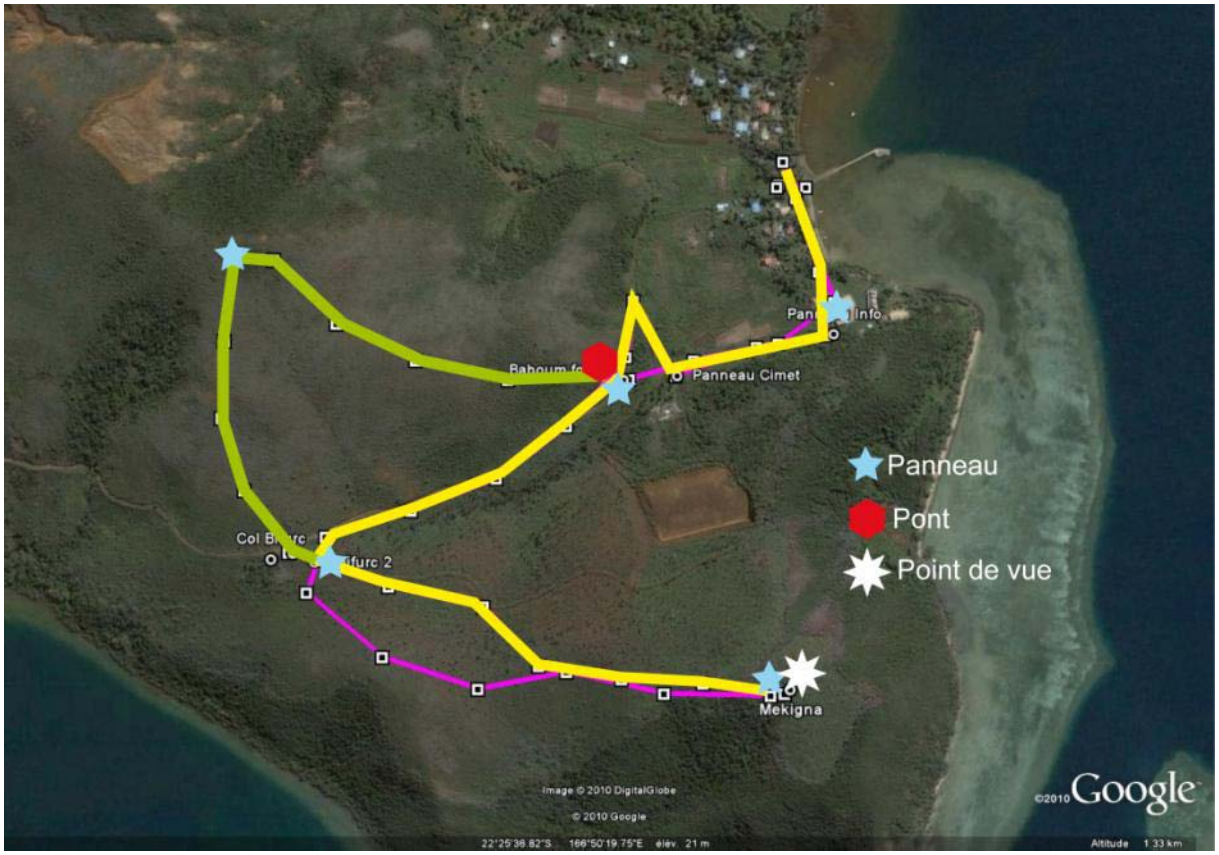
Hundreds of humpback whales hover around the island every year around August.



Finally, the history of this island is characterized by a rich past and its vestiges, which are now part of the registered heritage and deserve to be known and protected. It is therefore important to bring tourists to enable local people to participate in the development of their island while informing and educating people to respect the natural and cultural heritage of this area by having an eco-responsible behavior. This island is famous for its ancient jade mine.

Objective of the day

The purpose of the visit is to live a moment in total immersion with the inhabitants of the Ouen island. Therefore, a traditional welcome will be held. Everything is oriented to live in harmony with nature and in respect with local customs.



One of the highlights of the visit will be the possibility to observe the whales, if they are still there, from the point of view designed for this purpose on the island in the company of several guides of the tribe.



Also, a guided visit of the Ouara church edified in 1864 is planned. Ouara church is the second oldest church in solid construction after the Vao church in the Isle of Pines. During a journey from Saint Louis (Mont Dore municipality) to the Isle of Pines, the priest Chapuy is strained to take refuge in Ouen Island during a violent cyclone. A first contact is made with the island population.

Two years later, the priest Rougeyron is sending several catechists who were facilitating the establishment of a mission and the construction of the church. In 1882, another cyclone is threatening to wipe out the church roof. After having escalated a ladder to secure the roof, the priest Chapuy made a fatal fall. He is buried nearby in a small cemetery.



The church became a registered building in 1993. In 2003, the Erica cyclone torn out the church roof. Subject to a rehabilitation project, the Church of Ouen Island regained its roof in 2011.



World Heritage file introduction.

Ouen Island local management comity will introduce the site, its management aims and actions implemented to protect this amazing spot.

Since 8 July 2008, part of lagoons, reefs and mangroves in New Caledonia are registered as UNESCO World Heritage. Six sites in New Caledonia are concerned: the Large Southern Lagoon (1), West Coast Area (2), d'Entrecasteaux atolls (5), Ouvéa and Beautemps-Beaupré atolls (6), the Large Northern Lagoon (4) and the North and East Coast area (3).

These six sites are surrounded by "buffer zone", ashore and at sea, that are not part of the World Heritage sites but which are classified as highly-monitered areas to improve the conservation.



This registration represents a **label of excellence**. Worldwide, it recognizes the exceptional universal value of the diversity in terms of submarine landscape, scenic beauty and marine species variety on site.

Ouen Island is part of the Large Southern Lagoon divided in two zones with distinct reef morphology and typology: the East part is the Horn of South. This site plays a transition zone between different communities (subtropical/ temperate settlements) and presents a particular interest. Such a marine area may serve as **witness for eventual global changes and particularly climate changes**. It has been identified as having an **"international interest" in conservation.**



Management and protection of the Natural Heritage.

The entry to the World Heritage list is not a set-aside. Current activities can be maintained (fishing, tourism…), as long as they are not representing a threat for the priceless value of the site.

To implement the principle of sustainable development management, measures have to be taken for each of the 6 sites. Management measures are determined with the inhabitants, professionals, (fisherman, tour operator, farmers), associations, customary authorities, municipality, where voluntary representatives gather in a “participative management comity”. These persons are responsible to conceive and suggest a management plan for each site.

