Sensibilisation: The role of awareness raising in biodiversity conservation in Kanaky/New Caledonia

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Abstract

Sensibilisation is a French term often translated to "awareness raising" but which encompasses a broader set of practices and philosophies intended to foster behavior change among target audiences. For those working on biodiversity conservation, *sensibilisation* is central to their work yet its meanings and methods vary. In this article, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork in Kanaky/New Caledonia to examine discourses of *sensibilisation* among conservationists using a political ecology framework. I use the concept of conservation morality to demonstrate how the moral imperative of conservation drives conservationists to use *sensibilisation* to enroll others into adopting specific attitudes and behavior. Two models of *sensibilisation* emerged: a Francophone and a Kanak model. The Francophone model centered scientific knowledge and was motivated by biodiversity protection, whereas the Kanak model was rooted in hands-on learning and motivated by perpetuating cultural and familial heritage. Both models seek to shape the territory's ecological future, but their power to capacitate change is predicated on asymmetrical knowledge and resource flows. I argue that the drive, and different motivations, for *sensibilisation* are reflective of broader tensions over the fate of the territory's political future as Independent from or a territory of France.

Keywords: biodiversity conservation, collaborative conservation, future, Indigenous sovereignty, South Pacific

Résumé

La sensibilisation est un terme français souvent traduit par « awareness raising », mais elle englobe un ensemble plus large de pratiques et de philosophies visant à favoriser le changement de comportement chez les publics cibles. Pour les acteurs de la conservation de la biodiversité, la sensibilisation est au cœur de leur travail, mais ses significations et méthodes varient. Dans cet article, je m'appuie sur un travail de terrain ethnographique en Kanaky/Nouvelle-Calédonie pour examiner les discours de sensibilisation parmi les conservationists dans une perspective d'écologie politique. J'utilise le concept de morale de la conservation pour démontrer comment l'impératif moral de la conservation pousse les conservationists à utiliser la sensibilisation pour inciter les autres à adopter des attitudes et des comportements spécifiques. Deux modèles de sensibilisation ont émergé : un modèle francophone et un modèle kanak. Le modèle francophone était centré sur les connaissances scientifiques et motivé par la protection de la biodiversité, tandis que le modèle kanak était ancré dans l'apprentissage pratique et motivé par la perpétuation du patrimoine culturel et familial. Les deux modèles cherchent à façonner l'avenir écologique du territoire, mais leur capacité à impulser le changement repose sur des flux asymétriques de connaissances et de ressources. Je soutiens que la volonté et les différentes motivations de sensibilisation reflètent des tensions plus larges sur le sort de l'avenir politique du territoire en tant qu'indépendant ou territoire de la France.

Mots-clés: conservation de la biodiversité, conservation collaboratif, l'avenir, souveraineté autochtone, Pacifique Sud

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Resumen

Sensibilisation es un término francés que a menudo se traduce como "awareness raising", pero que abarca un conjunto más amplio de prácticas y filosofías destinadas a fomentar el cambio de comportamiento en el público objetivo. Para quienes trabajan en la conservación de la biodiversidad, la *sensibilisation* es fundamental en su trabajo, aunque sus significados y métodos varían. En este artículo, me baso en el trabajo de campo etnográfico en Kanaky/Nueva Caledonia para examinar los discursos de *sensibilisation* entre conservacionistas desde un marco de ecología política. Utilizo el concepto de moralidad de la conservación para demostrar cómo el imperativo moral de la conservación impulsa a los conservacionistas a utilizar la *sensibilisation* para incentivar a otros a adoptar actitudes y comportamientos específicos. Surgieron dos modelos de *sensibilisation*: un modelo francófono y un modelo Kanak. El modelo francófono se centraba en el conocimiento científico y estaba motivado por la protección de la biodiversidad, mientras que el modelo Kanak se basaba en el aprendizaje práctico y se motivaba por la perpetuación del patrimonio cultural y familiar. Ambos modelos buscan moldear el futuro ecológico del territorio, pero su capacidad para impulsar el cambio se basa en flujos asimétricos de conocimiento y recursos. Sostengo que el impulso y las diferentes motivaciones para la *sensibilisation* reflejan tensiones más amplias sobre el destino del futuro político del territorio como independiente de Francia o como territorio de Francia.

Palabras Clave: conservación de la biodiversidad, conservación colaborativa, futuro, soberanía Indígena, Pacífico Sur

1. Introduction

Raising awareness as a form of environmental education is used to generate consciousness around the need to conserve biodiversity and promote sustainability in the face of species loss and ecological change (Kiggell, 2021). For nearly 40 years, the push for conserving biodiversity has grown among governments and institutions that seek to combat myriad drivers of ecological degradation (Clavel, 2012). Biodiversity conservation is often a multinational effort that involves complex networks of partnerships and funding sources, relying on national and regional governments, multilateral institutions, and non-governmental associations to collaboratively create and carry out projects (Benjaminsen & Bryceson, 2012; Cornier & Leblic, 2016; Levine, 2007; e.g., Walley, 2004). Often, these projects seek support at local levels for their initiatives through collaborative approaches, while being initiated and funded by larger organizations. The recent vote at the UN to protect 30% of the world's oceans by 2030 is an example of how decisions in global level institutions seek to influence local-level initiatives for conservation. As biodiversity conservation initiatives have blossomed, so too have discourses about the important role of awareness raising for biodiversity conservation (Leal Filho, 1996; Turrian & Glauser, 2013).

In francophone countries, this call for awareness raising is generally framed under the concept of *sensibilisation*. *Sensibilisation* stems from the Latin *sensus*, which refers to the 'capacity to feel an effect of.' However, in French everyday language, it refers to *faire prendre conscience*, or to take consciousness, to become aware of the significance of a notion, a fact, or a problem (Turrian & Glauser, 2013, p. 74). There is an assumption behind *sensibilisation* that it will result in desired behavior changes, which are identified by the person carrying out *sensibilisation* – the *sensibiliseur* (Kennell, 2011; Turrian & Glauser, 2013). As described by Turrian and Glauser (2013, 74), *sensibilisation* is the first step to driving knowledge, then behavior change (see also Riera, 2022, Chapter 7). In recent decades, this form of environmental *sensibilisation* has moved beyond solely the transmission of knowledge to seeking to foster relationships between people and the environment (Clavel, 2012; Leal Filho, 1996). Indeed, the 13th Article of the Convention on Biodiversity (1992) focuses on public education and awareness and calls for its integration into biodiversity conservation projects, situating the imperative for *sensibilisation* at the highest multi-lateral levels.

In this article, I draw on insights from critical political ecology which focuses on how discursive practices mediate material realities (Fabinyi, 2012, pp. 4–5), to evaluate the deployment and role of *sensibilisation* in collaborative biodiversity conservation projects in the French Overseas Territory of Kanaky/New Caledonia. I refer to the territory as Kanaky/New Caledonia, rather than its official name of New Caledonia (Nouvelle-Calédonie), as Kanaky is the name often used by the Indigenous peoples of the archipelago (see also Batterbury, Kowasch, & Bouard, 2020). By using a political ecology approach, I examine how the drive to conduct *sensibilisation* shapes collaborative conservation by seeking to develop shared value systems

and how these practices interface with Indigenous sovereignty movements in determining the future of the territory. A political ecology framework is apt for examining how colonial and power legacies shape contemporary conservation initiatives (Collins *et al.*, 2021).

2. Conceptual framework

Political ecologists have long engaged in examining how knowledge and practices constructed as authoritative have affected material realities for people and the environment. They have demonstrated how expert claims to truth via scientific knowledge have created false narratives of ecological degradation (Fairhead & Leach, 1995) and how conservation can lead to the dispossession of lands for Indigenous peoples (West, 2016). Conservation efforts by large transnational corporations and non-governmental organizations portray local communities who rely on the environment for their livelihoods as threats to that ecosystem (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008; Fabinyi, 2012; Segi, 2014; Walley, 2004). These same types of projects often try to enroll Indigenous and local populations as collaborators in projects to foster new environmental subjectivities (or 'environmentalities') (Agrawal, 2005; Segi, 2013) – an idea stemming out of Foucault's idea of governmentality (Cepek, 2011).

The concept of governmentality has been used to examine how governance structures impact individual subjectivity. Cepek (2011) critiques the concept of governmentality, arguing that the concept situates power as the ultimate arbitrator of one's subjectivity. He suggests this analytical tool does a disservice to those with whom one works. Cepek argues and demonstrates how the Cofán of Ecuador have maintained their environmental values that pre-existed collaborative conservation projects while remaining critical of their relationships with conservationists despite participating in their projects for nearly two decades. Thus, unequal power relations generated via colonialism do not always result in changed environmental subjectivities of marginalized populations, who generally already have environmental consciousness of their own.

Here, I consider how colonial legacies influence modern biodiversity conservation initiatives via hierarchical knowledge flows engendered in *sensibilisation* practices in Kanaky/New Caledonia with its ongoing Indigenous sovereignty movement. Kanaky/New Caledonia, officially colonized by France in 1853, remains a French Overseas Territory with limited autonomy, but which has gained greater autonomy throughout its colonial history given a strong, ongoing Kanak decolonization and sovereignty movement. In Kanaky/New Caledonia, as elsewhere that *sensibilisation* occurs, the ideas of who should be *sensibilisé* (made aware) are fraught with political and power legacies of what knowledges and practices should be taken seriously and fostered and which should be replaced (see also Riera, 2022, Chapter 7). In connecting insights from political ecology and Indigenous sovereignty, I show how *sensibilisation* practices seek to engender a shared conservation values framework through attempting to enroll the public, and particularly the Kanak, into a shared conservation morality. Simultaneously, the Kanak carry out their own *sensibilisation* practices that center on continuing cultural and familial legacies, focusing on the inextricable interconnections between nature and culture. These different motivations for conservation, and the desire to foster broadly shared understandings of the importance thereof, are reflective of broader social tensions at a time when the future of the territory as either an independent nation or a French territory is hanging in the balance.

I focus my analysis on an often-missing piece of the conservation puzzle in anthropological and political ecological analyses – that of conservationists (Kiik, 2018). I broadly define conservationists here as individuals working or volunteering for both large- and small-scale organizations (e.g., non-profit organizations, associations, researchers, and government officials) that seek to effect sustainable change in human-environment relationships. For many working on natural resource management issues, there has been a trend towards 'co-', or collaborative, approaches, such as co-creation, co-production, co-design, co-learning, and co-management, which in part, are intended to provide reflexive analyses on the relationships between power and knowledge and its translation to public spheres (Hakkarainen *et al.*, 2021). These types of 'co-' arrangements are common in Kanaky/New Caledonia.

The widespread presence of the *Institut de Recherche pour le Développement* (French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development; IRD) in large part provides the scientific expertise to understand the territory's social-ecological dynamics. There are highly trained environmental managers in the three Provincial

Governments as well. Scientific findings are often translated and transmitted to the public via environmentally oriented organizations, often led by French (non-Kanak) individuals with advanced degrees in the natural sciences. These same organizations seek broader collaborations with other organizations, as well as with the public, to carry out environmental initiatives, including *sensibilisation* campaigns. It is this collaborative dynamic, in part fostered through the small size of the territory, which mitigates conservation efforts and discourses in Kanaky/New Caledonia. As an integral component of biodiversity conservation, the types of knowledges that become dominant in *sensibilisation* have the potential to reinforce or challenge social hierarchies of power and knowledge, impacting the outcomes of conservation and interfacing with tensions over the future of the territory.

3. Site background

Kanaky/New Caledonia is an archipelago in the western South Pacific approximately 1,200 km east of Queensland, Australia. The largest island, *Grande Terre*, is roughly 450 km long by 50-70 km wide with mountains spanning its length. The island is surrounded by a lagoon, creating the second-largest barrier reef in the world and the largest continuous barrier reef globally. The entirety of this archipelago's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is home to high islands, atolls, and underwater sea mountains, forming some of the most geographically diverse underwater environments in the world (Job, 2016). Over 9,300 marine species have been identified in the territory's waters (Pelletier, 2024). In recognition of this remarkable ecology, six locations in the lagoon were designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2009 (Cornier & Leblic, 2016) via a movement started by local non-profits in conjunction with provincial and communal governments and the Indigenous *Sénat Coutumier* (Customary Senate) (UNESCO Nomination File, 2008). Not only is the marine ecology notable for its biodiversity and richness, but terrestrially the archipelago has some of the highest levels of endemism in the world and is identified as a leading global biodiversity hotspot (Lowry II *et al.*, 2004). As frequently stated by its human residents, Kanaky/New Caledonia is home to an 'extraordinary' ecology.

Administratively, the territory is divided into three provinces: *Province Nord* and *Province Sud*, splitting the island of Grande Terre, and *Province des Îles Loyauté*, comprising multiple inhabited and uninhabited islands to the east of Grande Terre. In 2019, the population was censused at over 271,000 residents with 74.8% of the population in Province Sud, where the metropolitan area of the capital city, Nouméa, houses most residents (ISEE, 2019). Today, less than half of the population is Indigenous although a breakdown of security in 2024 and worsening employment prospects have led to the departure of many French nationals. Kanaky/New Caledonia's demographic composition differs from other French Pacific overseas territories due in part to (1) its history as a penal colony based on a settler colonialism model, and (2) the historical, sometimes forced, migration of people from other French territories, such as Vietnam and Algeria, who came to the island to participate in the mining economy (Ramsay, 2011) and more recently, from other French Pacific territories. The territory has also been a leader in multi-lateral Pacific fisheries and environmental affairs through housing the headquarters of the Pacific Community since 1949 (formerly the South Pacific Commission) as well as being the seat for the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) for many years, which has since moved. As such, Kanaky/New Caledonia has a relatively diverse population primarily originating from multiple Pacific nations and the Hexagon (European France), with varying degrees of knowledge and experience with Kanaky/New Caledonia's relatively unique ecology.

In this article, my research primarily took place in the Province Nord, with environmental organizations led by Kanak people, and in the Province Sud with local and multi-national organizations primarily led by non-Kanak folks, many of whom relocated to Kanaky/New Caledonia from the Hexagon. Provinces Nord and Sud are distinct, in terms of their racial and ethnic compositions (Nord is predominantly Kanak while Sud is not), economic dynamics (less opportunities in Nord), and population density (lower in Nord), among other factors. But perhaps the most potent symbol of the differences is as one is driving north up the west coast of the territory, the moment they cross the Provincial border there are Kanaky flags flying everywhere, while in the South, one predominantly sees the flags of France.

While this fieldwork took place in 2022, much has changed in Kanaky/New Caledonia since that time.[2] Beginning on May 13th, 2024, protests broke out regarding French plans to change voting rules to allow more recent arrivals to the territory to vote. This proposed rule change followed already heightened tensions due to a series of three referendum votes (2018-2021) on whether the territory should become independent. The vote results largely fell along ethnic lines, with Kanak voting for Independence and non-Kanak voting to remain with France. The third vote ultimately failed as the Kanak protested the timing and most did not participate, due to being in a mourning period following widespread mortality among elders in their community from COVID-19. The 2024 protests resulted in an estimated $2.4 billion USD in damage, over 100 buildings burned, unemployment rates surged, food insecurity heightened, and an estimated 10,000 people left the territory, leaving gaps in healthcare and other sectors (Mazzoni, 2025). Widespread social insecurity is left in the wake, with numerous consequences for the conservation sector.

Oedin *et al.* (2025) describe some of the negative consequences of these events on Kanaky/New Caledonia's environment, with concern for the numerous threatened and endangered, endemic and native species in the territory. Kanaky/New Caledonia's environment is highly vulnerable to extinctions given high levels of endemism (Pellens & Grandcoals 2011 cited in Oedin *et al*. 2025). Following widespread food insecurity, more people have been poaching wildlife and harvesting wood as an alternative fuel for cooking. Potential runoff from waste fires and fires from the riots can negatively impact mangroves and lagoons. Many people who departed the territory abandoned their pets, with cats and dogs being primary predators to numerous threatened and endangered species. Finally, given the insecurity, environmental conservation and management activities cannot be carried out, including monitoring and reforestation (Oedin *et al.* 2025).

While this article provides a snapshot in time from before this crisis, the conversations around the importance of *sensibilisation* and Indigenous sovereignty remain. Indeed, in one of their suggested solutions to ameliorating this social and conservation crisis, Oedin *et al.* (2025) suggest awareness raising as a method for combatting some of the negative environmental impacts arising out of the crisis. Thus, *sensibilisation* is a primary conservation method in Kanaky/New Caledonia.

4. Methods

I draw on ethnographic research conducted in Kanaky/New Caledonia between August and November 2022, including semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Interviews were conducted with individuals who work on topics related to biodiversity conservation, sustainability, and the links between these topics and human health. Interviewees were identified based on their roles with various organizations that work on environmental issues. I reviewed a list of partner agencies on Kanaky/New Caledonia's branch of the French Government's *Agence de la Transition Écologique* and contacted those whose contact information I could find for interviews (https://nouvelle-caledonie.ademe.fr/lademe-en-region/partenariats/associations). In total, I interviewed sixteen Kanak, non-Kanak, or mixed heritage individuals from a variety of organizational types, including small, local organizations; large, multi-national organizations; public interest groups; the government; independent and non-independent researchers; and a public-school educator. Most, but not all interviewees were identified based on the *Agence* website.

All interviews were conducted by the author, then completely transcribed in French by a native speaker and subsequently translated into English by the author. They were then imported into Atlas.ti Software (v.23.2.0) for analysis. I employed grounded theory, including coding interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and jottings to analyze the data. Grounded theory is a flexible and systematic method for building theory out of one's data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 1). Like interpretivist theory, grounded theory examines how meanings are made through the interactions of people and processes, assuming that processes, interactions, events, and how people talk about and behave during these phenomena, create and reveal meaning in daily life (Charmaz, 2001).

[2] On July 12th, 2025, the *Accord de Bougival* was signed by the French Republic, and the Independentists and Loyalists political parties of Kanaky/New Caledonia, which would establish Kanaky/New Caledonia as a state with association with France. Whether and how this takes shape is yet to be determined as the *Front de Libération Nationale Kanake et Socialiste* (FLNKS)—a pro-sovereignty political party—officially rejected the Accord on August 9th, 2025.

Grounded theory shares with discursive political ecology the assumption that discourses play a fundamental role in shaping politics (see also Fabinyi 2012).

During the first cycle of coding, I used a variety of code types, including in-vivo (e.g., 'extraordinary' or 'pristine'), versus (e.g., 'Nouméa vs Rural'), value/ethic (e.g., 'conservation ethic'), and action coding (e.g., 'research' or 'monitoring'), among others (Saldaña, 2013). Following initial coding, I organized the codes into code groups, exemplifying higher-level themes in the data, which were continually refined through successive coding phases. Code groups included categories such as 'Identity' and 'Ecological Characteristics.' During the second coding cycle, I continued refining the codes and their applications, seeking to identify those that are dominant in explaining the data. A third coding cycle ensured all quotations were appropriate to the code assigned to them. I kept memos throughout the coding process to track missing codes, emergent themes, relationships between codes, and next coding steps.

In addition to interviews, I conducted participant observation at numerous environmentally oriented public events. This included events such as government-hosted informational sessions on current management efforts; a day-long 'citizen's conference' for one of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites; results reporting from ecological monitoring studies by mining companies; or events such as *ciné-débats* or *MasterOcéan*, which gathered the public for conversation on an environmental topic following presentations by experts. I took fieldnotes during these events, noting the discourses, concerns, conflicts, and reactions expressed by participants and included them in the grounded theory analysis described above.

5. Results

In the following, I demonstrate environmental discourses of conservationists in Kanaky/New Caledonia. I show how conservationist's own subjectivity is predicated on conservation morality, which, for many, is justified through notions of extraordinary ecology, pristine and virgin environments, and emblematic species. Kanak conservationists were motivated to conserve based on their familial and cultural heritage. However, given varying levels of collaboration and resource disparities, some *sensibilisation* messages, particularly those predicated on scientific knowledge, are more widely spread and shared. This is both the product of, and produces, asymmetrical knowledge and resource flows, despite collaborative approaches to conservation being predicated on bringing together multiple knowledge types.

Ecological discourses, conservation morality, and sensibilisation *motivations*

During interviews, I asked interviewees if they participate in activities outside of work to care for the land or sea. Many non-Kanak respondents mentioned recreational activities they did, such as hiking, kayaking, or diving. Several stated they would do things like pick up trash or take time to sensibilize others when recreating. As one interviewee, self-described as Caledonian who was born and raised in Nouméa, humorously explained: "or, so, I am a bit like the police, I tell people not to walk on the coral, I communicate around me." Another non-Kanak interviewee when asked if he participated in activities to take care of the land and sea outside of work explained that he teaches neighbors and children about more sustainable practices. Effectively, conservationists view the moral values of conservation as something that permeates between their personal and professional lives, embodying the values they seek to impart upon others: their conservation morality. This feeds into the broader discourses about the environment that they deploy to justify conservation and linked *sensibilisation* efforts.

Conservationists often described the ecology and biodiversity as 'extraordinary', 'rich', 'pristine' or 'virgin' during interviews and public events, while also discussing the 'emblematic species' of the region. As summarized by one respondent born and raised in the Hexagon and who works for a big international non-profit,

> The lagoon of New Caledonia is something absolutely extra exceptional… we have at the same time an exceptional underwater biodiversity, the coral is very pretty, there are a lot of fish, there are a lot of marine animals, we also see a lot of emblematic species: sharks, rays, turtles.

His statement demonstrates how species abundance (i.e., exceptional biodiversity) and charisma (i.e., emblematic species) serve to justify biodiversity conservation.

The discourse of emblematic species intersected with environmental discourses of Kanaky/New Caledonia's ecosystems as 'virgin' or 'pristine.' Interviewees would invoke tropes such as virgin environments, untouched or barely touched by humans, to simultaneously legitimate the need for biodiversity conservation and *sensibilisation*. This interviewee was born and raised in the Hexagon and now works for a local nonprofit: "It seems that 3% of virgin reefs in the world are remaining and New Caledonia has 30% of them therefore we have a responsibility towards humanity: we cannot violate these virgin sites so we *sensibilise*…" For many conservationists, statistics grounded in scientific knowledge production provided key evidence for the need for *sensibilisation* and conservation to occur, as a "responsibility towards humanity." This idea of a responsibility to humanity expresses the moral responsibility that conservationists feel to carry out their linked *sensibilisation* and conservation activities.

In general, conservationists' key motivation for conducting *sensibilisation* activities were to change the behavior of others to be more environmentally friendly. *Sensibilisation* efforts seek to generate shared values and to create the societal conditions for conservation to occur. A non-Kanak self-described Caledonian interviewee, born and raised in Kanaky/New Caledonia and educated in France, working for a French non-profit explicitly linked *sensibilisation* and behavior change in the context of wildfire prevention activities her organization carries out:

> Fire *sensibilisation* starts with changing behaviors. . . This will involve communication to suggest alternative techniques, or, for example, explaining not to do slash and burn when it is windy… Otherwise, *sensibilisation* also involves promoting (*valorisation*) ecosystems, for example, by setting up channels so that people realize the forest has value for them…

As demonstrated in this quote, *sensibilisation* efforts assume that others have the potential for valuing conservation the same way as the *sensibiliseur*, but these values must be fostered by sharing the right information (i.e., communicating, explaining) and by enculturating shared values in others. Perhaps the greatest *sensibilisation* success, as explained to me by one interviewee, is when those who received *sensibilisation* in turn raise awareness with others. Thus, *sensibiliseurs* seek to generate the societal conditions for conservation by fostering shared values: a conservation morality.

One interviewee who works as a research consultant for the government laid out a three-step model for how *sensibilisation* results in adopting conservation morality:

> As for comprehension, for me, there are several stages: you understand that it is important, but you do not do anything for it, that is the first stage. At the second stage, you know that it is important to you and begin to take action. The third, you know, and you integrate these actions into daily life, you do what is necessary to be in coherence with these messages. You appropriate them, and you really internalize them. It is missing this intermediate link, and I think that is where I fit in. I use researcher data to transmit messages, stories, anecdotes, to the population who does not know much, who wants to know but is not able to read scientific articles.

While articulated by one interviewee, this model of *sensibilisation* appeared to be shared among others based on how they discussed and carried out *sensibilisation* activities. It is this third stage of *sensibilisation* that we see lived out in the lives of conservationists, where they view their quotidian lives as subscribing to living out a conservation morality. Also exemplified in this quote is that scientific knowledge is often treated as the most apt for generating this environmental consciousness that precedes living out a conservation morality. It positions a researcher or other trained knowledge holder as ideally situated to translate (scientific) information to an unknowing, but presumably receptive, public. For most conservationists, their organizations were viewed

as key in being able to translate *sensibilisation* messages to transform public understanding and subsequent action.

Asymmetrical knowledge and resource flows

Thus, many *sensibilisation* efforts are predicated on the idea that information and knowledge in and of themselves may lead to people changing their behaviors. The underlying assumption here is that knowledge and information will be transformed into values that then foster a conservation morality in the subjectivity of the information receiver. This presents a one-way transfer of information, from the *sensibiliseur* to target audience, whether that is the broader public or, often, Kanak communities. However, while *sensibilisation* is often framed as a one-way path for information to travel, much of the conservation efforts in Kanaky/New Caledonia are built on collaborative approaches, whether collaborative conservation or co-management.

As an illustration of the tight links between *sensibilisation* and collaborative conservation in Kanaky/New Caledonia, the quote cited earlier which states that there is a 'responsibility to humanity' to conserve and "thus we *sensibilise*. . ." goes on to say "and then we meet in a structure called…" where the respondent goes on to describe a variety of non-profit organizations and government representatives who make decisions regarding the management of the Natural Park of the Coral Sea – one of the largest marine reserves in the world. Another interviewee originally from a different French territory, also demonstrated the close perceived links between *sensibilisation* and co-management regarding a project his organization carried out: "And so about the fire, the co-management, we know that this is the right path, but we failed. We did not have the right levers, the right messages still." Thus, even in co-management arrangements, there is a presumption that people must come to adopt the value or morality of environmental conservation, which is enabled through spreading the "right" messages.

Spreading the "right" messages in co-management results in people being *actors* in co-management, rather than being *passive*, as explained by this self-described researcher-activist from the Hexagon: ". . . a true co-management agreement where it is well made and well explained, that is going to promote the social acceptance of biodiversity protection by people. We make them *actors* of protection and not *passive*" (emphasis mine). Thus, despite collaborative approaches being popular across the territory, there is an underlying presumption among non-Kanak actors that the knowledge appropriate for conducting environmental conservation and management, for even being a partner in such arrangements, flows from certain actors (i.e., those with scientific credentials that positions them as translators of environmental knowledge) to others (i.e., the broader public with a specific focus on Kanak individuals).

Collaboration in conservation and its linked *sensibilisation* practices occurs not just through tribal-organization partnerships, but also through sharing *sensibilisation* materials, such as books, pamphlets, or guides, as well as experiences. The following quote from a respondent working in a public interest group in Kanaky/New Caledonia and who was born and raised in the Hexagon, exemplifies the diversity of events hosted by, and the levels of collaboration that occur between, organizations:

> Us at the [organization name], we intervene to do *sensibilisation*. We have a program, for interventions in school environments, financed with the [organization name] and the [organization name] … We regularly participate at stalls to present the world heritage but also the Dugong action plan, the preservation of Dugongs. We try to target marine themed events. We have done the World Ocean Days in Nouméa. . . the Ocean Celebration in Ouvéa, we really do ocean themed things. But as we cannot multiply ourselves over the year, our material is available for the associations who want it.

This sharing of information between these organizations positions them as possessing similar awareness-raising qualifications, while those not included in this network are generally perceived as needing *sensibilisation*. This reinforces the perception that specific actors, primarily those who lead environmental organizations, whether governmental or non-profit, are equipped for interpreting and translating scientific knowledge, while others are positioned as receivers thereof, those in need of adopting a conservation morality.

Sharing materials furthers the asymmetrical flow of environmental knowledge which serves to legitimate certain environmental knowledges (i.e. scientific knowledges) as the crux of *sensibilisation* messages, while others are left out or left unheard.

Some interviewees I spoke with criticized how certain organizations would create glossy pamphlets and maps to present their environmental stances as authoritative. One interviewee with mixed Pacific Island heritage, including Kanak, and who describes himself as "Caledonian", explained "You can make some beautiful posters, some big, televised ads, but there is nothing better than the cousin or the aunt who has said that, or who has participated. Like that, it diffuses." While on one hand this comment demonstrates differing philosophies of effective *sensibilisation*, touched on more in the next subsection, it also points to differences in resource access and the capacity of various environmental organizations in Kanaky/New Caledonia. Small, local non-profits like this Caledonian's organization do not have the same ability to create televised ads and beautiful posters as do the large, multi-national organizations that are present in the territory. This reinforces the latter's ability, largely run by non-Kanak folks from the Hexagon, to dominate conversations around environmental conservation and management and to decide which knowledges are considered worthy of spreading.

As an illustration of these resource disparities, I contrast my experiences talking with a large, multi-national non-profit with visiting a small, Kanak-led association in the tribe. I visited the multi-national organization's office in Nouméa. This branch of the organization was founded by a billionaire who donated her money for global ocean conservation initiatives. The office was in a sleek, newer looking building, with glass interior walls and modern furniture, all thematically colored in shades of blue to match their marketing materials and logo. I was offered an espresso from their machine. I am a bit of a coffee snob, and this was some of the best espresso I had in Kanaky/New Caledonia. The person I interview drinks three as we chat over an hour and a half. As we talk, he hands me brochure after brochure with glossy images and shiny covers, detailing their projects, which range from hosting a global level event regarding ocean conservation to organizing an international art exhibition around oceanic themes. I leave with pounds of brochures. Later, as I am departing the territory, I recognize those familiar shades of blue from their marketing materials, advertising the territory's exceptional biodiversity on the walls of the international airport.

A few weeks later in Province Nord, I went with my research partner to interview two small associations situated at the tribal level to discuss their environmental actions. We met at the community building – a long, single story, slightly dilapidated concrete structure with windows lined along the front of the building and a couple of old, wooden doors towards one end. The windows were square holes in the concrete walls. Inside, the walls were bare and there were two uneven aged wooden tables with wooden benches that ran nearly the length of the room. A small table in the back of the room had a large, antiquated plastic thermos full of hot water, Nescafé instant coffee, Lipton tea, and sugar in a former plastic ice cream tub, alongside some cheap orange glass bowls that are ubiquitous in convenience and grocery stores throughout Kanaky/New Caledonia. After performing custom with the Chief, we were lead inside and offered instant coffee. We were apologized to twice for the humble accommodations.

These resource disparities further ingrain the perceptions and practices of whose voices and knowledge are both worthy of hearing and which are actually able to be projected within conservation, and their integrated *sensibilisation* practices.

Kanak sensibilisation*: A sovereign move*

The disparities in resources among Kanak-led organizations and non-Kanak led organizations, and particularly multi-national non-profits, impact the scope of work that an organization can carry out. As I spoke to predominantly Kanak folks in Province Nord, the subject of a lack of budget came up repeatedly – they had ideas and obligations for conservation actions to carry out, but they lacked the means to do so. *Sensibilisation*, however, was one area where some efforts are still able to be carried out despite lacking resources.

I interviewed a Kanak educator who works at a *collège* (similar to an American middle school) in Province Nord, who sought out an opportunity to communicate about human-environment relationships to his primarily Kanak students at the school, given his interest in teaching about the relationship between Kanak

cultural heritage, environment, and his concern over the future. The *sensibilisation* activities he conducted with students were largely hands-on. These activities were things like participating in reforestation projects, trash clean-ups, or building greenhouses. He viewed children as the most receptive to learning *sensibilisation* messages, which they could pass on to adult family members. This sharing of information between family members reflects the example given by the Caledonian *sensibiliseur* above who discussed the powerful impact of *sensibilisation* messages spreading between family members. While these *sensibiliseurs* viewed messages passing between family members as particularly effective, they also viewed hands-on activities as more effective for *sensibilisation*. Both the focus on family and the hands-on activities demonstrates a Kanak approach to *sensibilisation* which differs from a French or Francophone model that is focused on dialogue, media, and written materials.

For both these Kanak *sensibiliseurs,* their methods differed in terms of their experiential nature but also given that *sensibilisation* was not only about learning about environmental issues, but explicitly about teaching Kanak culture and custom. "That is linked in fact, culture and environment, so we try to make the students understand that." For this *collège professeur*, the link between culture and environment was emblematic of Kanak custom, as he further explained using an example of the Notu bird (Ducula goliath), which is a totem species for a clan in the area:

> There are species that only have one baby a year, like the Notu, therefore if we are not careful, there will no longer be any, and if we lose this animal here, we are going to lose a piece of our custom, our culture. We need them; therefore, it is necessary to preserve them if we are going to preserve our culture. That is the message, it is that which I try to pass on to the children.

Thus, culture, ecology, and custom are intricately interconnected, and their future survival is codependent. A highly similar sentiment was expressed by the Caledonian *sensibiliseur* who explained:

> . . . today in Caledonia, people are more and more detached from nature. They no longer have this link that was essential before. This link manifests by knowing how to name in a vernacular language a species of bird, of plant, of animal, etc. When we no longer know, that says that we have lost, on one hand, a part of our naturalist culture of origin and, on the other, our social culture.

While non-Kanak *sensibiliseurs* were largely focused on environmental pristineness and protecting environments, Kanak *sensibiliseurs* were focused on restoring the links between culture and nature and furthering cultural heritage, teaching it to future generations who would, in turn, reinforce these lessons with their elder family members. By protecting culture, nature would also be protected, and vice versa as the two are inextricable.

This interest in furthering cultural heritage was reflected in an explanation provided to me by a member of an environmental organization that works in part to carry out the management plans for the UNESCO World Heritage Sites designated around Province Nord. He explained that they tried to carry on this work, despite difficulties in accessing resources to carry out their responsibilities, because it was their grandparents who began these associations (see also Hunter 2025). By conducting environmental conservation, Kanak conservationists were continuing their familial legacies: caring for the environment is caring for both ancestors and future generations. Thus, *sensibilisation* for these Kanak conservationists is as much about honoring their heritage and their future as it is about environmental health. *Sensibilisation* therefore is a space for Kanak to assert their sovereignty. Conservation and sovereignty are entangled in their shared imperative to shape social-ecological futures.

6. Discussion

Sensibilisation is an integral part of the conservation process, although awareness-raising practices, their effectiveness, and how they contribute to conservation success or shortcomings are not well studied (Qian, Mills, Ma, & Turvey, 2022). The UN has required environmental awareness-raising as the 13th Article of their Convention on Biodiversity since 1992. The discourses that are expounded through *sensibilisation*, or awareness-raising practices not only drive conservation practices locally, but they also link local practices to broader, global conservation discourses. A discursive political ecology enables assessment of how these discourses link agency to structure and mediate the material realities of conservation.

In Kanaky/New Caledonia, discourses around nature provide the kindling for fueling the territory's conservation initiatives and championing conservation's moral imperative. These types of discourses, such as nature being pristine, virgin, and extraordinary not only drive conservation locally, but also link it to larger global initiatives, such as the UNESCO World Heritage Sites, which rely on multilateral cooperation, and which are quite literally predicated on being 'extraordinary.' For many conservationists in Kanaky/New Caledonia, the drive to work in conservation is fueled by its moral components: conserving is a "responsibility to humanity" and is something which permeates personal and professional lives. However, this moral imperative also situates conservation as something that takes on greater meaning than the work itself as it determines ecological, and linked, human futures (Clavel, 2012). Conservation discourses ultimately prioritize what kinds of life have the right to survive (Biermann & Mansfield, 2014). In determining what should survive, conservation is about determining the future, and ultimately it becomes a political statement about what it means to care for the place where one lives, crafting an environment where competing values emerge.

Conservation morality is an integral part of many conservationists' subjectivity and in their professional work, this morality transforms into governmentality. When guided by conservation morality, *sensibiliseurs* seek to impart a shared value system to others, with the ultimate success being when one who has been *sensibilisé* (made aware), in turn starts *sensibilizing* others – they are subsumed under the governmentality of conservation driven by its moral components that seep into diverse aspects of life. Thus, conservation morality drives conservationists to guide others to adopt their same subjectivity. Regardless of a conservationist's heritage, the idea was shared that effective *sensibilisation* messages may spread between people who had been *sensibilisé*. Each *sensibiliseur* was seeking to enroll others into their value system.

Sensibilisation is a consensus-building effort in that it seeks to engender upon others shared value systems that lead to common, approved behaviors (see also Graeber, 2001). Yet, similar to Michael Cepek's (2011) findings among the Cofán in Ecuador, the Indigenous Kanak, who are often the intended audience for many *sensibilisation* efforts, have preexisting frameworks for valuing the environment, which do not directly translate to non-Kanak conservationist values. Thus, while there may be alignment in the desire for conservation among diverse conservationists, the moral frameworks motivating conservationists differ.

Motivations for conservation, while always encapsulating moralistic elements that speak to broader value systems, differed among Indigenous and non-Indigenous conservationists in Kanaky/New Caledonia. Yet, *sensibilisation* seeks to build consensus around what is considered to be the right ways to act in relation to the environment. This drive towards consensus ultimately attempts to depoliticize a highly political act determinative of human and nonhuman futures alike. Places that use collaborative approaches to conservation may be particularly susceptible to these attempts to feign consensus around conservation efforts. Carins *et al.* (2013) demonstrate this in the Galapagos. As they acknowledge, and as we see in Kanaky/New Caledonia, there are often attempts to increase the information available to people to build consensus around conservation (i.e., *sensibilisation* efforts). However, their research shows that adding more information is unlikely to build consensus on conservation given "genuinely divergent perspectives" on subjective topics (Cairns, Sallu, & Goodman, 2014, p. 22).

Attempts to build consensus are reflected in the asymmetrical knowledge and resource flows evidenced within conservation economies in Kanaky/New Caledonia. Political ecologists have shown how common it is for scientific understandings to be prioritized within co-management arrangements (e.g., Fache, 2017; Nadasdy, 2007), and how conservationists seek to enroll supportive participants through adopting new ideas (e.g., Cepek 2011, Segi 2013). *Sensibilisation* is the initial step in fostering participation, and it seeks to build shared value

systems while also making target populations suitable partners in collaborations. Segi (2013) describes this dynamic in Granada, the Philippines, where villagers only adopted conservationist-prescribed behaviors to the extent they did not interfere with local customs. He describes this as the villagers being "acted upon" rather than being actors in conservation (Segi, 2013, p. 342). We see a similar dynamic in Kanaky/New Caledonia, where in trying to create "agents in biodiversity protection", conservationists fail to see how some Kanak people are already practicing biodiversity protection through their own onto-epistemological techniques.

Many non-Kanak conservationists I spoke with in Kanaky/New Caledonia were genuine about the value of partnerships and sincere about what they saw as the value of collaborative conservation or co-management. Yet, the bias of their scientific training led them to see the Kanak as people who could be effectuated as "agents" of biodiversity protection rather than agents already acting in this sphere. This could be due to how the conservation morality for many Kanak conservationists differs from those under a more Francophone model: Kanak were protecting, sustaining, and perpetuating their linked social-natural heritage whereas, under a Francophone model, conservation was motivated and justified by protecting "virgin", "pristine", and "extraordinary" biodiversity. For Kanak, and many Indigenous Pacific islanders, these differing conservation motivations are not just about environmental health, but about ensuring their own survival (Goodyear-Ka'o̲pua, 2018; Spencer, Fentress, Touch, & Hernandez, 2020). Thus, the emphasis placed on *sensibilisation* in Kanaky/New Caledonia's conservation circles represent not just environmental values, but a debate about what the future of the territory should be, at a critical juncture in its history where tensions between loyalists (i.e., folks wanting to remain with France) and *Independentists* (i.e., pro-Independence folks) are high.

With the political stakes over the territory's future so high, the desire for one's *sensibilisation* messages to rise above the fray can lead to a singular vision. The drive for finding the "right" messages to adequately enroll people in conservation, disregards the act of mutual learning central to collaborative conservation/management approaches on which so much of conservation in the territory is predicated. Collaborative conservation, like co-management, relies on the assumption that different actors bring different knowledges to partnerships, which through a mutual reciprocity of learning and knowledge will lead to more effective management practices (Berkes, 2010; Olsson, Folke, & Berkes, 2004). Yet s*ensibilisation* practices view the actors with the "right" messages as responsible for fostering conservation morality in others. *Sensibilisation* is a form of soft power, which interfaces with asymmetrical knowledge and resource flows, enabling those with more resource access more say in determining the social-ecological futures of the territory. Ultimately, conservation discourses hold their own form of sovereign power in deciding which nonhumans are worthy of life (Biermann & Mansfield, 2014; Bluwstein, 2018). Similarly, these varying discourses of *sensibilisation* hold their own form of sovereign power in deciding whose environmental visions determine the future. In Kanaky/New Caledonia, I found that actors using a scientific approach to conservation most often held the most resources and were more integrated with other well-resourced conservation actors, leading to asymmetrical knowledge and resource flows biased towards scientific understandings. These asymmetrical knowledge and resource flows were further expounded through privileged organizations sharing materials and collaborating on events. Thus, mutual learning was disregarded in lieu of *sensibilisation* efforts that sought effective messaging to ultimately transform the value system of the other.

Collaborative approaches to conservation should go beyond simply 'incorporating' multiple types of knowledge into practice. As pointed out by House *et al.* (2023), often the idea of 'integrating' or 'incorporating' different knowledge types ends up masking the power dynamics of knowledge ownership and deployment. We see this in Kanaky/New Caledonia where the entrenched position of scientific knowledge as the primary method for caring for the environment is reestablished via *sensibilisation* practices as a fundamental characteristic of collaborative biodiversity conservation initiatives. To achieve a truly collaborative approach to conservation, environmental knowledges of all actors should be shared and considered (e.g., Reid *et al.*, 2021). A collaboration that fosters symmetrical knowledge flows and which addresses resource disparities may be better positioned to enable all partners as *agents* of conservation, rather than treating certain actors as needing to be enrolled into conservation.

Co-management and other approaches to conservation that let Indigenous peoples and local communities take the lead have been shown to be among the most effective forms of conservation. In a review of 648 empirical case studies of conservation globally, Dawson *et al.* (2024) show that in 85% of cases where

Indigenous peoples and local communities are autonomous in their conservation efforts, there were positive ecological outcomes and in 57% of these cases there were also positive social outcomes. In instances where partnerships existed (defined as equal partnerships or co-managers with respect for rights, customary practices and clear efforts to reconcile historic conflicts and to bridge values, cultures, and knowledge systems) 64% of cases had positive ecological outcomes and 27% had positive social outcomes. Whereas when Indigenous peoples were treated as stakeholders, consultees, or were excluded, positive ecological outcomes were as low as 18-25% of the cases and positive social outcomes were as low as 0% - 8%.

In Kanaky/New Caledonia, as in other places, more effective conservation partnerships may be enabled through seeking shared understanding of differing goals and values for conservation and supporting local autonomy (Cairns *et al.*, 2014; Pisor *et al.*, 2022). These types of conservation conversations may be fundamental to crafting collaborative approaches that better achieve their goals, while also recognizing the sovereignty of Indigenous actors in determining their futures. The differences in *sensibilisation* practices, motivations, and justifications, are not just about conservation, but reflect differing visions for the future of the territory (Bambridge, D'Arcy, & Mawyer, 2021; Mawyer & Jacka, 2018). In a territory already struggling with social insecurity and tensions over its future, whether it will be independent from or will remain a territory of France under a new or current configuration, these types of conversations may be fundamental to achieving more with less, and to fostering Kanaky/New Caledonia's future.

7. Conclusion

In Kanaky/New Caledonia, *sensibilisation* is not merely a tool for raising awareness for biodiversity conservation, but a political act embedded within broader struggles over whose knowledge matters, who has access to resources, and who determines the future of the territory. Drawing on political ecology, and using the concept of conservation morality, I have shown how *sensibilisation* operates as a form of soft power that both reflects and reinforces asymmetrical knowledge and resource flows, tending towards privileging scientific motivations for conservation over Indigenous Kanak motivations. Yet, Kanak-led *sensibilisation* efforts reveal an alternative conservation morality—one rooted in the inseparability of nature, culture, and heritage. These practices are not only about protecting biodiversity but also about continuing intergenerational legacies of caring for place, which are entangled in Indigenous sovereignty movements.

As conservationists seek to enroll others into shared value systems, the question becomes not just what kind of conservation is practiced, but whose vision of the future is being advanced. *Sensibilisation*, then, is a site of contestation where competing claims to authority, legitimacy, and belonging are negotiated. In a territory marked by colonial legacies and ongoing debates over independence, conservation and its *sensibilisation* practices are inseparable from the political project of determining Kanaky/New Caledonia's future. Recognizing and supporting Indigenous-led conservation efforts—grounded in cultural sovereignty—is essential for fostering more equitable, effective, and truly collaborative conservation partnerships.

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