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Making in the Cook Islands

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*“What Now, Fishgate?” Scandal,  
Marae Moana, and Nation Making  
in the Cook Islands*

*Trevor J Durbin*

In less than two decades, large marine protected areas have become an increasingly important strategy in attempts to sustain ocean life threatened by climate change, overfishing, marine pollution, and other impacts (Toonen and others 2013; Wilhelm and others 2014). Proponents claim that over 80 percent of all protected marine space now exists within large areas that measure in the hundreds of thousands to millions of square kilometers (Toonen and others 2013). Pacific Island countries have been global leaders in this movement to design ocean stewardship at scale and have used these achievements as evidence that Small Island Developing States are better thought of as Large Ocean States (Maclellan 2012). Pacific Island leaders such as President Anote Tong of Kiribati and Prime Minister Henry Puna of the Cook Islands have made political and moral declarations about the global significance of their nations’ extensive marine territorial rights and cultural heritage of sustainability. These claims are evocative of Epeli Hau‘ofa’s well-known critiques of Pacific regional development paradigms and his argument that Pacific Islands are not small or isolated by the ocean but rather connected through it and the expansive practices of its residents (Hau‘ofa 1994). However, despite the growing importance of large marine protected areas within and beyond Oceania, almost no scholarship exists about the particular cultural, social, and political processes through which they emerge.<sup>1</sup>

In this ethnographic essay, I explore the inception of the Cook Islands Marine Park, a proposal to develop an approximately one-million-square-kilometer mixed-use marine protected area in the southern half of the Cook Islands exclusive economic zone (EEZ).<sup>2</sup> I begin to paint a clearer picture of what large-scale marine management means and what it can

mean, specifically, in a Pacific Islands context. The Cook Islands Marine Park is also known by the Māori name Marae Moana, which is often translated for general audiences as “Sacred Ocean.”<sup>3</sup> In following the park’s development, I show that although several stakeholder groups in the Cook Islands did not initially support the marine park concept, the process of making Marae Moana became a way of rearticulating national values and aspirations in the face of serious challenges like sluggish economic development, climate change, local environmental degradation, and emigration. As it developed, Marae Moana became an important nation-making project that integrated previous national concerns within a new idiom of large-scale marine environmental management.

In this article, I claim that a history of scandal in the Cook Islands was an important precondition for how many came to understand the marine park and that this succession of scandals is associated with structural conditions such as the size of the state apparatus and public responses to what is perceived, by some, as a lack of government transparency. In doing so, I draw on work by Cook Islands scholar and environmentalist Jacqueline Evans, who has claimed that scandal in the Cook Islands has been conditioned by “bureaucratic thinness,” that is, the relatively large influence of a few individuals working within the bureaucratic structure of micro-states (Evans 2006). I extend this argument by claiming that bureaucratic thinness is also paired with what I call “informatic thinness” in the Cook Islands. Informatic thinness means that relatively few individuals within the state apparatus control the production and flow of officially sanctioned information. In the Cook Islands, both bureaucratic and informatic thinness have contributed to the production of scandal, in part because publically available forms of information such as rumor and gossip tended to gain national publicity as more formal sources of information became less available or less trusted. I draw on work by anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists to argue that scandal has been an important means of clarifying and reaffirming values and norms associated with a sense of national identity. Specifically, scandals revolving around government transparency and fisheries management transformed the Cook Islands Marine Park into a space for negotiating social norms and moral values and has contributed to what appears to be a shifting sense of the Cook Islands as a Large Ocean State. In making this argument, I begin to foreground scandal as a key feature of political life. While scandal in the Pacific has been satirically explored in fiction, such as in Hau‘ofa’s *Tales of the Tikongs* (1983), and while particular scandals have been regu-

lar objects of concern in political reviews in *The Contemporary Pacific*, the formative role of scandal and scandalization in Pacific Islands politics has received little attention. In the second part of this essay, I outline the case that previous nation-making projects such as those concerned with modernization, traditional culture, and tourism have not been abandoned but are being approached and integrated in new ways under a broad rubric of large-scale ocean management. I refer to this shift as “big ocean nationalism.”

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over fourteen months, from July 2011 to September 2012, and included nine months as an intern with the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and five months housed in the Cook Islands National Environment Service building in Avarua, Rarotonga. While working in the Cook Islands, I observed meetings of the Cook Islands Marine Park Steering Committee, an interim multi-stakeholder body that advised government on creating a national large-scale marine park. I also conducted in-depth interviews with members of the steering committee from government ministries, non-governmental organizations, the Aronga Mana (traditional leaders), and other interested parties. Additionally, I participated in public events such as the annual Cook Islands Lagoon Day and analyzed public discourse as represented in national media including *Cook Islands News*, the nation’s most prominent news source. I observed public stakeholder meetings related to the marine park, a proposed shark sanctuary, deep-sea minerals mining, and fisheries. The last event I attended in an ethnographic capacity was the 43rd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders’ Meeting, where the government’s intention to create the Cook Islands Marine Park was officially declared.

#### MAKING MARAE MOANA: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF AN UNFINISHED PROJECT

When Kevin Iro presented his idea for a Cook Islands Marine Park to a room full of cabinet ministers, he was not known as a nature conservationist or a marine scientist. Rather, he was famous for playing professional rugby and for his extensive community work in the Cook Islands through his church and the Cook Islands Sports Academy, a school with an emphasis on athletic training. In 2008, while serving together on the Cook Islands Tourism Board, Iro and his friend Robin Grant became concerned with the same problem: Both men wanted to persuade more

tourists to choose the Cook Islands over other destinations with similar beaches, climate, and entertainment. The marketing of traditional Cook Islands culture was one primary way the state had previously attempted to meet this challenge (Sissons 1999), but travelers could still go to other Polynesian islands and have what many tourists would consider a similar experience.

The marine park concept was simple at first. The Cook Islands has one of the largest exclusive economic zones in the Pacific, but, as far as Iro and Grant could tell, the government was only using its sovereign rights within approximately two million square kilometers of ocean for commercial fishing. They came to believe that tourists, especially environmentally concerned tourists, would pay a premium to visit the largest marine park in the world. Iro presented the idea to Wilkie Rasmussen, then the minister of marine resources, who became the principal advocate for the idea in the government until the Cook Islands Party won the national elections in November 2010. Iro also made presentations to members of the House of Ariki and the Koutu Nui—organizations of traditional leaders also known as the Aronga Mana—that were instituted after the initiation of self-government and that have occupied shifting roles within nation-making projects and national discourse in the Cook Islands (Crocombe 1979; Sissons 1999). Both branches of the Aronga Mana supported Iro's idea from the beginning, while the new government, now under the leadership of Prime Minister Henry Puna, continued to support the previous government's policy by endorsing the marine park concept. In early 2010, the cabinet approved the development of an overarching policy for a Cook Islands Marine Park and the establishment of a marine park charitable trust, including a group of people who would be responsible for administering the park and its resources.

However, despite nominal approval from the cabinet, the marine park idea was not, at first, strongly supported by government administrators and scientists, Cook Islands environmental nongovernmental organizations, or other stakeholders who chose to express their opinions through national media outlets. Key technical staff within the National Environment Service, the Ministry of Marine Resources (MMR), and Te Ipukarea Society (a grassroots environmental organization) believed that smaller traditional marine protected areas (*ra'ui*) should be the focus of marine conservation efforts because reef areas enclosed by *ra'ui* contain the highest density of marine biodiversity. One member of the Marine Park Steer-

ing Committee summarized the early lack of support for the idea among most stakeholders at the time:

There was little public engagement initially. Kevin approached cabinet first, and then he was asked to get comments from the Environment Service and Marine Resources and come back to cabinet. The public meetings began over a year later, around the time of the constitution celebrations. Marine [Ministry of Marine Resources] and Environment [National Environment Service] didn't like the idea. Maybe because the ministers in cabinet are telling their staff, "this is what you need to do," and the staff are thinking, "we are the technical people, we should know." It just put them offside, I think. Environment Service is coming around, I think, but Marine Resources has been much slower. When it came to engagement with the media, the newspaper kept calling Kevin and he wasn't filling them in, and he was sending them to the Office of the Prime Minister. And engagement didn't happen until much later and by then there was a lot of public speculation about the marine park trust and who was on it. So people started opposing the idea and wondering about the motives.

Much of the criticism in public discourse, as represented in national media outlets, stemmed from suspicions that the proposed marine park trust was a ruse for hijacking public resources for the personal gain of individual trustees. One letter to the editor of *Cook Islands News* explicitly linked criticism of the marine park trust with perceptions of corruption in the MMR and the way it granted commercial fishing licenses. The author speculated: "Rumours are that the perpetrators of this scam [the trust] are politicians and a couple of Heads of Ministries (HOMs) with one prominent business person. One particular HOM is a person that I believe has been conning this country for quite a while now. I believe the person is also involved with the fishing licence scam" (CIN 2011c). These suspicions were exacerbated by minimal government communication about what the marine park was or how the trust would function.

## EXPERTS VISIT RAROTONGA

Iro's idea for a Cook Islands Marine Park continued to live a spectral existence until July 2011 when it appeared to make a dramatic transition from being primarily an object of public rebuke and technical criticism to gaining overwhelming stakeholder support. Opinion shifted after Prime Minister Puna invited Sue Taei from Conservation International and Tim Carruthers from SPREP to visit Rarotonga and talk about their experience

developing large-scale marine protected areas. Taei had been intimately involved in the creation of the Phoenix Islands Protected Area in Kiribati, which at the time of its declaration was claimed to be the largest marine protected area in the world. Carruthers had experience with marine spatial planning and had reviewed the Water Quality Protection Plan for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, the first large-scale marine park in the world. Taei and Carruthers met with stakeholders on Rarotonga from the 11th to the 14th of July 2011. They consulted with the prime minister, the deputy prime minister, the deputy leader of the Opposition, representatives from government ministries, a representative from Te Ipukarea Society, and members of the House of Ariki and the Koutu Nui. They also conducted public meetings in each of the three major districts (*vaka*) on Rarotonga. Their presentations in the *vaka* constituted the first significant engagement with the public concerning the Cook Islands Marine Park.

It became clear in the public meetings that some stakeholders were hesitant about supporting a large marine protected area because they believed it would prohibit local fishing. Instead, audiences learned that the marine park would be zoned for multiple uses in a way that would sustainably manage all marine resources. Carruthers showed that establishing no-fishing zones in the Great Barrier Reef had been associated with increased size and number of fish and increased fishing outside these zones (Reeves 2011b). Taei compared the marine park to *ra'ui*. Explaining a large-scale marine protected area in terms of traditional resource management proved helpful because more people were familiar with the *ra'ui* in the outer islands as well as those that had once disappeared on Rarotonga but were reintroduced in the 1990s (Tiraa 2006). The idea that the Cook Islands EEZ could be a kind of large *ra'ui* also resonated with arguments among traditional leaders and others that the people of the Cook Islands own national marine resources. During the public meetings, Taei also spoke of no-fishing zones as a kind of insurance policy and as a bank account that can accrue interest in terms of more and larger fish.

Metaphors of banking, insurance, and *ra'ui* fell under a more general trope of the marine park as marine resource ownership that was prominently evoked on a PowerPoint slide Taei used in her presentation. The slide contained the phrase “protecting what we own” displayed next to a map of the proposed marine park boundary. Within days, the idea of public ownership turned up several times in *Cook Islands News* in relation to the marine park. In a story that ran immediately after the public meetings, Kevin Iro is quoted as saying, “This marine park is about Cook Islanders

protecting what we own” (CIN 2011b). The idea that the public owns the resources encompassed by the Cook Islands EEZ was used by participants to argue for expanding the boundaries of the proposed marine park from nearly half of the EEZ to the entire zone. This happened during the meeting in Takitumu vaka (one of three main districts on Rarotonga) on Wednesday evening. According to a *Cook Islands News* report:

Any hesitation to support the project stemmed from a belief that the marine park should encompass the entire exclusive economic zone (EEZ), rather than just the proposed one million square kilometres of it. . . .

One mama stood up and said: You say to protect what we own, but to me we own the whole lot! We should protect the whole lot. . . .

Mii Kauvai of Muri Environment Care group said she came to the public meeting undecided about whether to back the marine park proposal.

After listening to the presentation and looking at what you’ve got there, she said, pointing to a slide reading Protecting what we own, I embrace this project. (Reeves 2011a)

This was a common reaction to the presentation. Before the vaka meetings, coverage of the marine park and the marine park trust in the news, including letters to the editor, was mostly unfavorable. After the meetings, the general consensus in news coverage and among those involved in planning the project was that the marine park had an unusually large number of supporters from diverse interest groups including the House of Ariki, the Koutu Nui, the opposition Democratic Party, Te Ipukarea Society, interested members of the public in Rarotonga, and those from the Northern Group islands who were able to attend.

## NEWS, RUMOR, GOSSIP, SCANDAL, AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

To fully appreciate the dramatic shift in public opinion regarding the proposed marine park, it is important to understand how historical, structural, and ecological conditions have coalesced in a political ecology of news, rumor, gossip, and scandal in the Cook Islands. Scholars typically distinguish between “news” and “rumor,” with the latter referring to information that cannot be verified or is later determined to be false (Coast and Fox 2015; Stewart and Strathern 2004; White 1994). “Gossip” is often distinguished from rumor in terms of topic and scale, both temporal and social, meaning that gossip is usually directed toward the behavior of individuals within a relatively small social group, while rumor can be spread

sequentially throughout larger social networks and is concerned with events that are more broadly salient (Coast and Fox 2015; Stewart and Strathern 2004; White 1994). However, these analytical distinctions can blur in practice. For example, gossip can contain rumor, rumors can be a form of gossip about individuals, and news can help spread gossip. For my purposes, however, precise analytical definitions of these terms is less important than understanding all three forms of communication as practical ways to circulate socially salient information that depends as much on the particular circumstances of the social actors involved as on any imagined or real truth-value of what is being said. Whether information is considered credible depends on personal, political, cultural, and social conditions, making a determination of what is news and what is rumor an inherently social act. A newspaper, for instance, may insist on the credibility of its claims, while others, especially those who would be scandalized by the news, may allege slander. From this perspective, the truth-value of news and rumor is not as important as the effects these forms of communication can have on public perceptions of moral transgression.

Scandal results from the publicity of moral transgression that may have previously only existed as gossip, rumor, or news on a smaller scale (Adut 2005). In modern states, including the Cook Islands and other Pacific Island countries (see Connell 2007), news media are necessary for creating publicity at the national scale and, therefore, for creating national scandals. I suggest that processes of news making, rumor, gossip, and scandalization are carried out not only in private spaces but also in national public events and through media outlets like *Cook Islands News*, a national newspaper that publishes six days per week and has a circulation of about 2,500 copies in a country of approximately 15,000 (Woods 2010a). The impact of *Cook Islands News* on public discourse is even greater than its circulation would imply, especially on Rarotonga where it is published, because each copy is read by as many as four people (Woods 2010a). Furthermore, the newspaper not only serves as a source of news information but is also a forum for opinion, accusation, gossip, and rumor in the form of letters to the editor and opinion pieces. Unique to *Cook Islands News* is a section called “Smoke Signals” where readers can anonymously express their opinions about current events. According to *Cook Islands News*, “Smoke Signals are remarks and observations that range from the serious to the sarcastic. Typically anonymous, these quips capture the community’s notes on life and events in the Cooks, or what’s echoing over the Coconut Wireless” (CIN 2016). In short, *Cook Islands News* jux-

taposes all three forms of information—news, rumor, and gossip—in a consistent format with high circulation and public saturation. I argue that *Cook Islands News*, as the most important national newspaper, does not simply report on national scandals but is vital in constituting them by creating publicity and providing a forum for public negotiation of moral transgressions, especially those by politicians and public servants. *Cook Islands News*, like national media elsewhere, plays an important role in scandalization by forming discursive relationships among individuals, the public as an imagined national community (see Anderson 1991), and the state apparatus. In what follows, I suggest that these processes of scandalization help bring historical events with tangible structural and ecological legacies into public consciousness in ways that affect ongoing politics and projects of national identity formation.

### THE SHERATON HOTEL SCANDAL

Emerging scandals are partly interpreted through the lens of previous experiences and events, including prior scandals (Jacobsson and Löfmarck 2008). I begin with what is widely known as the Sheraton Hotel scandal because of its lingering influence on public perceptions of government operations and lasting ecological effects in the Cook Islands, especially on Rarotonga. In her account of the Sheraton scandal, Cook Islands scholar, environmentalist, and Marae Moana Project Manager Jacqueline Evans has theorized that thin layers of bureaucracy make states like the Cook Islands highly vulnerable to the desires of individuals, geopolitical conditions, and the vagaries of the global economy (Evans 2006). By “thin layers of bureaucracy,” she refers to a structural condition characterized by a relatively small administrative apparatus with control over major decisions, insufficient government transparency, and lack of due process. She argues that bureaucratic thinness can have profound effects on small island nations and has shown how these conditions contributed to structural adjustment and environmental degradation in the Cook Islands less than three decades after achieving self-government. This situation was made possible, in part, by the small size of the government bureaucracy, which lacked adequate checks on the use of power by individual cabinet ministers and their staff while also providing a cover of secrecy classically associated with bureaucracy (Weber 1978). Specifically, these conditions allowed Norman George, the acting minister of tourism under the Pupuke Robati government in 1987, to unilaterally sign an agreement with Sichel

SpA, an Italian construction company, to build a luxury hotel on Rarotonga. The deal ultimately placed the Cook Islands government in debt to the Istituto Nazionale di Credito per il Lavoro Italiano all'Estero (ICLE) bank of Rome for NZ\$81 million (US\$56.7 million) by 1994. In October 1990, not long after construction on the Italian–Cook Islands hotel development began, Sichel SpA was placed under receivership by the Italian government. Another Italian construction company was contracted by ICLE, but construction was halted permanently when the insurer for the development loan froze payment to the Cook Islands after six of its members were arrested for connections with organized crime. Eventually, the relatively massive government debt resulted in structural adjustment measures that both boosted tourism-related development and gutted the public service sector, including the National Environment Service, which was mandated to assess new developments for environmental impacts. A significant lack of environmental oversight contributed to coastal erosion, increased pollution, and progressively degraded lagoons on Rarotonga, especially in the tourist village of Muri. Years later, as the government was attempting to create the largest marine park in the world, the memory of the Sheraton and other similar scandals would help condition public opinion about government transparency, the environment, and Marae Moana.

#### WHAT NOW, FISHGATE?

Despite a shift in public opinion regarding the marine park after meetings with Sue Taei and Tim Carruthers, the specter of scandal that once haunted the marine park trust did not disappear. Instead, suspicions that were once directed at the trust and its proposed members, including rumors that the trust was connected with organized crime, seemed to become more intensely directed toward perceived government secrecy within the Ministry of Marine Resources (MMR). Support for the marine park seemed to increase along with mistrust of the MMR, in part, because the marine park came to be seen by many supporters as a way of creating more government transparency in fisheries management. Public concern with commercial fisheries revolved around several related issues. The first was unease with how the MMR was handling the sale of fishing licenses to foreign companies, especially in the Northern Cook Islands. Residents from the North reported that commercial fishing vessels had been spotted from shore, which if true would mean they were in violation of a ban on commercial fishing within twelve nautical miles of each island. The MMR

denied that such sightings were possible, but suspicions and reports continued. This was one of the primary concerns of Cook Islanders from the Northern Group who wanted to be included in the marine park; it was believed that inclusion in the park would give them greater protection from what they perceived to be overfishing by foreign commercial vessels.

Others disapproved of a new exploratory fishing program implemented by the MMR that could grant up to twenty-four new fishing licenses for bigeye tuna, broadbill swordfish, and purse seine fishing for skipjack tuna. The MMR argued that the new program was a necessary research phase in an attempt to establish Cook Islands rights to the fisheries for these species. Disapproval of the program, and those implementing it within the MMR, stemmed from the secrecy that seemed to surround the issuing of licenses. One letter published in *Cook Islands News* and titled “What Now, Fishgate?” is indicative of much of the public discourse concerning the licensing plan:

There’s growing opposition to the way the government through its Ministry of Marine Resources is handling the future of our oceans. One MMR official, who blames the media for the public reaction, needs to realise the backlash is because of the way they have foisted the fishery plan on an unsuspecting public, and signing the memorandum of understanding with China WITHOUT consultation was a strategic mistake. A bit like [former Financial Secretary] Sholan Ivaiti and [former Minister of Finance] Sir Terepai Maoate foisting their Toa scheme on the public without discussion, because they felt they knew better. In a recent email . . . Josh Mitchell replies that he hopes to see people attend the public consultations next week. Personally, I don’t think I’ve ever seen the media whip up the mass hysteria as well as they have this time around. A pity they didn’t let the facts stand in the way of telling a good story. And when all else fails, just throw in the word Chinese and watch the horror of the general public grow. Anyway, I’ll save my views for the appropriate forum, which will be at the planned public consultation where dare I say it, we might actually be able to have an informed debate, instead of distorted media tripe. One person emailed the newspaper to comment: He believes anyone with a different opinion is stupid or misinformed and should be marginalised. He forgets that these fish belong to the people not to the MMR and its cronies. If the majority is AGAINST it, for ANY reason, it shouldn’t go through. A lousy \$7 million for the rape of our oceans? How much of that is earmarked for a new MMR headquarters? (CIN 2011d)

The term “Fishgate” evoked Toagate, a failed attempt by the government under the leadership of Prime Minister Jim Marurai to buy a facility

from Toa Petroleum in 2009. The scandal had both political and economic consequences, resulting in the firing of Deputy Prime Minister Terepai Maoate, the sacking of the prime minister from the Democratic Party, and an extra tax levied on the public to pay a court-ordered government obligation of NZ\$1.7 million (US\$1.2 million) to Toa Petroleum (Jonassen 2011, 211). Toagate resulted from publicity, in national media, about how cabinet secrecy affected Cook Islanders and was explicitly linked in public discourse with the Sheraton Hotel scandal (Jonassen 2011, 211). The letter's focus on the exploratory fishing program was also evocative of an episode in which the MMR granted sixteen annual fishing licenses to Taiwanese vessels through the Cook Islands Northern Fishing Company in 2008. After the company failed to meet some of its contractual obligations, an audit found that the MMR had acted in violation of the Cook Islands Marine Resources Act (Manins 2011).

Staff within the MMR, including Secretary Ben Ponia (who was not involved in the 2008 scandal), attempted to change public opinion by explaining the ministry's rationale for the experimental fishing scheme (Ponia 2011). Key to its justification was the fact that all of the targeted species are highly migratory, spanning the Pacific Ocean from west to east. In addition, nearly all migratory tuna is caught in the western Pacific, with only a small fraction caught in the Cook Islands (CIN 2011a). This means that even a total ban on fishing within the Cook Islands EEZ would have a negligible effect on fisheries conservation. Furthermore, the MMR claimed that all fisheries within the Cook Islands were already managed at sustainable levels. The claim was, in part, that the Cook Islands has a right to its share of marine resources under international law and that exploratory fishing is a necessary form of research used to establish the parameters of new fisheries. These arguments seemed to make little difference, however, if letters to the editor of *Cook Islands News* are used as a barometer of public opinion. A sense of mistrust of the MMR and its dealing with foreign companies persisted in public discourse.

### SECRECY, SCANDAL, AND THIN BUREAUCRACY

A common theme of these scandals is the perceived lack of government transparency and public consultation on issues that affect the nation and local communities. John Woods, who was managing editor of *Cook Islands News* at the time, explicitly linked insufficient government trans-

parency with national scandals, including those surrounding Toa Petroleum and the Sheraton Hotel. He wrote in *Cook Islands News*:

[Jacqueline] Evans believes the . . . Sheraton scandal was much worse than the current Toagate financial blunder, and concluded: “Personally, I think that if we fostered a culture of transparency so that free and immediate online access to cabinet minutes was normal practice, the opportunity would be given for public input and healthy debate so that we don’t find ourselves in this fix again.”

It’s true that both the Sheraton and Toagate deals were done in the secrecy of Cabinet meetings, with deliberate intent to deny the public of the right to know—and this is wrong morally and democratically. (Woods 2010b)

Woods’s editorial not only shows the impact of previous scandals on how the public comes to understand emerging scandals but also hints at the complex entanglements of various forms of information (including academic scholarship, news, and opinion) in the context of ongoing public debates about collective values and moral norms. Specifically, Toagate and Sheraton were focal points for public discussions about the role of secrecy in state management of national resources. Part of the discussion hinged on the use of the Cook Islands Official Information Act (OIA), which was implemented in October 2009 (Woods 2010a). Specifically, information act requests are often not effective in securing information, especially regarding government-issued fishing licenses. On 31 July 2012, *Cook Islands News* submitted an information act request to the MMR for information on what appeared in the national budget to be twenty additional licenses under its exploratory fishing program. The request was denied. In response to the query about whether the MMR had issued additional fishing licenses, the secretary of the MMR wrote: “Pursuant to section 18 of the OIA Act I have decided that further elaboration of this request is not warranted primarily on the basis that the request is frivolous” (Reeves 2012). The secretary also responded to an information act request about details of the fishing licenses themselves: “I have decided that details of the license agreements will be withheld pursuant to sections 8 & sections 6 of the OIA Act primarily on the basis that fishing license [*sic*] are a commercial and confidential arrangement between the Crown and the fishing vessel owner or operator and that disclosure could prejudice the entrustment of information to Government, maintenance of law and to prevent improper gain or improper advantage” (Reeves 2012). Two years later,

the MMR denied another information act request from *Cook Islands News* regarding a settlement reached with the owners of a purse seine vessel rumored to have been illegally operating in Cook Islands waters. The ministry also threatened legal action if any details of the arrangement were subsequently published (Samoglou 2014).

Secrecy, often glossed as a lack of transparency, is a classic feature of bureaucracy (Weber 1978). However, state secrecy is especially salient in thin bureaucracies, where it enables as few as one or two individuals within the state apparatus to have dramatic effects on the nation-state as a whole. In the case of large ocean management, this socio-structural condition is paired with ecological opacity, meaning that knowledge of what is happening far offshore is subject to a great deal of uncertainty and is always highly mediated. Monitoring of offshore activities like commercial fishing and ecological research is a capital-intensive endeavor. As a consequence, public debate about ocean issues can be significantly influenced by the quality of public trust in the organizations responsible for producing and communicating environmental knowledge about the ocean. In the Cook Islands, scandals like Toagate and Sheraton eroded public trust in some information conveyed by the government. In both cases, bureaucratic thinness included informatic thinness, which, as explained earlier, involves disproportionate influence of a few individuals over publically important, officially sanctioned information. I suggest that in the Cook Islands, informatic thinness is partially interpreted through the lens of previous government scandals in ways that render some information, including rumor and gossip, apparently more trustworthy than others, including some officially sanctioned messages. In particular, the informatic thinness concerning commercial fishing practices and previous scandals revolving around a lack of government transparency combined to make rumors of misconduct by the MMR and fishing companies seem more credible to some social actors. This informal, speculative knowledge was circulated via public fora and nationally distributed print media. Through letters to the editor of *Cook Islands News*, and even more so through Smoke Signals, individuals aired their suspicions, found an audience for their accusations, and passed along rumor to an imagined national community. Public opinion mingled with expert opinion and more traditional news articles to produce a variable terrain of publicity on which moral transgression was alleged, denied, and negotiated, thus facilitating greater visibility of marine environmental issues as national ethical concerns.

## FROM FISHGATE TO FINGATE

In addition to evoking the Sheraton Hotel scandal and Toagate, the exploratory fishing scheme also raised concerns among conservation groups about increased shark finning within the Cook Islands. Te Ipu-karea Society wrote articles and letters to *Cook Islands News* expressing its concern and calling for a ban on technologies such as wire traces that were seen as specifically targeting sharks. The issue of shark conservation was visible through the work of another local nongovernmental organization, the Pacific Islands Conservation Initiative, which was lobbying for a shark sanctuary that would encompass the entire EEZ and complement the already existing Cook Islands Whale Sanctuary. Both groups were concerned about the potential impacts of a draft National Plan of Action for Sharks created by the MMR. During a public consultation held by the ministry, it became clear that stakeholders did not support the MMR's plan for a sustainable shark fishery. Te Ipu-karea Society, the Pacific Islands Conservation Initiative, the Natural Heritage Trust, and the Aronga Mana unanimously voiced their support for a policy that would allow zero retention of sharks (Scott 2012).

Within a week of the National Plan of Action for Sharks meeting, stories began running in *Cook Islands News* about an international surveillance operation led by the New Zealand Navy that had allegedly found approximately three tons of shark fins aboard a transit vessel in Cook Islands waters. The value of the fins was estimated at NZ\$3 million (US\$2.3 million) (Smylie 2012). In a parliamentary session, Deputy Leader of the Opposition Wilkie Rasmussen claimed he knew from a reliable source that the fins were indeed found and that one of the vessels caught in the operation was owned by Luen Thai, a company that had been awarded exploratory fishing licenses. Minister of Marine Resources Teina Bishop denied knowledge of any shark fins and later denied that any had been found, while MMR Secretary Ben Ponia denied the allegations and claimed they were a result of sensationalist rumors (Smylie 2012). *Cook Islands News* insisted on the validity of its multiple sources, some of which it claimed were “close to MMR” (Smylie 2012).

As a result, further expressions of anger appeared in public discourse. Some readers of *Cook Islands News* wrote letters to the editor or to Smoke Signals. One angrily asked: “Just how many sharks would have been killed to produce 3,000 kg of shark fins? What is the maximum

fine that can be imposed on the offenders? What is the maximum jail term that can be imposed on the offenders?” (CIN 2012). Another wrote: “Numerous calls to *Cook Islands News* last week before even going to parliament is evidence that shark fins were caught on board a Luen Thai vessel by the New Zealand navy ship, oops, but hey, now that the billionaire director is here, let’s stay hush-hush aye Mr Bishop” (CIN 2013). The situation seemed even more frustrating because it was informatically thin. Specifically, the New Zealand Navy would not comment on the report but insisted that any official account of the operation would have to be released to the public by the Cook Islands MMR. This meant that the story reported by *Cook Islands News* could not be officially verified and was subject to allegations that the newspaper was reporting rumor and gossip as news. At the same time, unofficial accounts of what happened seemed to gain credibility. A sense of scandal grew as public discourse intensified a commitment to shark preservation as a national value. On 12 December 2012, with overwhelming public support, the government declared the entire Cook Islands EEZ a shark sanctuary.

Through the fisheries scandals, marine resource management and the conduct of the MMR had become highly visible political issues. This is important for at least two reasons. First, through national coverage of commercial fisheries, the management of the Cook Islands EEZ was transformed into an object of intensified national moral discourse. Perhaps this is not very surprising in an Island nation with a dramatic contrast between the availability of terrestrial and marine resources, but it is also not inevitable. Second, public frustration with the MMR was palpable immediately before, during, and after the vaka consultations with Sue Tai and Tim Carruthers and throughout a period that was critical in forming public opinion about the marine park. Within this context, it makes sense that ideas like public participation, multi-sector management, and citizen ownership of marine resources were persuasive. It is my contention that the marine park became vigorously supported by a broad spectrum of interested parties within an increasingly dense atmosphere of frustration with state secrecy that grew in response to government scandals and, more recently, the perceived opacity of the MMR. This claim is supported by interviews with steering committee members, one of whom both supported the marine park and insisted that nothing existed in the EEZ for a marine park to manage except commercial fisheries and, perhaps someday, manganese nodule mining. The implication was that the Ministry of Marine Resources itself needed reform. Another committee member said

that the structure of the MMR was a major concern because too much power over national marine resources was concentrated in the hands of only two people, the secretary and the minister. Ultimately, and despite the MMR's sometimes vocal resistance to creating the Cook Islands Marine Park, public perception of the ministry's actions helped galvanize support for making Marae Moana.

### A NEW PHASE OF NATION MAKING IN THE COOK ISLANDS?

Anthropologists have long noted that scandal, and the ability to scandalize properly, can contribute to a sense of community (Gluckman 1963). According to this functionalist sensibility, scandals are only possible if social norms exist and can be publically violated (Jacobsson and Löfmarck 2008; Neckel 2005). National scandals occur when nationally shared norms are perceived to have been transgressed. From this perspective, scandal in the Cook Islands is less about corruption or dysfunction in any simple sense (although both may exist) and more about relationships among moral codes, norm violations, publicity, and evocations of public anger. However, it is not only the case that scandal reinforces moral codes and social norms; it can also produce and modify them. After Fishgate and Fingate, the ocean became a more intense object of public ethical awareness. Over the course of a succession of scandals, new ways of talking about the ocean as an object of moral concern were modified and invented, and the marine park became central to public discussion and negotiation as a way of opening a sense of possibility and alternatives for the nation's ecological future. Because many of these discussions were carried out in public and in the context of a national project, I suggest that scandal has been a means of nation making in the Cook Islands (see Foster 1997 on other modes of nation making in the Pacific).

It is significant, in this context, that the Cook Islands Marine Park was later recast as Marae Moana, a name that evokes the sacredness of the ocean on a national register. To violate a marae was once punishable by death, and the violation of these structures is still met with outpourings of community anger. Importantly, the restoration of marae has been a symbolic component of previous nation-making projects in the Cook Islands (Sissons 1999). In the name "Marae Moana," this sense of the sacred intersects with international law and is extended in public discourse throughout the Cook Islands EEZ. I claim that in contributing to Marae Moana, this particular history of scandal also contributed to a re-formed

and emerging sense of imagined national community and identity within the Cook Islands. This is not to imply, however, that fisheries scandals somehow account for the importance of the ocean to Cook Islanders or its contribution to a sense of national or regional identity. Many scholars have followed Hau'ofa in emphasizing the prominence of the ocean as a means of identification throughout Oceania.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, I am not suggesting that Cook Islanders have historically been inattentive to, or unconcerned about, their environments. Instead, I am making the more precise claim that support for the creation of Marae Moana has been an important occasion for increased public debate about the ocean, within national fora and as an object of national ethical value, and that these negotiations have brought previous nation-making projects and concerns together under a common rubric of large-scale marine management that did not previously exist. In what follows, I will contextualize this argument within a historical account of Cook Islands nation-making projects.

#### TOWARD BIG OCEAN NATIONALISM: PHASES OF COOK ISLANDS NATION MAKING

Jeffrey Sissons has argued that a sense of national identity in the Cook Islands emerged through four historically distinct phases (Sissons 1999). The first phase began in 1965 with the initiation of self-government and ended in 1974. During this period, and under the charismatic leadership of Premier Albert Henry, a modern nation was built and characterized by centralized planning, state-controlled media, elaborate spectacles that revived traditional motifs, mass participation in national projects, and increased international aid. At this time, the House of Ariki was formed to serve ceremonial purposes, and traditional dance became a symbol of Cook Islands identity both internally and globally, through groups of dancing “ambassadors.” Dance remains integral to maintaining a sense of nation through competitions at Constitution Day celebrations, the Miss Cook Islands pageant, and at international events, including the 43rd Pacific Islands Forum held on Rarotonga, where the government officially declared its intentions to create the Cook Islands Marine Park.

Sissons traced the beginning of a second phase to the completion of the Rarotonga airport on 1 November 1973, also known as DC 8 Day (after the Douglas DC-8 jetliner). New access to global tourism markets meant that promoting the Cook Islands as a cultural nation could pay off economically. In the same year, the government created the Koutu Nui, a

national body for those holding local traditional titles of mata'apo and rangatira. The role of the Koutu Nui was to advise the government on matters of culture and, in theory, to complement the House of Ariki. During this period the Cultural Development Division was also created. Previous displays of national unity, such as dancing, were reinterpreted as a form of economic development. Māori culture was promoted in schools, while national identity, state legitimacy, development, and culture became increasingly entangled.

While the role of traditional culture and tourism was more visible in the nation-making process during this period, other national aspirations are left out of Sissons's account but have reemerged as important for the Cook Islands as a Large Ocean State that is attempting to create one of the world's largest marine parks. From nearly the beginning of self-government, Albert Henry believed that access to commercial fisheries and potential seabed mining would be important means of nation building and future economic growth. On 29 July 1974, he addressed the 46th meeting of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to advocate for a two-hundred-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone that would give ocean states access not only to fisheries but also to seabed mineral resources (UNCLOS 1974). The Cook Islands then became an early member of SOPAC (Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission), the organization responsible for developing seabed minerals in the Pacific region (Howorth 2009). Given the long-standing national interest in seabed mining, it is not surprising that the Cook Islands passed the world's first deep-sea minerals mining legislation on 31 March 2009 (Lynch 2011). In this context, it is somewhat easier to understand how government could promote the Cook Islands Marine Park and resource development simultaneously. From the beginning, Prime Minister Puna was clear that the marine park would not prevent resource extraction but rather enhance it by rendering it more sustainable. The problem of how it would accomplish the concurrent goals of developing marine resources and promoting the Cook Islands as a destination for environmentally concerned travelers was seen as a technical challenge to be resolved through the process of marine spatial planning within the park boundaries.

The third phase, according to Sissons, was precipitated by a change in political leadership from the Cook Islands Party to the Democratic Party. Beginning in 1978, the Democratic Party, under the leadership of Prime Minister Thomas Davis, began to significantly weaken the cultural institutions that had lent legitimacy to the Cook Islands Party and to shift the

country away from a dominant understanding of the nation as a cultural community to a vision of the Cook Islands as an economic unit. Davis closed down the Cultural Development Division in 1980 and curtailed government sponsorship of cultural development in general. This amounted to a kind of reversal of Albert Henry's policies. Whereas Henry wanted to develop culture as a way to attract tourists, Davis wanted to develop the tourism sector directly. The changes resulted in economic growth, including the development of a significant university-educated middle class.

The fourth phase corresponds to the reemergence of the Cook Islands Party under the leadership of Albert Henry's nephew, Geoffrey Henry, in January 1989. With this change in leadership, the project of cultural nationalism returned. However, thanks to the technocratic successes of the Davis administration, it was much better funded. With the growth of tourism in the Cook Islands, awareness increased among the educated middle class about the benefits of promoting an ethnic identity among Cook Islanders. In November 1990, Geoffrey Henry established the Ministry of Cultural Development, through which dance reemerged as a state project. Importantly, the ministry was also instrumental in making preparations for the 1992 Festival of Pacific Arts, held on Rarotonga. The festival, with the theme "Seafaring Pacific Islanders," was an occasion for the arrival of sixteen *vaka moana* (oceangoing canoes) from across Oceania. The event is now widely understood to have involved the largest *vaka* flotilla in over a century (Lewis-Harris 1994), with subsequent *vaka* pageants seen as enacting and building regional connectivity and identity (Hau'ofa 1994; Thomas 1997). The *vaka moana* were also an important symbol for Cook Islands nation building under the leadership of Geoffrey Henry and included seven vessels constructed in the Cook Islands, including two built on Rarotonga and five sailed from the outer islands of Mauke, Mitiaro, Atiu, Mangaia, and Aitutaki (Kauraka 1993). The festival, in short, marked both a strengthening of national identity, based on the development of traditional arts, and a contribution to more extensive oceanic networks of people, practices, ideas, and things that continues today. As more recent voyages show, however, there is also now a clear emphasis on what the *vaka moana* can say about large-scale ocean health and environmental stewardship within the Cook Islands, in Oceania, and globally.

The four phases of nation building identified here are limited—as all historically specific research must be—but also diagnostically useful for analyzing emerging trends. Specifically, Sissons's work was published dur-

ing what might be identified as a fifth phase of nation making, that can be seen as characterized by aggressive neoliberal reforms, including privatization of government functions (see also Firth 2000; Murray 2000). Given the narrative outlined thus far, this shift within the Cook Islands could be located in the Sheraton Hotel scandal and the resulting consequences of structural adjustment measures, including downsizing of the National Environment Service, environmental degradation, and a subsequent increase in environmental awareness and activism. Te Ipukarea Society was also founded during this period as a direct response to the downsizing of the government environmental sector; it has been important in channeling international resources into the Cook Islands for environmental projects and raising awareness for environmental issues, including the need for better nature conservation in the Cook Islands. This attitude is also reflected in Prime Minister Puna's distinctly neoliberal push to foster sustainable development by rebranding the Cook Islands as a "clean and green" destination for conscientious tourists while also promoting the expansion of commercial fisheries and seabed mining.<sup>5</sup>

If nation building in the Cook Islands roughly corresponds with these phases, then there is good reason to pay attention to what appears to be an emerging, integrative phase of nation making, marked by an attempt to incorporate previous projects meant to foster economic development (eg, through tourism, fisheries, and potential seabed mining); education (by inculcating a sense of national pride in young Cook Islanders); and Māori culture (including dance and traditional voyaging) under a broad rubric of large-scale ocean management. I call this process "big ocean nationalism" and argue that it is marked by a trend toward greater large-scale environmental awareness among Cook Islanders and the integration of traditional culture (especially voyaging), economic development, and other domestic concerns with a focus on marine spatial planning and management. For example, environmental themes were foregrounded when the vaka moana returned to Rarotonga approximately twenty years after they arrived for the 1992 Pacific Arts Festival. This time, the voyaging canoes were there not only in the context of Pacific arts but also as a way to raise awareness in the Cook Islands and Oceania more broadly concerning important environmental issues such as shark finning, marine pollution, climate change, and the Cook Islands Marine Park. Tourists visiting Rarotonga now have ample opportunities to visit ra'ui that have been reinstated since 1998; a whale research center, where they can learn about a 2.2 million square kilometer whale sanctuary; and a Marae Moana information hub, where

they can use interactive geospatial software to experience marine park planning. Since 2008, Lagoon Day in the Cook Islands has also become a highly visible way for government and nongovernment organizations to promote environmental stewardship as a personal and national virtue. Through the event (which is held annually but not always in the same month), students, the broader public, and tourists have been introduced to ecological challenges and solutions—not least among them, the Cook Islands Marine Park.

### LAGOON DAY: TOWARD A CLEAN AND GREEN NATION

I attended Lagoon Day on 16–17 July 2012 in the village of Arorangi. The event included several educational venues that stretched from an inland landfill to the beach, the implicit message being that everything from land to reef and from reef to ocean is ecologically connected. Between these two extremes, in the building that houses the Ministry of Infrastructure and Planning, busloads of schoolchildren from all grade levels waited to see exhibits and to view a short video about the Cook Islands Marine Park. Produced by Kevin Iro, the film featured upbeat music, footage of young people enjoying the beach, scenes from Rarotonga, and some representations of the more graphic consequences of marine environmental change, such as overfishing and marine pollution. According to its creators, the purpose of the four-minute video was to help young Cook Islanders feel a sense of pride in their country's global environmental leadership, to facilitate a sense of ownership of their ocean, and to educate them about the importance of environmental stewardship through the marine park.

The film served its purpose admirably. I observed three sets of roughly twenty students view the video. It had comic moments that evoked laughter, such as a surfing Jack Russell Terrier or jokes made by celebrities. The students were especially attentive during the celebrity portion of the film. Teuila Blakely and other cast members from *Shortland Street*, a long-running TV show in New Zealand that is also popular in the Cook Islands, congratulated the Cook Islands on creating the marine park. After the film was over, Iro asked a few questions that evoked the main messages of the film. What is happening to the ocean? How much is protected? How big is the Cook Islands Marine Park? The last question was always the same: “Do you want to watch it again?” Each time the answer was a resounding and collective, “Yes!” But enthusiasm was not limited to students. It also seemed to foster a sense of pride among adults, including one who

verbalized a special connection to a moment when the narrator said, “The world needs a hero,” while an image of the Cook Islands flag and a map of the marine park faded into view. In another powerful moment, the narrator spoke about the marine park’s relative size (“four times the size of New Zealand” and “eight times the size of England”) before moving on to scenes from Rarotonga and speaking about how one of the smallest countries is making the largest protected area in the world. As represented in the video, the marine park is as much about fostering a renewed sense of national pride through large-scale marine management as it is a technical mechanism for creating management and conservation. It is also clear that the marine park was intended to be an initiative explicitly aimed at strengthening the nation by addressing some of its most pressing economic, environmental, and demographic challenges. In precisely this sense, the creation of Marae Moana is indicative of an emerging phase of nation making in the Cook Islands, one that tends toward the articulation of previous ambitions, concerns, and projects through an idiom of ocean protection and management at scale.

Celebratory public events such as Lagoon Day or the return of the vaka moana are important rituals of big ocean nationalism<sup>6</sup> and may seem to have little in common with the succession of scandals described previously. In the case of the Cook Islands, however, both have been important for rendering the ocean more visible as an object of national concern. A succession of scandals, from the Sheraton Hotel to what I have referred to as Fingate, involved national-scale publicity of potential or actual moral norm violations committed, or widely perceived to have been committed, primarily by public servants and political figures. While all of these scandals involved state secrecy and at least the perception of public harm, later scandals carried senses of national and community identity into public negotiations of marine resource use and management at massive scales. In these public spaces, as with more celebratory rituals, what it means to be a Cook Islander in relation to the ocean is being formed and remade.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that previous nation-making projects and national concerns in the Cook Islands are becoming integrated through big ocean nationalism, that is, under a rubric of large-scale ocean management that has emerged within a context of preceding and ongoing domestic scandals.

These scandals are related to structural conditions that I have described, building on Evans (2006), as both bureaucratically and informatically thin. Thinness helps enable individuals to make potentially large impacts at the national scale by gaining disproportionate influence over the state apparatus while remaining largely hidden from public view. Through events like the Sheraton Hotel scandal, both transgressions of moral norms and their adverse effects became publicized through nationwide media outlets like *Cook Islands News*. It was in this milieu of prior scandals that strong public support for the marine park almost did not materialize and in which the marine park trust was initially a target of public concern and cynicism. Circumstances began to change, however, when visitors from SPREP and Conservation International reframed the initiative as a means of indigenous and public ownership (as a very large *ra'ui*) at a time of increasing dissatisfaction with the Ministry of Marine Resources that included perceptions of secrecy and corruption. These sentiments culminated, in this particular ethnographic account, with the shark finning scandal. As I have argued, however, scandal does not necessarily detract from a sense of national belonging so much as produce and recreate it. Through scandal, moral positions are staked out, alliances are formed, arguments are played out, and norms are affirmed, modified, or made more explicit. During the inception of Marae Moana, national scandal was both shaped by preceding transgressions of public moral norms and came to revolve most explicitly around large-scale ocean management. In short, the emergence of the Cook Islands as a Large Ocean State paralleled a growing sense of belonging to a big ocean nation that was mediated, and to some extent fostered, by scandal. Processes of scandalization and nation making, therefore, have formed an important milieu in which Marae Moana, as one of an increasing number of large-scale marine protected areas, has emerged. However, it is precisely these kinds of complex social, political, and cultural processes that have thus far been least critically studied by the scholars and practitioners who are most concerned with large-scale ocean management in the Pacific.

\* \* \*

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## Notes

1 But see De Santo, Jones, and Miller 2011 and De Santo 2013 for a critical perspective on large marine protected areas, and see Gruby and others 2016 for an argument that more social science research on large marine protected areas is needed.

2 Subsequent to the period covered by the ethnographic research used in this essay, the Cook Islands declared its intention to expand the Cook Islands Marine Park (Marae Moana) to its entire EEZ, which comprises over 2 million square kilometers.

3 Although Marae Moana is often translated for general audiences as “Sacred Ocean” (RNZ 2016), the term *marae* typically indicates a formal gathering place. However, because marae, and especially ancient marae, in the Cook Islands are regarded as sacred (tapu), the translation in this case makes sense.

4 See D’Arcy 2001, 2003; Diaz 2012; Fry 1994, 1997; Gershon 2007; Hanlon 2009; Hau’ofa 1994, 1998; Jolly 2001, 2007; Lilomaiava-Doktor 2009.

5 Promoting the Cook Islands as a “clean and green” destination was included in the Cook Islands Party Manifesto 2010–2014 (Cook Islands Party 2010).

6 It should be obvious that, as with the vaka moana, Marae Moana is not simply reducible to a nation-building project or a sense of national identity. All large marine protected areas participate in broader discourses and events. Nevertheless, how larger discursive, economic, political, and other processes are harnessed and reformed for the purposes of emerging Large Ocean States and big ocean nations is of particular interest here.

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## *Abstract*

Although large marine protected areas have become a dominant strategy for marine biodiversity conservation, especially in Oceania, scholars have mostly ignored the historical, social, cultural, and political contexts that have contributed to the emergence and development of these institutions. In this ethnographic essay, I discuss the inception of the Cook Islands Marine Park (Marae Moana), an approximately one-million-square-kilometer mixed-use marine protected area in the southern half of the Cook Islands exclusive economic zone. I show that although many stakeholders in the Cook Islands did not initially support the

marine park concept, the process of making Marae Moana eventually became a medium for rearticulating social values and aspirations in the face of serious challenges to the nation, state, economy, and environment. This transformation, from public criticism to broad stakeholder support, was conditioned by public perceptions of previous and emerging national scandals that tended to intensify support for the marine park because it was seen, by many, as a project that would increase government transparency. In particular, concerns over scandals related to fisheries and other environmental issues foregrounded the ocean as an ethical and political object for all Cook Islanders and recast large-scale marine protection as a national virtue. Marae Moana became a nation-making project that was intended to foster a sense of pride among Cook Islanders while also integrating previous state priorities such as economic development, modernization, traditional culture, and tourism.

**KEYWORDS:** Cook Islands, large marine protected areas, Marae Moana, rumor, gossip, scandal, nation making