

OPENING ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE GOVERNMENT OF FRENCH POLYNESIA

read by **Dr. Patrick Tahiatā HOWELL**
Minister of Health and Research

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The President of the Government, who cannot be among us today, has asked me to tell you how concerned by the Miconia problem the Government is.

In June 1992 the First Earth Summit, commonly known as the Rio Conference, brought to the public the notion of "biodiversity", which had been known only by scientists until then.

Although the resolutions adopted on that occasion were not much followed by actual implementations, their merit was to lay emphasis on the importance to preserve biological diversity and on the threats it is confronted with.

The message of that conference was not to freeze the state of an ideal environment but rather to accompany its evolution with the constant concern of sustainable and controlled development.

The history of human progress is before all the history of harnessing nature, adapting its constraints to the development of human life.

Haven't our ancestors, on the first settlements of Polynesia, brought animal and plant species which did not exist, thus basically modifying the existing natural order ?

What is new is the outrageous power to mortgage the future through our present acts, which is made possible by our recent level of development.

Over a century, Humanity has released forces capable of having an impact on the major natural phenomena.

As an exemple, owing to the artificial production of carbon dioxide, the climate of the planet witnesses a significant green-house effect, which has reversed the natural trend towards glaciation.

50,000 animal or plant species also disappear each year because of an uncontrolled human activity, which then wastes the capital built over hundreds of millions of years of evolution.

Although awareness is slowly growing, such phenomena are still insufficiently known by the public and not properly assessed by the authorities, who do not actually realize the scope of the impact they are likely to have.

The submersion of low lands, the fragilization of agriculture, the climatic migrations, the breaks in ecologic equilibriums and the series of economic and social disorders they entail, are all up coming upheavals, the management of which should start today.

Biological invasions are less spectacular. Nevertheless they are a major risk to the environment, apt to alter the most fragile ecosystems.

On the international conference on "Introduced Plant Species" which was held in Norway in July 1996, experts stated that biological invasions by alien species will, in the next century, represent the most serious threat to biodiversity, even before habitat loss.

Their economic cost for the sole United States has been estimated at upwards of 100 billion dollars.

Many examples in history have shown that nature can sometimes restore threatened equilibriums by itself. Eradication programs against unwanted plants have proved successful in South Africa, New Zealand or Australia. But I know that the scientific community is mostly pessimistic, given the extent of the recent phenomena, and the little concern they arouse among the authorities. Yet monitoring such phenomena requires substantial coordinated and durable multidisciplinary means.

The major invasion of the Mediterranean Sea by the sea weed *Caulerpa taxifolia* since 1984 can unfortunately be considered as a model concerning both its scientific interest and the little concern of the authorities.

In French Polynesia, the controlled management of natural heritage is perhaps a matter which is even more sensitive than anywhere else.

The area of the Territory is small, its insular ecosystem fragile, and last but not least, its population is growing very sharply. Most of its resources come from a still generous environment.

You know that French Polynesia's main own revenues come from tourism, black pearls and fisheries, which are sectors of the future, induce growth and a greater economic independence.

The craze for natural exotic substances or ones having special virtues is also opening substantial opportunities for the Polynesian economy. Noni (*Morinda citrifolia*) juice, Kava (*Piper methysticum*), Tamanu (*Calophyllum inophyllum*) Oil and many other essential oils, may, alongside with vanilla, find a privileged niche in the export markets of French Polynesia, as long as the quality requirements imposed by international markets are met.

But all these prospects of development will become concrete only under a controlled management of the natural resources which make them possible.

The nature protection organization "Conservation International" unfortunately classifies Polynesia among the 17 hot spots of the globe which face the most serious attacks to biodiversity.

The history of biological invasions in French Polynesia is old and rich. Far from being exhaustive I will give the following examples. Concerning the recent introductions which are particularly noxious: the Beach Nono (*Culicoides belkini*) imported in 1959 from Fiji, and which haunts the beaches of the Leeward and Tuamotu Islands is detrimental to tourism activities. There is also the common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*) which is swarming in the Society Islands. I will also quote the carnivorous snail *Euglandina rosea* introduced in 1974 from Guam, and which has already caused the extinction of 9 species of *Partula* in Moorea and many other species in the Society islands.

Miconia calvescens, which is the subject of our conference, was introduced in 1937 as an ornamental plant. As it escaped from the botanical garden of Papeari for which it was intended, it started its slow but regular invasion of wet mountain areas.

I will let the scientific lecturers tell us about the level of proliferation it has reached, and which is particularly alarming on the island of Tahiti, and about its catastrophic consequences on local flora.

As for me, I would like to illustrate what I have just said by stressing the serious risks entailed by the rampant expansion of *Miconia* on the tourism sector, which depends on the beauty of the landscape, on agriculture and on the quality of our environment, which is one of the assets of French Polynesia.

As from 1988, the cooperation between the government of the Territory and ORSTOM has resulted in the establishment of the first research programs towards a better identification of the phenomenon.

Removal campaigns have regularly been carried out since 1992 in the Leeward Islands by the agents of the Rural Development Service, with the essential and never failing support of the French Army.

More recently, in the framework of the Development Contract, the Government of French Polynesia entered into a hopeful cooperative agreement on a biocontrol program with the Agriculture Department of the State of Hawaii, of which a delegation is present today.

This is an outstanding example of regional cooperation, where each party, according to its means, brings a useful contribution. French Polynesia is represented by Dr. Jean-Yves MEYER, a young Polynesian research scientist, the mainspring of the *Miconia* control programs and who has attended the University of Hawaii as a visiting scholar and acts as the link with the Hawaiian researchers.

The Conference of today, which was initiated by the Delegation for Research and the ORSTOM Center of Tahiti, whose cooperation has been constant since 1988, also falls within the overall scheme of the government.

But its effort must be maintained and intensified because this plague is far from being controlled. *Miconia* young plants have recently been discovered in the Marquesas Islands. It is feared that a new infestation center could develop if immediate and effective steps are not taken by local authorities.

Indeed awareness must not be limited to the sole authorities of the Government of French Polynesia. At the local level, municipalities also have a major role to play. I wish they become convinced of it and get the means for action. Associations and individuals also have to take part in the eradication of a phenomenon which affects us all, and which cannot be left to the sole responsibility of the Territory.

As for me, I have asked the Delegation for Research, which has a leading role in that matter, to think about the establishment in the near future of a territorial technical committee for *Miconia* control.

That committee would seek to better arouse awareness among the relevant partners, develop their financial or human involvement, coordinate actions and make proposals to the government regarding a plan of action in the medium term, with numbers. Its ambit shall exclude no sector, be it research, tearing-off campaigns, information and training sessions, or binding regulatory provisions.

I have no doubt that that the scientific and technical presentations that will be presented during the first days of this conference will provide useful inputs.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like now to end my speech, which I hope will not have been too long, by thanking our partners who contributed to the organization of this event.

At the top of the list is the Delegation for Research, the ORSTOM Center of Tahiti and the Mathilde-Frébault Institute which is hosting us in its premises.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you a good conference and fruitful debates.