



# Rapa Nui World Heritage Site – Initiatives and Challenges for the Risk Management

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## ■ Abstract

*Rapa Nui National Park, as a Cultural World Heritage Site, is strongly linked to the natural environment that influences the richness of its attributes. However, some risk factors inherent to these nature-culture linkages have been identified in recent years. Among other threats, natural hazards, such as earthquakes and tsunamis, are the object of greater preventive efforts, in which the local community is playing an increasingly important role: Since 2017, the Rapa Nui National Park administration is carried out by the Polynesian Indigenous Community Ma'u Henua, constituted by members of the Rapa Nui indigenous community. In this article, the author aims to show the linkage between the Rapa Nui and Minami-Sanriku Town, an area affected by the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami and visited during the Capacity Building Workshop on Nature-Culture Linkages. Although located far away from each other, the Pacific Ocean and the Ring of Fire have created connections between these two communities in withstanding interrelated disasters. At the same time, this experience has created a bond that relates both communities through shared heritage, which supports their recovery and the community's resilience.*

**KEY WORDS:** Rapa Nui, World Heritage, Risk factors, Community, Moai, Resilience, Protection, Minami-Sanriku Town

## ■ 1. Introduction

The Rapa Nui Island, whose official name as part of the Chilean territory is Easter Island (*Isla de Pascua*), is located 3,700 km from Chile's mainland, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, with a surface of 163.6 km<sup>2</sup>. The island, at a national level, is fully protected by Law No. 17.288 of National Monuments, under the category of Historical Monument. An important portion of its territory, corresponding to the National Park, has been listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List [Fig. 1] since 1995. It was inscribed as a Cultural World Heritage property under criteria (i), (iii) and (v)<sup>1</sup> in which the *Moai* colossal statues take a

central role in its significance. However, the cultural values of Rapa Nui Island and its communities are strongly linked with the natural environment.

Some risk factors, inherent to these nature-culture linkages, have been identified in recent years. Studies have been conducted to monitor coastline erosion caused by climate change, such as sea level rise. Fires are also a threat that is rather well controlled, although recently, and in particular, in 2017, there have been concerning episodes that have alerted and generated studies in order to develop risk control measures<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO Website, Rapa Nui National Park World Heritage Site (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/715>)

<sup>2</sup> Project document "Strengthening Disaster Risk Management at 3 World Heritage Properties in Chile" -Support for the implementation of Pilot Projects inscribed on the sub-regional "Action Plan for World Heritage in South America".

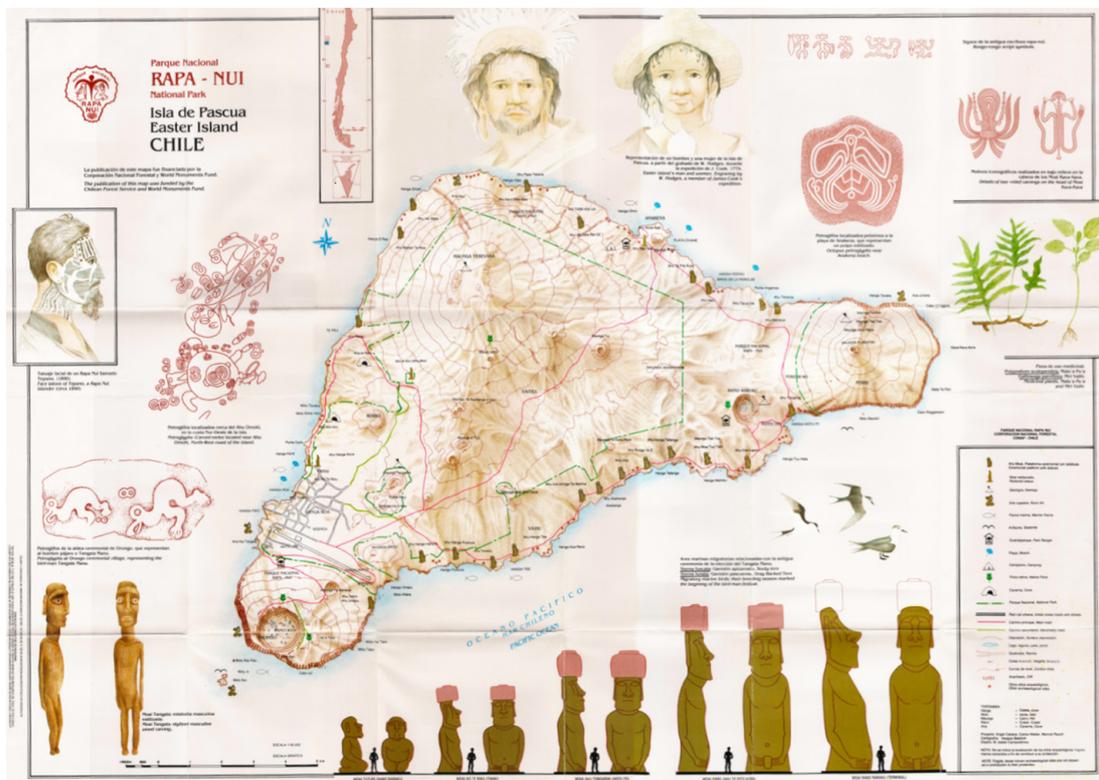


Figure 1: Rapa Nui National Park – Inscribed WHS Property. Source: UNESCO Website. Author: Baldrich, Horacio.



Figure 2: Ahu Tongariki. Source: National Service for Cultural Heritage, Chile. Author: Jorge López.

Natural hazards, such as earthquakes and tsunamis, are still the object of greater preventive efforts. In this article, the author reviews the role that the local community can play in these efforts, especially since the National Park administration is from 2017 carried out by the Polynesian Indigenous Community *Ma'u Henua*. This institution, created in 2016, was constituted by members of the Rapa Nui indigenous community.

Interestingly, the Capacity Building Workshop on Nature-Culture Linkages (the Workshop) brought the author closer to an outstanding example of a recovery process that linked Easter Island and the Minami-Sanriku Town, which was affected by the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami. In the last section, the author will share her observations and reflections on this experience.

## 2. Management Context

In terms of its management, the area protected as a National Park -coincident with the World Heritage Site- until 2017 was under the responsibility of the National Forestry Corporation (CONAF), an entity that works under the Ministry of Agriculture. However, as a result of a historical process promoted by the local community, since 2017, the National Park management has been transferred to the local entity *Ma'u Henua*, constituted by members of the Rapa Nui indigenous community [Fig. 3]. The main objective of *Ma'u Henua* is to establish a new administration system, which allows guaranteeing the protection and enhancement of the archaeological and scenic richness of the Rapa Nui culture, through the direct management of the local community<sup>3</sup>. Currently, the group has control of 25 official visitation sites and as an operational mechanism, all decision-making in terms of management is validated through its exposure to the entire Rapa Nui indigenous community.

The legal framework that sustains the creation of the new administration carried out by *Ma'u Henua* is linked to the Wills Agreement

(1888)<sup>4</sup> for the right to territory and wealth, as well as to the legislation and international Law of the Indigenous Peoples, the National Indigenous Law, the 169 Convention of the International Labor Organization on Indigenous Peoples (ILO), and to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The institutional organization chart has a board of directors and a transverse ethics committee, under which the activities and initiatives are carried out by different departments (communications, archaeology, planning, administration, finance, and operational), forming a total number of 167 workforces. On the basis of the diagnoses related to the previous management model, one of the main objectives of the new *Ma'u Henua* administration is to work on promoting the integration and the sense of community belonging with the richness of its territory (RAPU 2018)<sup>5</sup>.

## 3. Risk Factors

### 3.1 Main risk factors

Rapa Nui, due to its particular scenery, is strongly related to the natural environment [Fig. 4]. It is



Figure 3: Community Meeting, Ahu Tahai. Source: National Service for Cultural Heritage, Chile. Author: Jorge López.

<sup>3</sup> Ma'u Henua Website (<https://www.mauhenua.com/comunidad-ma-u-henua>).

<sup>4</sup> Easter Island was incorporated in 1888 to the sovereignty of Chile under a "Wills Agreement" between the State and the heads of the Rapa Nui community. This agreement established the session of sovereignty of the island in favor of the Chilean State, the latter committing itself to provide education and development to the islanders, who maintained their property rights on the land, and the heads of the Rapa Nui community

<sup>5</sup> RAPU, Rafael. 2018. Documents of the World Heritage Sites National Center, Site Managers Meeting.

a volcanic island with its last eruption dating to around 2000 years ago. Even though it does not have the same seismic activity as the continent, it does suffer the effects of the earthquakes, especially events related to tsunamis. The strongest tsunami registered in the last century was a result of the 1960 earthquake in southern Chile (the Valdivia earthquake), which devastated the southeast coast of the island, affecting several archaeological sites, an example of this is the damage that caused the fall of several of the colossal *Moai* statues located on *Tongariki's Ahu*. Another threat is fire episodes from anthropic factors, the last of major concern was recent, on September 2017, which resulted in the Rapa Nui National Park being subject to numerous fire foci, with an affected surface of 1160 hectares.

Furthermore, the local community recognizes that the proximity to the sea is one of the main risk factors that is eroding the land surface, due to the island's shore in an area in which a large number of archaeological sites are located, as well as the increase in the annual rate of tourism that today reaches 8% (approximately 100,000 tourists annually). In this respect, the local administration is implementing improvements, especially in matters related to controlling the visits to the sites, with particular focus on those that present a higher level of vulnerability.



Figure 4: View from Tahai area. Source: National Service for Cultural Heritage, Chile. Author: Jorge López.

### 3.2 Initiatives and challenges

As a result of the different risks identified, some studies, initiatives, and reforms at the national and local levels are being implemented to improve the management of the territory in order to ensure the integral protection of the island, considering its nature-culture linkages and its values as an inherent scenario to the territorial condition of the island. These include the "Study of the *Mata Ngarahu Rapa Nui* massif,"<sup>6</sup> National Monuments Council (2014), whose general objective considered an accurate assessment of the geological situation in which the *Mata Ngarahu* area of the *Orongo* ceremonial village is located, as well as taking into consideration the recurrent loss of large portions of land from the volcano's south slope and the need to implement measures to stabilize the rocky massif to achieve the conservation of its petroglyphs. This situation is related to other initiatives and studies for the management and control of visitation of sites carried out by the *Ma'u Henua* community<sup>7</sup>.

Another case is the "Strengthening Disaster Risk Management at 3 World Heritage Properties in Chile" project, which is in full development<sup>8</sup>. The project has as main objective to provide initial support for the future development of Disaster Risk Management Plans for the Rapa Nui National Park, through field reconnaissance missions and a review of available background information, in relation to present risk factors, to facilitate the assessment of property vulnerabilities<sup>9</sup>.

The preliminary findings of these studies were presented at the Workshop. It is expected that the new management carried out by the community will propitiate an analysis of the participatory methodologies undertaken, with the aim to incorporate improvements on all the processes related to risk management, linking them to the community and building resilience. The objective is

<sup>6</sup> National Monuments Council, Chile. 2013. "Study of the Mata Ngarahu Rapanui massif."

<http://www.mercadopublico.cl/Procurement/Modules/RFB/DetailsAcquisition.aspx?qs=PFRB0pcH6QV30UxcFbV1qQ==>

<sup>7</sup> RAPU, Rafael. 2018. Documents of the World Heritage Sites National Center, Site Managers Meeting.

<sup>8</sup> WORLD HERITAGE NATIONAL CENTER Website:

<https://www.sngp.gob.cl/sitio/Contenido/Noticias/90525:Seminario-Taller-Fortalecimiento-de-la-gestion-del-riesgo-de-desastres-en-Sitios-del-Patrimonio-Mundial-en-Chile>.

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<https://www.sngp.gob.cl/sitio/Contenido/Noticias/91628:Encuentro-y-Workshop-taller-en-Sitios-Patrimonio-Mundial-Oficinas-Salitreras-Humberstone-y-Santa-Laura>

<sup>9</sup> Project document "Strengthening Disaster Risk Management at 3 World Heritage Properties in Chile" -Support for the implementation of Pilot Projects inscribed on the sub-regional "Action Plan for World Heritage in South America".

to place local stakeholders as the main protagonists since they are the carriers of the traditional knowledge of their territory and the link between their natural and cultural heritage. Therefore, towards effective conservation, it is positive that conservation measures consider agreements taken on participatory processes based on the experience of the inhabitants.

■ 4. Protection as a linkage between the Rapa Nui and Minami-Sanriku Town.

The Rapa Nui community practices an oral tradition, characterized by the transmission of particular cultural expressions from generation to generation. In doing so, their living experiences are transmitted to future generations with the aim of protecting their culture. Due to this, it is possible to conclude that written perspectives of how the community values the colossal statues, called *Moai*, are scarce or almost non-existent.

The statues correspond to the present representation of the ancestors of the Rapa Nui people, and in that sense, they are worshipped and respected as sacred images (Rapu, personal interview 2018). Some of them are grouped and located on platforms called *Ahu*, under which the

remains of the ancestors that they represent can be found. However, there is significance in the way they were placed and meaning in their orientation.

The aboriginal people from Rapa Nui follow a distinctive cult of death, linked to their worldview and beliefs on *Mana*. *Mana* is a fundamental component which can be defined as a supernatural power or a protective force that comes from the cosmos inhabited by humans and spirits. It is transversal to all areas of life and its absence or loss is the explanation of the internal catastrophes that have hit the island throughout its history (CNCA 2013)<sup>10</sup>.

From the field trip visit to Minami-Sanriku Town, as part of the Workshop, an interlinkage between the two case studies was observed, in which both places are connected by the post-disaster and resilience processes. Minami-Sanriku Town, in Japan, was devastated by the 2011 tsunami and one of the famous *Moai* statues is located in its new commercial area, replicating the characteristics of those found in Rapa Nui [Fig. 5].

It is important to clarify the origin of the statue that is located in Minami-Sanriku Town. This specific statue is not linked to any Rapa Nui ancestor in particular. It was specially sculpted



Figure 5: Moai figure located in Minamisanriku Sun Sun Shopping Village. Margotta M. A. 2018.

<sup>10</sup> NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE AND ARTS, CHILE. 2013. Knowing the Rapa Nui Culture. <https://www.cultura.gob.cl/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Guia-Rapanui.pdf>

for her transfer to Japan, to replace a first figure, which was previously sculpted and transported from Rapa Nui. That initial figure was a gift from the government of Chile, sent as gratitude to Japan, in the context of the UNESCO Japan project<sup>11</sup>. Some of the activities carried out by this programme addressed the restoration of *Moai* statues that were damaged as a result of the 1960 tsunami in Chile, the force of which subsequently reached the coasts of Japan's Tohoku region, where Minami-Sanriku Town is located.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the new meaning effects visualized in Minami-Sanriku Town are noteworthy. It is possible to appreciate that there have been few, or perhaps insufficient, activities or dissemination links with the aim to transmit to the local community of Minami-Sanriku the original context described above. Nevertheless, it is possible to appreciate a special reappropriation of the figure by the community which collects that original feeling of protection in this very different context. This new meaning had a positive effect and contributed in the reinforcement of the community and the town's hopes in a resilience process after the 2011 tsunami, as one of the few elements still existing and that recalls the image of the town before the disaster.

The statue evolved into an interesting example of how a community's heritage linked to a very specific environmental context, expressed in its materiality (the *Moai* stone figures), and to a specific culture and its practices (rites of death) can be reconverted and transformed into an invaluable resource for a different and very distant community (Minami-Sanriku) in their process of recovery. Particularly in Minami-Sanriku, the author and other Workshop participants could testify of the remarkable role that the local community is taking in the reconstruction of their town, through different participatory projects currently under development.

In conclusion, it can be highlighted that although the *Moai* located in Minami-Sanriku is not placed on the remains of a specific Rapa Nui ancestor, nor does it accurately represent it, the figure commemorates the disaster and the victims who are part of the collective memory of the community and that has been a tool for resilience in the recovery processes, linked to the post-

disaster reconstruction. This link with intangible values and the reinterpretation of the protection feelings, beyond the tangible dimension of the *Moai* figure located in Minami-Sanriku, is what marks this example as a particularly interesting case study. It is this feeling of protection that makes this use of the *Moai* positively evaluated by the members of the Rapa Nui community to whom the author transmitted this story.

<sup>11</sup> Bahamondez M, Sawada M, Inoue S., Araki Y. and Valenzuela P. 2007. Ahu Tongariki: Conservation work of its 15 moai. CONSERVA Journal N° 11: pp. 55 - 64. [http://www.patrimoniocultural.gob.cl/dinamicas/DocAdjunto\\_1203.pdf](http://www.patrimoniocultural.gob.cl/dinamicas/DocAdjunto_1203.pdf)

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