



Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) in the Cook Islands

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Prepared for the Cook Islands National Environment Service

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Glossary and Acronyms

Term	Definition
Protected area	A clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values (Dudley, 2008).
Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs)	Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measure, defined by the Convention on Biological Diversity as: “A geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in situ conservation of biodiversity with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic, and other locally relevant values” (CBD, 2018).
ICCA	Territories and areas conserved by Indigenous peoples and local communities (sometimes abbreviated as “ICCAs” or “territories of life”) (ICCA Consortium, 2021).
Protected and conserved area	Defined here as a grouping term for protected areas, OECMs, and ICCAs.
NES	Cook Islands National Environment Service.
UNEP-WCMC	UN Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre.
SPREP	Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme.
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature.
Stakeholder	Defined here as any individual or organization that may affect, or be affected by actions and decisions.
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity.
Ra’ui	A restriction on certain activities in a certain area for a certain time and purpose as determined by a traditional leader or leaders of a village area.
Ra’ui motukore (mutukore)	The traditional custom of imposing permanent (everlasting) restrictions on the use of the resources of any land, reef, or lagoon.
Biodiversity Steering Committee	An informal group with the primary objective to provide advice and guidance on the conservation of the natural biodiversity and ecosystems of the Cook Islands to the NES. The Committee will also provide input and consider issues related to the CI environment and facilitate exchange of knowledge, experiences and good practices through a coordinated approach among biodiversity related initiatives. The National Biodiversity Committee is also referred to as Kopapa Ao Ora Natura.

1 Introduction to the document

This document is designed to be a reference document for government officials, conservation practitioners and any other individuals or groups in the Cook Islands with an interest or stake in area-based conservation. It provides a snapshot of Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs), starting with the global context and narrowing down to the Cook Islands, where it presents possible types of OECMs in the country and recommendations for how to move forward with recognising and reporting these sites.

The document is structured as follows:

- **Section 1** explores the history of OECMs, the component parts of their definition, and how they compare with Protected Areas, territories and areas conserved by Indigenous Peoples and local communities (ICCAs), and other forms of area-based conservation.
- **Section 2** provides case studies from OECMs around the world and identifies some linkages to the Cook Islands context.
- **Section 3** looks at the potential benefits, drawbacks, opportunities, and threats associated with recognising and reporting OECMs, particularly those specific to the Pacific region and Cook Islands context.
- **Section 4** looks at the Cook Islands specifically, reviewing policies and practice around area-based conservation and identifying some potential OECMs, based on the outcomes of the first OECM workshop in January 2023.
- **Section 5** provides recommendations for a roadmap for recognising and reporting OECMs in the Cook Islands.

This document builds on the first Cook Islands workshop on OECMs in January 2023, which brought together representatives from government, local communities, traditional leaders, non-government organisations, and the private sector to understand, explore, and discuss the potential of recognising and reporting OECMs in the Cook Islands. Through the workshop we identified key areas and questions around the OECM concept that were particularly relevant to the country, and consequently have structured this document around those. Concerns and opportunities that were discussed in the workshop by participants have also been highlighted. A key activity in the workshop was to run through the OECM screening tool, through which some potential OECMs were identified. These are listed in Appendix 1, and some are highlighted in more detail in Section 4.4. Finally, the recommendations in Section 5 are guided strongly by the conversations held during the workshop, but these represent an ongoing conversation and further consultations will guide the process.



Day 1 of the January 2023 workshop on OECMs in the Cook Islands.

2 What are OECMs?

2.1 Defining OECMs

Biodiversity - and the many services that it provides us - is vital for a healthy, functioning planet, and supports our society and economy in a seemingly endless diversity of ways. However, this biodiversity is being threatened by impacts such as habitat degradation and loss, climate change, pollution, and more. A variety of approaches have been employed to try and tackle this, including the use of “area-based conservation tools”. These are areas with a distinct border within which management that promotes biodiversity takes place and certain activities are regulated or restricted. Examples could include marine protected areas, national parks, nature reserves, territories or areas conserved by Indigenous Peoples and local communities, or fisheries closures.

As governments worldwide have looked to halt and ultimately reverse biodiversity loss, they have collectively set ‘area-based targets’ to set aside a certain percentage of the globe for nature. For instance, in 2010 the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) agreed to protect 17% of the land and 10% of the sea. This was to be achieved not only with protected areas (see glossary for definition), which Parties were familiar with, but also with ‘Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures’, or ‘OECMs’, which were first introduced here in this agreement and would be equivalent to protected areas in their contribution to the targets. Due to a lack of clear guidance from the CBD processes on what these areas

were, their recognition globally had initially seen relatively slow progress. However, recently a definition and criteria for their identification and management were officially adopted by the CBD in Decision 14/8, 2018 (CBD, 2018). According to this definition, an OECM is:

“A geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in situ conservation of biodiversity with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio–economic, and other locally relevant values. (CBD, 2018).”

As defined here and in [supplementary guidance assembled by the IUCN-WCPA \(2019\)](#), an OECM is not a protected area, but OECMs are important in their own right, and are both comparable to and complement protected areas. The main difference is that a protected area has the conservation of biodiversity as its primary objective and is recognised (through legal or other effective means) as a protected area - that is to say, a protected area is first and foremost managed and designed to conserve biodiversity. An OECM, on the other hand, can have a variety of different aims and objectives, that may or may not include nature conservation, but that nonetheless achieve positive outcomes for biodiversity as a consequence of its management. There do exist OECMs that have conservation as their primary objective, but these will not be designated as a protected area (whether legally or by other means). They may meet the IUCN definition of a protected area, but can alternatively be recognised as OECMs if the site’s governance authorities request this. In cases where a site meets both the protected area and OECM criteria, it is up to the governance authority to decide which one they prefer, and this will have different implications and opportunities depending on the national context (see Figure 1).

Further differentiation between protected areas and OECMs comes from the language around recognition and establishment. For protected areas, a *new* site will often be ‘designated’, ‘established’ or ‘created’, with new boundaries and new management and governance systems (though this is not always the case). In contrast, OECMs tend to be ‘identified’ or ‘recognised’ from *existing* areas worldwide which are already delivering the long-term conservation of biodiversity (ICCA Consortium, 2022).

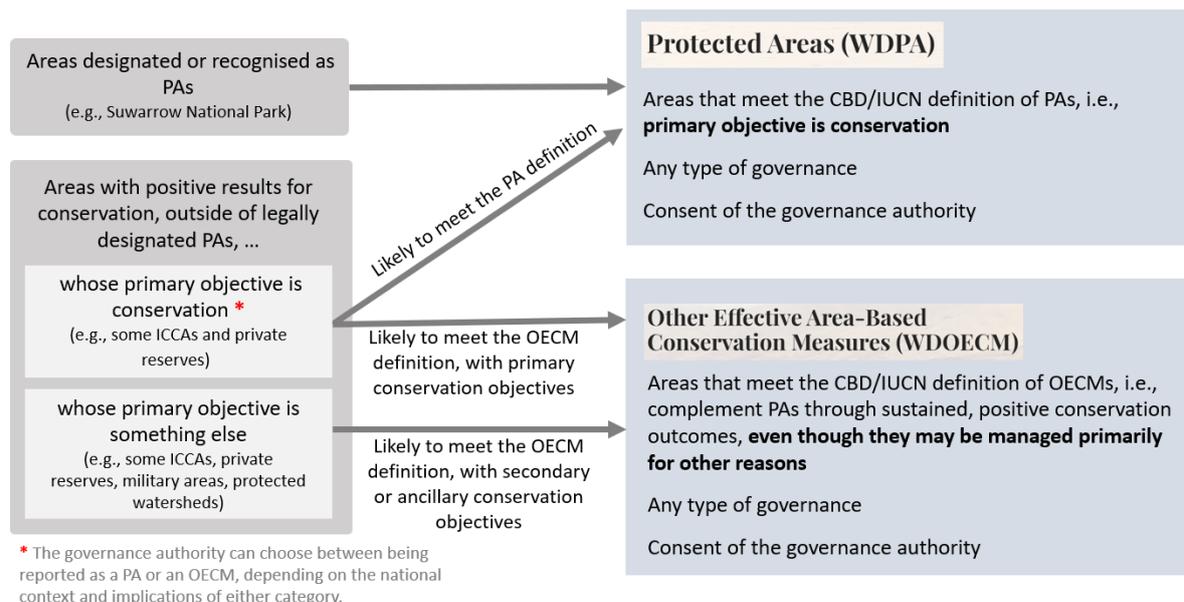


Figure 1: The difference between OECMs and other forms of area-based conservation.

As with protected areas, OECMs may be implemented and governed by a diverse range of actors under a diverse range of management and governance regimes, from Indigenous peoples and local communities to the private sector and government agencies. For instance, a community fishing area which is managed by local communities for food (i.e. healthy fish supplies) which may also provide conservation benefits through enacting no-fishing areas, or a privately governed disused quarry which may act as a habitat for a variety of avian life. This diversity of governance and management types encompassed by OECMs provides opportunity to engage a diverse range of rights-holders and stakeholders (Marnewick et al. 2021). There is, therefore, potential for OECMs to facilitate more inclusive and diverse area-based conservation approaches, which may provide visibility and recognition to previously marginalised groups for their contribution to biodiversity conservation (Marnewick et al., 2021; IUCN ESARO, 2022).

2.2 Characteristics of an OECM

In 2019, the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) Task Force on OECMs produced [guidelines to assist Parties in interpreting and operationalising Decision 14/8 and to encourage good practice for recognising and reporting OECMs](#) (IUCN-WCPA Task Force on OECMs, 2019). This guidance outlined that OECMs are broadly classified into three categories, based on where nature conservation falls as a management priority for each site:

- **Primary:** These are OECMs that do have biodiversity conservation as their primary objective, but are not recognised as a protected area or do not meet all the criteria of a protected area, according to the IUCN definition. In other cases these areas do meet

the definition of a protected area, but the governance authority requests that they are instead recognised as OECMs.

- **Secondary:** These are OECMs where conservation of biodiversity is a management objective, but is secondary to a higher priority management objective. For instance, a watershed area may primarily be concerned with maintaining healthy water flows for human use, but part of that may involve protecting the nature that keeps that water clean and prevents flooding.
- **Ancillary:** These are OECMs that don't have nature conservation as a stated management objective, but nonetheless achieve positive biodiversity outcomes. As an example, a heritage shipwreck area (such as Chuuk lagoon in the Federated States of Micronesia) may be designed to protect a historical site or cultural heritage, but in doing so may also conserve the ecosystems that fall within it or allow them to recover.

Regardless of its objectives, an OECM must be managed in ways that deliver effective long-term conservation of biodiversity. This is the core of OECMs - they are equal to protected areas in terms of their ability to deliver biodiversity conservation. IUCN, in line with CBD Decision 14/8, have defined some biodiversity values among which OECMs need to support at least one:

- Rare, threatened or endangered species and ecosystems;
- Natural ecosystems which are underrepresented in protected area networks
- High level of ecological integrity or intactness;
- Significant populations of range restricted species or ecosystems;
- Important species aggregations, such as spawning, breeding or feeding areas; or
- Importance for ecological connectivity, as part of a network of sites in a landscape or seascape.

At the national or local level, these should be defined more precisely to be context-specific, particularly in terms of monitoring and 'thresholds' past which a site can qualify as an OECM, and using all forms of knowledge (including traditional knowledge). For example, a site that demonstrates that it conserves nursery habitat for local fish species, evidenced by local knowledge of where young fish develop and regular fish population surveys, in addition to wider habitat surveys (e.g. water quality testing), could potentially qualify as an OECM as it is shown to effectively conserve this element of biodiversity. However, an important caveat is that the management of the site should be contributing to and directly linked with this biodiversity conservation, and that this positive link between management and biodiversity outcomes will be sustained in the long term.

2.3 Recognising and reporting OECMs

Any sites which are potentially OECMs must undergo a three step assessment (see Figure 2). OECMs are assessed on a case-by-case basis, with each site needing to go through its own assessment process (i.e. a group or type of sites cannot all be declared as OECMs, when

only one of them meets the criteria). Sites can be assessed using the IUCN OECM assessment tool (IUCN-WCPA, 2022).

1. A site that could be an OECM based on existing knowledge, and has passed the screening step (Step 1, Figure 2) is referred to as a 'potential OECM'.
2. A site that then gains the free, prior, and informed consent of the governing authority and other important stakeholders for a full assessment to go ahead (Step 2, Figure 2) is referred to as a 'candidate OECM'.
3. Finally, a site that has undergone the assessment process and has met all the criteria (Step 3, Figure 2) can be referred to as a full 'OECM' and is ready to be reported as such. It is important to note that OECMs can be any size, so long as they are able to demonstrate all the elements of the OECM criteria.

Prior to the step 1 screening tool, a comprehensive set of maps and data on the site should be compiled, as assessment requires management authorities to demonstrate the full range of biodiversity values present, alongside evidence of effective in-situ conservation resulting from management activities (Jonas et al., 2017).

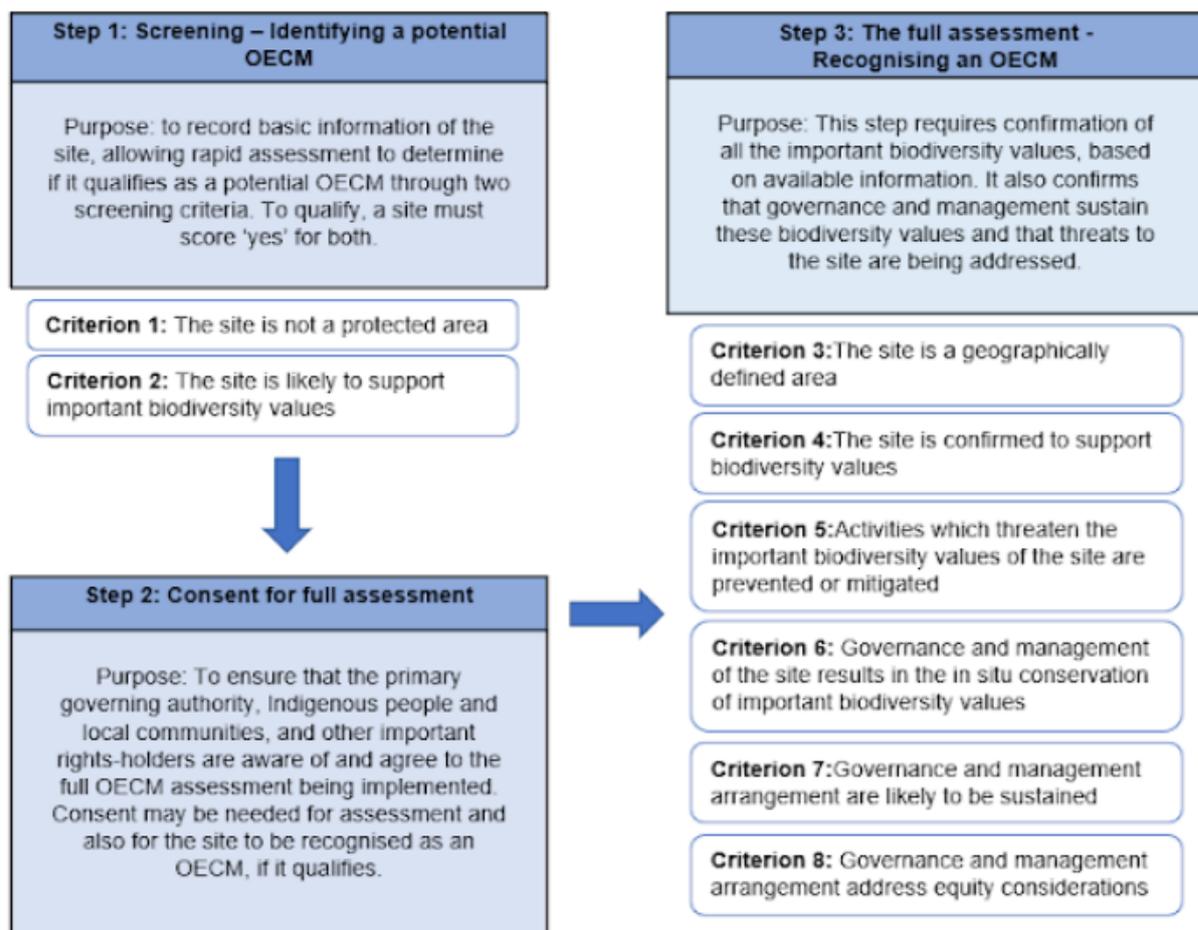


Figure 2: The three stages of recognising an OECM, based on the IUCN site-level assessment tool (IUCN-WCPA, 2022).

Due to the diversity of potential actors engaged and involved with OECMs, a fundamental element of their recognition is the principle of **Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)** – ensuring that the governance authorities, particularly when these involve indigenous peoples or local communities, are fully informed of the costs and benefits of recognising an area as an OECM and also freely and knowingly give their full consent for the area to be assessed and potentially recognised as such. It is essential that FPIC is given by the OECM’s governing authorities at two stages, first by consenting to assessment of the site, and second by consenting to reporting of the site as an OECM. This is essential to ensure that previous injustices, which may have been perpetrated in historical approaches to area-based conservation, are not repeated in the context of OECMs (ICCA Consortium, 2022; Jonas et al., 2017).

Once a site has passed the assessment tool, it can be formally recognised as an OECM. Data on OECMs can be submitted to UNEP-WCMC to be reported in the World Database on OECMs (WD-OECM), which enables tracking of countries’ progress towards global goals (UNEP-WCMC and IUCN, 2023). If a site does not pass the assessment tool, identifying and addressing the areas where the criteria were not met may enable the site to reach the OECM standards at a future time (see Figure 3).

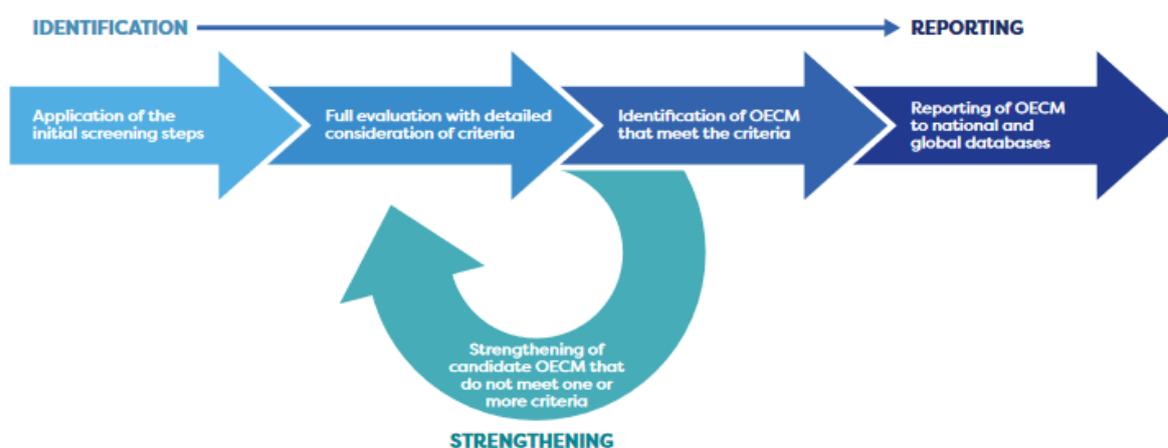


Figure 3: The pipeline from identification of OECMs to recognition and reporting (FAO, 2022)

Resources

More detailed information on OECMs, their criteria, the processes for recognition and reporting, and Free, Prior, Informed Consent can be found here:

- [Recognising and reporting OECMs - IUCN, 2019](#)
- [OECM site-level assessment tool - IUCN, 2022](#)
- [Free, prior, and informed consent toolkit - FAO, 2023](#)

3 Examples of OECMs

There are likely many sites in the Pacific region that would meet the definition and criteria of an OECM. However, as this is a relatively new concept, there are currently none reported for countries in the region. There is interest in OECMs in the Pacific, however, and with OECM recognition gaining momentum worldwide there is an opportunity to share knowledge on their potential and opportunities among governments, practitioners, and other stakeholders in the region. The following examples of both recognised and potential OECMs from around the world are provided to help showcase some of the different types of OECMs that may be relevant to the Cook Islands context:

OECMs managed by Indigenous Peoples and local communities: Patagonan daw Bahaw-bahaw

Patagonan daw Bahaw-bahaw is an OECM in the Philippines, and is an example of an OECM that is managed by indigenous peoples or local communities. Patagonan daw Bahaw-bahaw is one of 178 OECMs reported by the Philippines to the World Database on OECMs (WD-OECM), and is an Ancestral Domain belonging to and managed by the local indigenous people – the Higaunon of Agtulanon Mintapod Higaunon Cumadon. The site is also recorded as a territory or area conserved by Indigenous peoples and local communities (ICCAs) in the ICCA registry. Though the land is managed for subsistence of the Higaunon (such as for food, medicine, and clothing materials), it is also managed in a way that conserves the biodiversity and ecosystems of the forested landscape, as well as conserving the many spiritual, historical, and cultural values of the area (ICCA Registry, 2022). This particular OECM is reported to the World Database on OECMs as having conservation as a primary objective.

An OECM protected for unique natural features: Offshore Pacific Seamounts and Vents Closure

One of the OECMs submitted by Canada to the World Database on OECMs is the Offshore Pacific Seamounts and Vents Closure. This is a site protected for its rare and unique natural features (seamounts and hydrothermal vents) as well as the biodiversity that they support. All fishing or other activities (e.g. mining) that are in contact with the seabed are banned in the site (Government of Canada, 2022).

A potential OECM in the Pacific protected for its cultural values: Chuuk Lagoon

Chuuk Lagoon National Monument is an atoll in the Federated States of Micronesia that encompasses the waters and submerged remains of World War II ships and aircraft sunk in 1944. It is considered one of the largest shipwreck sites in the world and is a significant historic site. In addition to its cultural and historical significance, Chuuk Lagoon is home to rich marine biodiversity. The lagoon supports a wide range of fish species, coral reefs, and other marine organisms living among the shipwrecks, including sharks, rays, and groupers. The site was designated as a national monument in 1980 and is managed primarily for its historical value, but also with the secondary objective of conserving the biodiversity of the site ([Jeffery, 2023](#)). The site is not an OECM currently, but could potentially qualify if the

governance authorities wished to pursue assessment (and with the free, prior, and informed consent or relevant stakeholders).

A potential OECM around community fisheries: Kubu Raya

A 2022 study in Indonesia found almost 400 potential OECMs in the marine space, including the community-based fishery Kubu Raya. Here, local communities enact temporary fishing closures to allow populations of the locally-important mud crab species to recover, which are providing benefits not only for subsistence but also for the biodiversity in the mangrove forests. The local communities have also been working to monitor and report on the biodiversity of the area. If the community wanted the site to become an OECM, they would need to perform an assessment using the IUCN OECM assessment tool, or give their free, prior, and informed consent to someone else to perform it (e.g. the national government) (Planet Indonesia, 2021).

A potential OECM in the Pacific managed by local communities: Barana Nature and Heritage Park

The Barana Nature and Heritage Park, located in Solomon Islands, was established by the Mabulu people in 2017. The local community pushed for the park to be established so that they could prevent unsustainable activities such as mass logging from land sales, protecting the forests that they use for subsistence (including food, shelter, and medicine) and the biodiversity within the area. The community have also been pursuing ecotourism and selling some of the medicinal plants to generate income (Prasad et al., 2022). The park is not an OECM currently, but it has been suggested that it could qualify (Piringi, 2022) if the Mabulu people provide free, prior and informed consent for its assessment and recognition.

A potential OECM protected for cultural services: Tebrakunna Visitors Centre, Tasmania (from Jonas et al., 2017)

The Tebrakunna Visitors Centre was negotiated as an offset agreement in exchange for a windfarm development in *tebrakunna* country in northeast Tasmania. The site had no conservation objectives, but instead aimed to build relationships between the *trawlulwuyt* peoples and other Tasmanians. The centre allowed for the sharing of cultural and historical knowledge, and as a result this has led to conservation of *tebrakunna* country, particularly for wildlife corridors and the reintroduction of Tasmanian Devils. This has had positive consequences for the local Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, which has assisted in the first joint management agreement for an officially protected area in Tasmania. Again, free prior and informed consent of the governance/management authority and other stakeholders will be required before assessment as an OECM can take place.

4 Benefits and potential drawbacks to recognising OECMs

Recognising OECMs in a country is likely to provide a number of benefits to all groups of people from local communities through to national governments. Firstly, OECM recognition could strengthen local rights and increase respect for local values, knowledge, practice, and

worldviews, by acknowledging the important work that occurs in many of these locally managed areas (Jupiter and Govan, 2022). The additional focus on effectiveness of OECMs allows for more diverse governance arrangements to be championed and recognised (Gurney et al., 2021). Recognition of local governance can also ensure benefit-sharing mechanisms and decision-making processes are suited to local contexts and are carried out equitably (Gurney et al., 2021; Jonas et al., 2014). From a site-manager's perspective, recognising OECMs can increase resource availability (e.g. funding) (Gurney et al., 2021), and, from a government perspective, OECMs will contribute to international targets such as Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework – that is, the target to protect and conserve 30% of the land, inland waters, and sea by 2030 (CBD, 2022).

These benefits shone through in the January workshop. Participants highlighted that they saw advantages in:

- The potential for additional resources and funding;
- Encouraging transparency, accessibility, and community awareness around all forms of area-based conservation in the Cook Islands, including via their effective documentation;
- Preservation of traditional and cultural knowledge, values, practices, and language;
- Better ensuring food security;
- Improve and secure conservation of endemic biodiversity, including via creation of new conservation areas; and
- Incentivizing conservation by non-conservation-focused actors.
- Incentivizing greater focus on biodiversity and creation/maintenance of management plans;

They also noted additional opportunities in recognising OECMs in the country, including:

- Increased visibility for scientific research, including citizen science, that may be able to support biodiversity monitoring of the site;
- Education for all ages;
- Additional income opportunities, for example via ecotourism;
- Supporting the economy, for example a healthy fish stock in an OECM may provide opportunities for fisheries to fish on the boundary of the site.
- National government may have increased access to global monetary funds by demonstrating conservation engagement; and
- Supporting effective spatial planning processes in the Cook Islands.

Despite these benefits, there are also common concerns that need to be addressed. For instance, some communities have voiced concern around a possible removal of authority and autonomy of community decision-makers, or around weakening of local rights (Jupiter and Govan, 2022), e.g. that areas recognised as OECMs may be taken away from them at a later time (Gurney et al., 2021; ICCA Consortium, 2021). This highlights the importance of the

principles of free, prior, and informed consent, as well as proper recognition of title and tenure, which are fundamental elements of the OECM concept (IUCN-WCPA Task Force on OECMs, 2019).

Concern has also been expressed around whether governments may try to reach area-based targets by 'recognising OECMs' but not providing any additional resources to the management (Gurney et al., 2021). For management and governance authorities, this links to the concerns around who will pay for assessment and monitoring, particularly the additional elements of effectiveness and equity expected from areas counted towards Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (Govan and Jupiter, 2022; ICCA Consortium, 2021). It is important to make sure this is not an excessive burden on managers and that adequate resources are in place.

For conservationists, there are concerns over whether countries will opt for OECMs instead of establishing new protected areas or that protected areas could be 'degazetted' to become OECMs, which might reduce the priority of conservation in the area (Govan and Jupiter, 2022). However, if implemented in line with global guidelines, OECMs should be considered equal to protected areas in terms of their value for biodiversity conservation, and the requirements for demonstrating positive biodiversity outcomes could secure the effectiveness of the site's conservation (IUCN-WCPA Task Force on OECMs, 2019). An additional area of concern is whether the private sector may claim OECMs that are not truly acting to conserve nature (e.g. monocultures) (Jonas et al., 2014). However, again, there is a requirement for the OECM to demonstrate both existing biodiversity values and positive biodiversity outcomes. The benefits and risks of OECMs will depend in part upon how they are implemented at national level, but following the available global guidance should enhance the benefits and reduce the risks.

Concerns were raised in the January workshop, notably around:

- How to enforce compliance with management measures put in place - it was highlighted that additional support is needed, which will be important to define as part of OECM processes in the future;
- What are the direct benefits to communities - these will need to be better defined, which will be context-specific and so will also need to be addressed as part of future OECM processes;
- Guidance is currently only in English, and it would be beneficial for it to be translated to Cook Islands Maori and for specific Cook Islands guidance to be developed;
- Where will resources come from for the increased responsibilities associated with OECM recognition, management, and ongoing monitoring?;
- The 'Other' part of the OECM name was considered by some participants to have negative connotations and dismiss their diverse conservation efforts as secondary or less important. Though it is not possible to change CBD text, the Cook Islands may be able to create their own term for OECMs that is more acceptable to all stakeholders;

- How to obtain community buy-in and support, and how can true Free Prior and Informed Consent be achieved?;
- How can OECMs be adapted to Cook Islands contexts and perspectives?; and
- How can the commitment to the OECM designation be preserved between generations?

These concerns should be adequately addressed and mitigated to the extent possible when looking to recognise a site as an OECM, and through the development of equitable processes around OECM recognition and reporting that respond to these concerns. In particular, processes and terminology specific to the Cook Islands should be developed with these concerns in mind.

5 OECMs in the Cook Islands

According to national estimates of protected area coverage, the Cook Islands have protected 25.1% of their terrestrial area and 16.4% of their marine area, though this number is likely to increase with further recognition of OECMs and other protected areas. Though these statistics currently differ from those on Protected Planet (which are presently 25.15% terrestrial and 100% marine), SPREP, UNEP-WCMC and IUCN ORO are working with the Cook Islands National Environment Service to update the spatial data and ensure that these statistics are aligned.

Recognising OECMs and supporting them nationally and locally will enable the Cook Islands to continue to make progress towards global and national goals (including Target 3 of the Global Biodiversity Framework - protecting and conserving 30% of the world by 2030), as well as recognise and support the diversity of area-based conservation in the country, and plan future conservation efforts against a more accurate baseline. OECMs may be particularly relevant to the Cook Islands, due to the important role that traditional leaders and local communities have played in the conservation and sustainable use of ecosystems.

Relevant existing legislation in the Cook Islands for protected and conserved areas namely includes the Environment Act (2003), the Marae Moana Act (2017), and the Marine Resources Act (2005) (Sheppard, 2020 [more details on legislation available here]), as well as the Environment (Takuvaive Water Catchment Management Plan) Regulations (2006) (Cook Islands Government, 2006). Oversight on Cook Islands biodiversity conservation projects is also performed by the Cook Islands National Biodiversity Steering Committee, which is composed of key government agencies and non-government organisations (CBD, 2020).

Based on Twyford's (2021) Cook Islands Protected Area Classification System Policy Paper, the Cook Islands has a great diversity of area-based conservation activities. Terrestrial

protected areas include **Ra'ui motukore**, **Nature Reserves**, and **National Parks**, whilst marine protected areas take the form of either **Ra'ui motukore** or specific **Marae Moana zones (Marine Conservation zones; National Marine Park Zones; or Preservation Zones)**. Currently there are an estimated 10 protected areas in the Cook Islands, though there are a further 7 sites that may qualify (Twyford, 2021). However, there are also 'managed areas', which support customary resources stewardship and management whilst also achieving positive biodiversity outcomes, though these don't meet the IUCN definition of a protected area. Some of these managed areas may be OECMs.

There are a few different forms of 'managed area' that exist in the Cook Islands. **Land-based and marine ra'ui** are the temporary protection of sites to allow for resources (e.g. fish populations) to recover so that they can continue to be used sustainably, and follow a traditional form of resource management. **Conservation areas** are for the protection of significant natural systems, resources, processes, or values. There are also **non-MPA zones in Marae Moana (Seabed Mining Zones and General Use Zones)** and **other land areas** that have various objectives. An estimated 89 'managed areas' exist in the Cook Islands (Twyford, 2021). One of the recommendations by Twyford (2021) was that "managed areas are assessed and OECMs are identified and entered onto the WD-OECM, and be used to report against the Cook Islands' global obligations under the CBD and SDGs" (Twyford, 2021).

5.1 Ra'ui and Ra'ui Mutukore

The temporary nature of ra'ui make for an interesting case in terms of whether the OECM designation may qualify, as seasonal or time-sensitive measures would be unlikely to meet the criteria around long-term conservation. There are however similar conversations in other parts of the world, such as whether time-bound area-based fisheries management measures may qualify. Ultimately, as with the other possible OECMs, it will depend on whether the individual site meets the CBD definition of an OECM (CBD, 2018), particularly in terms of the *positive and sustained long-term* biodiversity outcomes. Twyford (2021) also notes the potential difficulties of keeping data up-to-date, as ra'ui start, stop, and move so often. Ra'ui mutukore, being a permanent "designation", may be more likely to qualify particularly where they are not already considered protected areas. However, Twyford (2021) suggested that ra'ui mutukore are more suitable for a protected area designation, whereas ra'ui should be assessed against the OECM definition. In the January 2023 workshop, a number of ra'ui were taken through the OECM screening tool and so qualify for the next stage of assessment (see Figure 3). These included: Aroa lagoon ra'ui; Avana/Aroko lagoon ra'ui; Pouara ra'ui; and Akapuao ra'ui (see Appendix 1 for a full list of sites).

5.2 Marae Moana

Marae Moana refers to the zonation of the Cook Islands' exclusive economic zone, taking the form of a multiple-use marine park. It covers approximately 1.9 million km² and is managed primarily by the Marae Moana Council (Marae Moana, 2022). The zones include:

- A general use zone – provides some protections for marine biodiversity whilst also allowing several sustainable uses;
- A restricted commercial fishing zone – additionally restricts large-scale commercial fishing, whilst still allowing for other sustainable uses;

- A seabed minerals activity buffer zone – restricts seabed minerals activities (e.g. deep-sea mining), whilst still allowing for other sustainable uses.
- An island protection zone – designed to conserve island, coastal, and shallow water habitats with restrictions on large-scale commercial fishing and seabed minerals activities, though still allowing for other sustainable uses.
- An ocean habitat preservation zone – protects marine habitats, restricting any possible damaging activities but still allowing for other sustainable uses.
- A national marine park zone – strict protection of habitats, including coastal and lagoons outside human jurisdictions.

The national marine park zones are likely to be protected areas (pending completion of the spatial plan), in addition to specific marine protected areas established under the same Marae Moana Act (2017). However, the other zones could qualify for OECMs based on the CBD definition (CBD 2018), and should be screened using the OECM site-level assessment tool to determine which individual zones could qualify for a full assessment.

5.3 Highlighted sites from the workshop

In the January 2023 OECM workshop, participants were invited to test out the OECM screening tool (stage 1 of the site-level assessment tool, see Figure 2) to begin identifying some sites in the Cook Islands that may be most likely to meet the OECM criteria. A full list of sites identified by the participants is provided in Appendix 1, but a few key sites are highlighted here:

Takitumu Conservation Area, Rarotonga

Takitumu Conservation Area is an area managed primarily for protection of the breeding grounds of the endemic Rarotonga flycatcher, but also for its various other biodiversity values. The site is situated on the southern side of Rarotonga - covering around 155 hectares of lowland forest, providing shelter to a number of endangered and native species including the Cook Islands fruit bat and the Rarotonga monarch. Management of Takitumu Conservation Area is overseen by the Takitumu Conservation Area Trust, which collaborates with the Cook Islands government, local landowners, and the community to safeguard the region’s biodiversity and encourage sustainable usage of its natural resources. The trust is involved in various conservation initiatives such as habitat restoration, predator control, and species monitoring (Te Ipukarea Society, 2023). The site was taken through the screening tool in the January 2023 workshop, with the results suggesting it is a potential OECM:

Screening tool criteria	Participant response
Criterion A: The site is not a protected area.	Yes. Takitumu Conservation Area, whilst likely meeting the definition of a protected area, has not been recognised specifically as such. It could potentially therefore also qualify as an OECM with the primary objective of conservation, depending on the preference of the governance authority.

<p>Criterion B: The site is likely to support important biodiversity values.</p>	<p>Yes. Participants at the workshop identified the following as being supported by the Takitumu Conservation Area, based on the IUCN OECM assessment tool:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rare, threatened or endangered species and ecosystems; • natural ecosystems which are under-represented in protected area networks; • high level of ecological integrity or intactness; • important species aggregations, such as spawning, breeding or feeding areas; and • importance for ecological connectivity, as part of a network of sites in a landscape or seascape.
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Takuvaine Water Catchment Management Area, Rarotonga

Takuvaine Water Catchment Management Area, situated in the centre of Rarotonga, is responsible for supplying fresh water to much of the island’s population, making it a crucial resource for the local community. The area is managed by the Takuvaine Water Management Committee, and comprises a mix of forest, agricultural land, and residential areas. The committee works to protect the area’s water resources and biodiversity, and the screening tool results from the January 2023 workshop suggest this site is a potential OECM.

Screening tool criteria	Participant response
<p>Criterion A: The site is not a protected area.</p>	<p>Yes. Takuvaine Water Catchment Management Area is managed primarily to protect drinking water resources on the island, but in doing so maintains the biodiversity of the site.</p>
<p>Criterion B: The site is likely to support important biodiversity values.</p>	<p>Yes. Participants at the workshop identified the following as being supported by the Takitumu Conservation Area, based on the IUCN OECM assessment tool:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • important species aggregations, such as spawning, breeding or feeding areas; and • importance for ecological connectivity, as part of a network of sites in a landscape or seascape.

Manuae

Manuae is a remote atoll located east of Aitutaki in the Cook Islands, consisting of a lagoon and surrounding coral reefs and islets. The atoll contains habitat that supports a variety of species, including marine life and various bird species. The Manuae Enea Conservation Trust

is responsible for managing the atoll and works to conserve the island’s natural environment as well as preserve its cultural heritage and explore educational and ecotourism opportunities (MECT, 2023). Participants of the January 2023 workshop assessed Manuae against the OECM screening criteria and found the site was likely to be a potential OECM:

Screening tool criteria	Participant response
Criterion A: The site is not a protected area.	Yes. The area is managed primarily for biodiversity conservation.
Criterion B: The site is likely to support important biodiversity values.	Yes. Participants at the workshop identified the following as being supported by the Takitumu Conservation Area, based on the IUCN OECM assessment tool: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rare, threatened or endangered species and ecosystems; and • high level of ecological integrity or intactness.

To proceed to a full OECM assessment, the management and governance authorities of all these sites would first need to provide their free, prior, and informed consent (see Figure 2).

6 Recommendations for OECMs going forward

Following the literature review, outcomes of the January 2023 OECM workshop, and discussions between the National Environment Service (NES), SPREP, IUCN Oceania, and UNEP-WCMC, a number of key actions for moving forward with OECM recognition and reporting were identified. These are presented in the form of a roadmap, and should be adapted further according to the Cook Islands context. The proposed steps do not necessarily need to be completed in sequential order, they rather serve as a foundation for further discussions domestically in the Cook Islands.

Roadmap: Next steps for OECMs in the Cook Islands

	Steps	Supporting organisations	Outputs
1	Generate a comprehensive list of potential OECMs in the Cook Islands, using the OECM screening tool and with spatial information where possible, and in addition to other areas of conservation value (e.g. protected areas, locally managed marine areas).	NES, UNEP-WCMC, SPREP	List of conservation sites in the Cook Islands.

	Steps	Supporting organisations	Outputs
2	<p>Develop Cook Islands OECM draft processes. Recommended considerations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of committee to verify OECM assessments, including key stakeholder representatives and decision-makers (or allocation of responsibilities to Biodiversity Steering Committee or sub-Committee) • Stakeholder mapping process to ensure all stakeholders are identified and sufficiently consulted with. • Engagement process for governance authorities, managers, and stakeholders of potential OECMs to go through OECM assessment. • Adaptation of global OECM terminology and criteria to the Cook Islands context, including creating a locally appropriate name and assessment criteria that align with those established by IUCN. • Understand opportunities and options for funding, financial incentives, and resources available to OECM sites (e.g. support in building ecotourism business, or creating an ‘incentives’ package). • Creation of an agreement process, for example a Terms of Reference, for area managers and governance authorities to co-sign with NES to formalise agreement on OECM recognition and to document consent. 	NES; Marae Moana; others as needed	Cook Islands OECM draft processes; Cook Islands-specific OECM materials.
3	<p>Pilot OECM evaluations in potential OECM sites, including Takitumu Conservation Area.</p>	NES, Takitumu Conservation Area, others	Completed OECM assessments documented; Candidate OECMs identified; case studies generated.

	Steps	Supporting organisations	Outputs
4	<p>Host a workshop to consult with conservation practitioners and a diverse range of other stakeholders (e.g. different government branches, private sector, representatives from each island) on the OECM draft processes, receive feedback on the assessment tool, and increase understanding of OECMs in the Cook Islands (including discussing tangible benefits of recognition and financing mechanisms). Adapt the draft processes in response to feedback.</p>	NES, SPREP	Workshop report, written feedback on OECM draft processes.
5	<p>Integrate OECMs into wider protected and conserved area processes. Recommended considerations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing protected areas legislation to include OECMs, including via revision of the Cook Islands NBSAP in 2023. • Creating a national database of protected and conserved areas in the Cook Islands, including establishing reporting processes to SPREP and Protected Planet. • Scoping national funding mechanisms for conservation activities, including for monitoring and enforcement of OECMs. • Scoping options for conservation of areas not currently under management (e.g. Rarotongan Cloud Forest, Tema Reef). 	NES, others as needed (e.g. consultant).	
6	<p>Document the OECM recognition and reporting process, to support learning and adaptive processes, including through production of a scientific paper led by NES staff.</p>	NES, SPREP, UNEP-WCMC, IUCN ORO	

As of April 2023, the Cook Islands National Environment Service has already engaged with the governance authority and stakeholders of the Takitumu Conservation Area to begin

assessing the site as an OECM. Continuing this momentum will enable the Cook Islands to further recognise the diverse range of conservation activities that occur across the country, and meet its obligations to Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity framework.

Reporting OECMs

Once an OECM has been recognised it can be submitted to the World Database on OECMs, which tracks progress towards Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Spatial data (i.e. data on the location and boundary of the site) along with further information on the site (e.g. its name, area, and management authority) should be sent to SPREP for processing, after which SPREP will share the data with UNEP-WCMC. [More information on the data required can be found here.](#)

Additional links for reference:

- [Pacific Islands Protected Area Portal](#)
- [Protected Planet](#)

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Appendix 1: List of sites identified by participants of the January 2023 OECM workshop.

Biodiversity outcomes for the screening are coded as follows (IUCN-WCPA, 2022):

A	Rare, threatened or endangered species and ecosystems
B	Natural ecosystems which are underrepresented in protected area networks
C	High level of ecological integrity or intactness
D	Significant populations of range restricted species or ecosystems
E	Important species aggregations, such as spawning, breeding or feeding areas
F	Importance for ecological connectivity, as part of a network of sites in a landscape or seascape

Site Name	OECM screening completed by participants?
Takitumu Conservation Area	Yes, passed. Likely biodiversity outcomes: A;B;C;E;F
Takuvaine Valley Catchment	Yes, passed. Likely biodiversity outcomes: E;F
Mokoero Reserve	No
Ra'ui	Yes, passed. Likely biodiversity outcomes: A;B;E;F
- Aroa lagoon ra'ui	Yes, passed. Likely biodiversity outcomes: A;C;E;F
- Avana/Aroko lagoon ra'ui	Yes, passed. Likely biodiversity outcomes: A;D;F
- Pouara ra'ui	Yes, passed. Likely biodiversity outcomes: D;F

Site Name	OECM screening completed by participants?
- Akapuao ra'ui	Yes, passed. Likely biodiversity outcomes: D;E;F
- Rarotongan resort ra'ui	No
- Tuingara ra'ui	No
- Motitara ra'ui	No
Anatakitaki	No
Avaavaaroa passage	Yes, passed. Information missing on likely biodiversity outcomes.
Ministry of Cultural Development historical sites	No
Manuae	Yes, passed. Likely biodiversity outcomes: A;C
Rarotonga cloud forests	Yes, passed. Likely biodiversity outcomes: A;B;C;D;E;F
Mitiaro caves	No
Mitiaro lake	No
Taro Patch	No
Ngatote water intake	No
Ngati Kainuku	No
Taatai/Tapatai/Taioto	No

Site Name	OECM screening completed by participants?
Aitutaki Bonefish Reserve	Yes, passed. Likely biodiversity outcomes: A;B;C;D;E;F
Aitutaki Trochus Reserve	No
Suwarrow	No
Manihiki	No
Takutea	No
Marae Moana	No
Flying Venus Reef (near Penrhyn)	No
Tema Reef (near Pukapuka)	No
Church grounds	No
Puna Vai	No
Tribal Maraes	No
Highland Paradise	No
Maungaroa	Yes, passed. Likely biodiversity outcomes: A;B;C;D;E;F
Other traditional ra'ui	No
Anatakitaki	No
Burial sites	No
Ati Hilaecine	No

Site Name	OECM screening completed by participants?
Titikaveka	No
Raina	No
Tupapa stream	No
Avatiu stream	No

Sites important for biodiversity but not currently managed in any way:

- Swamp lands, lakes, caves, wetlands
- Cloud forest
- Church grounds

Appendix 2: Initial summary of the January 2023 workshop

The workshop on OECMs in the Cook Islands was held between the 23rd and 25th of January, 2023, at the Edgewater Resort and Spa, Rarotonga. The aim of the workshop was to understand and discuss the potential of recognizing and reporting OECMs in the Cook Islands, including both possible benefits and drawbacks, through convening and supporting a participatory workshop involving representatives from governments, local communities, private sector, and more. The workshop was jointly funded between the BIOPAMA and ACP MEAs 3 programmes. The specific objectives were as follows:

- Improve understanding of OECMs among conservation practitioners and policymakers in the Cook Islands;
- Gain an insight into potential OECMs in the Cook Islands, and concerns specific to both the country and the Pacific region; and
- Identify recommendations for next steps on recognizing and reporting OECMs in the Cook Islands.

OECMs were not well-known in the Cook Islands. At the opening of the session, according to a Menti quiz, 53% of respondents were not at all familiar with OECMs and 47% were somewhat familiar. No participants were very familiar. Participants reported their desires for the workshop as being around improving their understanding and awareness, finding out what support is available for OECMs, and to see what solutions OECMs might provide to conservation problems.

The workshop was well-attended, with 40 participants outside of the core team.

Participants hailed from various government departments (Environment; Fisheries; Office of the Prime Minister), local landowner groups, local NGOs, and the private sector (tourism groups, journalists).

Confusion lay particularly around the difference between OECMs and protected areas. The greatest point of confusion was around OECMs that had conservation as their primary objective. It was clarified that in most of these cases, the governance authority can choose between their preference over the protected area or OECM title, though this can also depend on the national government legislation in place around protected areas. This will be a key point to expand upon in the follow-up discussion paper and in future workshops more generally.

A key point of emphasis around OECMs needs to continue being the strong 'biodiversity outcomes'. There were many questions around whether certain types of areas unique to the Cook Islands could qualify as OECMs. While many such as the watershed protection areas or the permanent locally managed fisheries closures certainly could, there were questions around traditional agricultural areas or temporary fishing closures which appear much less likely to achieve the conservation outcomes needed based on the achievement of biodiversity outcomes, and so may be better suited as 'sustainable use areas', which it is important that we promote also.

Benefits and drawbacks surrounding OECMs were identified and discussed by participants. Benefits included potential for greater funding and resources, recognition of conservation efforts, preserving traditional knowledge and practices, and encouraging transparency and education. Drawbacks included the potential for not getting sufficient government support, difficulties with enforcement, confusion around OECM criteria, and concerns over safeguarding local landowner rights, among others.

The ‘Other’ part of the OECM term was rejected by some participants. They felt it made forms of area-based conservation or management that didn’t fall into the ‘protected area box’ second class or somehow less important. Though CBD text cannot be changed (at least in the near-term), it was an important criticism, and potentially one that can be partly addressed at the national level (i.e. by having nationally-specific terminology).

There were lessons learned both for future workshops and for points of clarification for the follow-up discussion paper [this document]. More concrete examples and case studies are needed, and language and conservation ‘jargon’ needs to be simplified to support with understanding of participants. Examples of OECM recognition frameworks used in other countries (e.g. Canada, Philippines) may also support discussions. The broader context of OECMs, and how they relate to other forms of area-based conservation (e.g. protected areas, ICCAs, locally managed marine areas) is one of the most vital parts of these workshops, and needs to be given sufficient time in the agenda.

Over 10 potential OECMs were identified in the workshop. This was through a participatory activity running through the IUCN OECM screening tool. As participants were largely based on the main island (Rarotonga), it is likely there are many more potential OECMs in the other 14 islands.

Outcomes:

- Participants gained a greater understanding of what OECMs are and why they might be important to both them and the biodiversity of the Cook Islands. At the end of the workshop, when asked the extent to which participants were now familiar with OECMs, 0% answered not familiar, 63% answered somewhat familiar, and 37% answered very familiar. 87.5% of respondents indicated they would like to be further involved with OECMs going forward.
- The outcomes of the workshop will be built into a discussion paper [this document], under the BIOPAMA project. The discussion paper will include recommendations on next steps for the Cook Islands to take OECMs forward, determined in collaboration with National Environment Service and the BIOPAMA partners based in the Pacific.
- The Cook Islands are already moving forward with assessing OECMs in the country. The National Environment Service is currently seeking the Free, Prior and Informed Consent of the governance authority and stakeholders of the Takitumu Conservation Area to carry out a full OECM assessment.
- Other countries in the region are taking note. The intention was for this workshop and process to be the catalyst for OECM recognition and reporting across the Pacific region. The workshop received media coverage in Samoa (and potentially others), and several countries have expressed interest in recognising OECMs.