Title of the Story: Rapa Nui: Enhancement of ancestral teachings in one of the most isolated places in the world

Destination Name: (include any state, province or region)
Rapa Nui

Country: Chile

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Nomination Category: (Please check the boxes that indicate the focus of your story)

☐ Localizing the destination supply chain
☐ Decarbonizing the destination supply chain
☐ Culture & Communities
☐ Environment & Climate
☐ Nature & Ecotourism
☒ Tourism Reset & Recovery
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Issues faced

How can one of the most isolated territories on the planet be reinvented, while seeking to protect its environment and culture in times of pandemic?

COVID-19 forced the inhabitants of Rapa Nui, an island highly dependent on tourist activity, to take shelter and appeal to ancestral knowledge and the legacy of their ancestors, prioritizing self-care with programs that allow building a healthy society, in order to welcome visitors with affection in the future, something typical of this resilient community.

Located at a distance of 3700 km from Chile is the most remote island in the world. Rapa Nui, which in the original language means "Big Island", was discovered by the West in 1722, with the arrival of Jacob Roggeveen, a Dutch explorer who, during an expedition through Oceania, found this territory naming it Easter Island, coinciding with on Easter day.

This island has been known worldwide for its mythical stone sculptures called Moai, which were sculpted by the ancestors, called in the local language as "tupuna", who sought to transfer their spiritual power or "mana" to honor the good practices of some man.

For the local community, the Moai represents the “aringa’ ora “, which is translated as the living face of our ancestors. To the world, we reflect a living culture full of archeology, magic and tradition.

In the context of a new paradigm faced by global society, Rapa Nui sees the COVID-19 pandemic and the postpandemic period as an opportunity to show the world that the use of wisdom can rise as a significant contribution to humanity.

On March 14, 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic that was hitting the world, the last commercial flight to and from Rapa Nui was made, leaving the island completely closed. At that moment, an ancestral sacred order called "Tapu" was decreed, which meant that compulsory self-care had to be performed on all the inhabitants of Rapa Nui. This measure was led by the Tavana (mayor) in order to protect the community through this ancestral concept already known to their descendants.

The main challenge was to close the island to the main economic activity; In a territory inhabited by just over 7000 inhabitants, to stop receiving the more than 100,000 visitors who arrived before the pandemic is an opportunity to reflect on what tourism activity really means.
The pandemic considerably affected the island's economic activity, which was largely dependent on tourism. However, Rapa Nui was able to continue forward since the so-called “Plan A.M.O.R.” has been applied since 2012, whose axes lead to face the labor, economic and social consequences with serenity, civility and wisdom.

Rapa Nui with A.M.O.R. It is the plan that provides the logical, practical and conceptual sense that guides the development of the commune and the work of the local government, the axes of sustainability, continuous improvement, optimization of resources and respect as an intrinsic value in the ancestral worldview.

Each of the actions carried out by the local government of Rapa Nui are framed in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, with Rapa Nui considered a mirror territory for the implementation of these guidelines.

On the axis of sustainability, the central objective is the sustainable development of Rapa Nui, seeking to build a balanced society that focuses on the well-being of the individual and their environment. To this end, the concepts that define the cultural identity of Rapa Nui are promoted, orienting itself towards being a healthy, conscious and consistent community, with the sufficient capacity to live together in harmony, from generation to generation.

The specific objectives of this axis are to advance in food sovereignty, ensure ecosystem balance, advance in energy and water efficiency, strengthen waste management, strengthen cultural values such as the use of the Rapa Nui language and advance towards sustainable tourism.

On the axis of continuous improvement, it is understood that the continuity of progress is essential for the development of a sustainable community. To this end, it seeks to promote participation, collection, management of knowledge and training, advancing in strengthening the efficiency and solidity of the institutions as well as the collaboration between them.

The specific objectives of this axis are to promote citizen participation, generate training opportunities, generate inclusive spaces and develop and enhance sustainable mobility systems.

In the resource optimization axis, it seeks to promote the concepts of reciprocity, efficiency and cooperation, of the Rapa Nui worldview, with the objective of implementing a circular economy.

The specific objectives of this axis are to promote the conscious use of available resources, generate local, national and international alliances and promote the circular economy.

Finally, the axis of respect is considered the essential value of the Rapa Nui cultural identity. The attitude of respect towards the ancestors and the social, cultural and natural environment is the basis for the development and maintenance of the local culture.

The specific objectives are to promote self-care in the different stages of life, promote inclusion and good coexistence, and strengthen support for families.
At all times we seek to instill respect to guide and enhance all our work to optimize resources and continuous improvements to move towards a sustainable Rapa Nui.

A.M.O.R = MO‘A: Role of the Rapa Nui Worldview

We apply Rapa Nui indigenous wisdom to guide and motivate our actions towards more sustainable development.

According to conversations with local leaders, we highlight the most relevant elements of the Rapa Nui worldview: 1) Mo‘a: It is a value principle, referring to respect for being and their way of relating to others, with their social, cultural and natural environment; with their ancestors, with their language and also with their ‘ono tupuna (heritage, cultural heritage, legacy). It is an essential value for social balance and for fostering a sustainable community.

2) Haka Ara: It is the legacy of the ancestors and cultural heritage, which includes traditional knowledge and contemporary practices. Rapa Nui cultural knowledge includes many generations of learning and provides us with essential tools to maintain a community in balance with its environment. The rescue and promotion of ancestral wisdom is key to sustainable development.

3) Kaiŋa: It refers to the mother’s womb and the land where one grows, develops, gives life to its culture and identity as a people. As well as the concept of “Mother Earth”, Kaiŋa represents the source of life that nourishes, sustains and teaches us, in addition to carrying a sense of belonging to a place as it connects us with our past, present and future generations. It is because of this deep bond that it is understood that everything is interconnected.

4) ‘Umaŋa: It is an action that is born from the will and commitment to deliver and work, reciprocally, for a common good, both for the family group and for the community. The spirit of reciprocity fosters cooperation and trust, key factors for a healthy and resilient community.

5) Hua’ai: It refers to the family and the support structure with reciprocal responsibilities and obligations typical of the family model. Additionally, it is a model for team building and collaborative work at the community level. The family, being the nucleus of the community, is a basic concept for sustainable development.

Key success factors

The ancestral values of "tapu" and "umanga", which correspond to discipline in the face of measures and collective care, are some of the keys to understanding why the area has managed to eliminate outbreaks of contagion by Coronavirus for 14 months.

The authorities indicate that the health strategy has been focused on working in the community and in conjunction with the local population, in a coordinated manner.

Umanga is something that is born from collaborating and supporting beyond the classic western views, it has to do with empathy, affection and understanding. Do not look at appearances or differences and where the local community has managed to help each other, without thinking about rewards.

The success of the A.M.O.R. It is because he was thinking from the beginning as the ideal for the Development of Rapa Nui. In other words, at the most critical moment, it has been possible to demonstrate to the whole world that it is possible to take a different path from the one that has been traveled, it is possible to visualize an increasingly sustainable future, putting people’s well-being first. This approach will make it possible to explore the opportunities to replicate this type of plans and initiatives in various territories, considering the 17 sustainable development goals as keys to a better tomorrow.

The local culture begins to understand the increasing importance of caring for nature, over exploitation. Children, youth and older adults are valued and protected, not forgetting their contribution to society. Biodiversity is celebrated and it is understood that respect is crucial for the benefit of all the island’s inhabitants.
together with the local community, 40 actions pertinent to local sustainable development were prioritized. Goals are set that are related to the island’s geographic vulnerability, food sovereignty, health, education, gender equity, water efficiency, energy efficiency, inclusive cities, protection of culture, responsible consumption, sustainable tourism, climate action, and protection of biodiversity.

Lessons learned

The pandemic invites us to make a self-reflection of our house, invites us to stop and analyze our living, our territory and how we are going to be able to live in our future.

In Rapa Nui, despite all the adversities that have arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the outlook has not been bleak, as we have demonstrated the great resilience of the Rapa Nui people, as well as how well we have been able to manage government funds to be able to generate hundreds of jobs in times of pandemic, contributing to the circular economy since many products that supply us today are local.

On the other hand, this program called Proempleo, has been able to benefit our children, men and women; and our “koros” and “nuas” (elderly) through various social aids, which until before the pandemic had not been possible, such as the creation of their family gardens, manufacture of elements with recycled material, delivered free of charge, to the community, cleaning of land for the elderly for greater well-being, creation of educational workshops focused on sustainability for children throughout the year; as well as a cadastre of elements of inclusivity present in the urban area, cleaning of coastal areas and the seabed, achieving to date the collection of nine tons of waste, mainly plastic from distant places.

Results, achievements and recognitions

For the first time in decades, there are no visitors to the island to attend to, and the Rapanui have taken advantage of this to turn the crisis into a development opportunity. Faced with the estimated 4,200 unemployed left by the collapse of the economy, the mayor of Rapa Nui created an emergency employment program, based exclusively on community work and sustainability.

Today there are 1,200 people hired to plant flowers and trees, open new trekking trails, paint schools and assist the elderly. Some dive to clean up debris that pollutes corals and seamounts. Others collect trash from the beaches left by tourism and separate tons of beer bottles, wine and beverage cans. In the words of Mayor Pedro Edmunds “A place with a prestigious millenary culture on the planet cannot be accumulating hills of garbage or debris, that is why we are processing the waste and we are preparing for an eventual future opening to tourist activity.”

The case of Rapa Nui and its survival against COVID-19 is recognized worldwide, since thanks to sacred orders, it has been possible to keep the community free of COVID until today, in addition to the efforts of multiple actors in obtaining resources to generate jobs in times of pandemic and help the local community, regardless of whether they are local or foreign.

Nowadays, multiple efforts are being made to improve the conditions of the inhabitants of Rapa Nui, to generate instances of citizen participation in various areas, as well as in the union of the various actors of our territory, a previously very complicated task.
Additional references

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