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How did Chile acquire Easter Island?

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THE FACT THAT CHILE, a small South American country, distant by 2,000 miles and with absolutely no Polynesian ties, exercises sovereignty over Easter Island is, to many, a mystery as profound as the origin of the giant stone statues that cover the island. This paper will not rectify errors, will not set the record straight but it will, hopefully, tell the story of how this remote acquisition by the Republic of Chile came about.

Historically, the island could have been claimed by Holland because the Dutch Admiral Jacob Roggeveen was the first European in command of an expedition that set foot on the island on Easter Sunday 1722.¹ The land is said to have been sighted before by Edward Davis aboard his *Bachelor's Delight* in 1687 but the Englishman did not land. Although its general location was known, Davis' description exaggerated the size of the island that was named "Land of Davis." But it would take another 50 years for the island to be sighted again.

Under new policies, which the Bourbons brought to the Spanish throne, orders were issued by the viceroy of Peru to two Spanish captains, Felipe Gonzales and Antonio Dumont² to take possession of the "Tierra de Davis." This expedition landed in what is now called Rapa Nui and took possession in 1770 under the name of the King. In his majesty's honor the island was called San Carlos. It is significant that, in accordance with Spanish tradition, a document was drawn and duly signed by the Castillians in Spanish and by the natives in their native hieroglyphics characters.³ Although the Spanish name did not last, the signed Act of Possession meant that Spain had acquired the legal right to the land (Vazquez de Acuña 1991).⁴

Two other visitors would land on the Island during the 18th century. Captain James Cook in the *Resolution* arrived in 1774 and left complete descriptions of giant stone statues and the natives. Twelve years later, La Pérouse's two ships, the *Astrolabe* and the *Boussole*, dropped anchor in the bay that still carries his name.

These five expeditions visited the island and provided a wealth of information about its location, geography, ethnography and statuary. But the 19th century was to bring tragedy to the island, rendered by Westerners. The America schooner *Nancy*, out of Baltimore, landed in Rapa Nui sometime during 1805 and forcibly kidnapped women and men to take to the Juan Fernández Islands for the purpose of rendering sea otters. The native friendliness turned to outright belligerency from that time on, and at least two ships trying to land where repelled by a hail of stones and spears. Although two warships, the Russian ship *Rurik*, under Otto von Kotzebue in 1816, and the British ship *Blossom* in 1826, managed to land armed parties, the attitude of the natives was unfriendly. Women and children hid in caves. It was after these two forcible landings that the Chilean schooner *Colo-colo* under command of Leoncio Señoret visited the island in 1837 on his way back from delivering political exiles to Port Sidney, Australia. Señoret filed no report, or at least

it has not been found in naval archives, and the trip had no impact in Chile or in Rapa Nui (Fuenzalida Bade 1985:212).

Between 1859 and 1863 several Peruvian vessels arrived in Rapa Nui and either by deception or force, managed to extract between 800 and 1200 of the natives. Among them was the king Kana-Koi, his son Maurata and members of his family, most of the *maori* (wise men), men who knew how to write and read the *rongorongo* tablets, and other notables who were acquainted with ancient knowledge and traditions. These wretches were taken to Peru and literally sold as slaves to work on the guano industry on the Chincha Islands.⁵

This act of infamy was to have serious consequences that would profoundly alter life on the island. Of those abducted, the majority died as a consequence of the wet and cold climate, illness, malnutrition, and forced labor. Those left leaderless on the island tried to gain power for themselves with the result that anarchy, hate, hunger, and death took their toll in the remaining population. Although there are no reliable statistics, from the 1800 inhabitants of 1860, in three years the population had dropped to half.⁶

When the French frigate Cassini visited Rapa Nui in 1862, Captain Lejeune learned of the slave raids and hastened to Valparaíso where he reported the situation to the local authorities. Chile, at that time, had no control over the island and the government did nothing, but the Catholic bishop notified Monsignor Tepano Jaussen, Bishop of Tahiti, who had lived in Valparaíso between 1844 and 1848 as a member of the Congregation of Sacred Hearts of Pinctus, SSCC. The prelate appealed to the French government, which, in turn, filed a strong protest with the government of Peru, thus ending this veritable hunt for human beings in the Pacific Islands. The French managed to rescue around 100 islanders and take them back to Rapa Nui, but 85 died during the trip and those who finally returned carried with them smallpox and venereal diseases which devastated the population. By 1970, the number of islanders had been reduced to no more than 600 (Prat 1902:626). The actual number of returnees is not known.

Some authors limit them to six. There is no question that the Rapanui were led by a French missionary, Brother Eugenio Eyraud, SSCC. Brother Eugenio was a convert from the Valparaíso congregation who had moved to Chile after working in the mines of Bolivia. The schooner *Favorita* dropped him off in January of 1864 and promptly left, leaving him without resources or supplies. During the nine months he remained in the island he was practically alone, for the natives would not befriend him. Upon his return to Valparaíso, he presented his superiors with the sad facts of the island. He was authorized to set up a mission and he gathered supplies, tools, seeds and other materials to take to the island. In March of 1866 he was back, accompanied this time by another SSCC member, Father Hipolito Roussel. This time, the natives, no doubt attracted by

the material goods they brought, were willing participants in the mission. The missionaries taught them Spanish, showed them how to cultivate the land, care for domestic animals, and introduced them to the Christian faith. But more important for our study, the missionaries had taken with them a Chilean flag, specially made for them, that was hoisted from a mast for special occasions and whenever a ship approached the shores.

A few months after their arrival, two more disembarked: a priest, Father Gaspar Zumbohm and a brother, Téodule Escolan, from the same SSCC congregation. The mission turned into an unqualified success. By 1868, all the natives had been baptized and Brother Eugenio had given his all to the local population, with love and dedication so profound that he has been rightly called the Apostle of Easter Island. When he died on 9 August 1868, he was buried next to the church. His grave is still venerated by the Rapanui (Figures 1 and 2).

Father Gaspar returned to Valparaíso in 1869 to gather



Figure 1. The graves of Sebastian Englert and Eugene Eyraud are adjacent to the church. (Photo by G. Lee).

supplies and clothing for his charges. His arrival awakened some interest in Chile on the island. *El Mercurio* published an article asking the government to take possession of the land. As a result of Father Gaspar's actions, the government decided to send the corvette *O'Higgins* with the dual purpose of training midshipmen and studying the conditions of the island.

The corvette arrived in January of 1870 under the command of J. Anacleto Goñi. Three of the corvette's officers were to have a significant role in the final incorporation of the island. First, Commander Ignacio Gana (1930), who wrote a complete report on the physical conditions of the land; second, the surgeon Thomas Bate, reported on the inhabitants; while a third, a young midshipman named Policarpo Toro, would become interested in Rapa Nui—an interest that was to last a lifetime, and one that would be the most significant factor in the incorporation of the island to Chile's national entity.

But also in 1870, the captain of the French schooner *Tampico*, Mr. Dutrou-Bornier, landed in the island and, associating himself with an Englishman, John Brander, started a sheep ranch. Dutrou-Bornier married Koreto, the daughter of one of the local leaders and one who claimed Royal rights. By false promises, he managed to acquire much of the available land and even managed to send some of the natives to sugar plantations in Tahiti. When the missionaries objected, he led the natives into a rebellion against the Church. Twice the mission church and house at Vaihu was burned. The Catholic clergymen decided to leave the island, together with a small group

of natives which no longer would tolerate the abuses of Dutrou-Bornier.⁷

Again, Monsignor Jaussen asked for help from Chile. Three times he wrote, asking that the government take over the island and offering all the church property for sale. He objected to Bornier and Brander's ownership, which he declared to be fraudulent. The government did not officially respond but, in 1875, the *O'Higgins* was again ordered to the Hanga Roa anchorage. By that time, the native population was at an all time low: 111 people.

The 1875 trip of the *O'Higgins*, this time under the command of J.E. López and with Lieutenant Toro on board, was of



Figure 2. A recently created statue, said to represent Brother Eyraud, stands at the island's church. Flower leis are often placed around the statue's neck. (Photo by G. Lee)

little consequence. Toro again observed the conditions ashore and the archeological sites which by now had attracted the attention of European scientists, and gathered more data for his studies on the island.⁸

Slowly an interest in the island developed in Chile. In 1885, the newly published *Revista de Marina*, carried an article by Chile's eminent Historian Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna (1885) on the distribution of the Pacific Islands, pointing out the French annexation of Tahiti, "under our own noses" and asking for the annexation of Easter Island. But nothing happened until 1886, when the corvette *Abtao* returned from a

training cruise to the island.⁹ Captain Toro, now a Lieutenant Commander presented, as his thesis for promotion, an extensive report on the favorable economic conditions of the island and the importance that would be acquired with the opening of an inter-oceanic canal in Panama. It carried the persuasive power to convince the government that annexation by Chile was a possibility.¹⁰

Within the government, Toro's proposal was subjected to intense study. Chile had unquestionable rights under the Act of Possession, signed by Gonzalez and Dumont.¹¹ In fact, Ignacio Molina, one of the Jesuits banished to Rome, had written in 1778 that the island, as well as San Felix and San Ambrosio, belonged to the 'Reyno de Chile' (Sepúlveda 1936:564-573).

Professor Adolfo Ibañez (1976:1) believes that Chile's geographical situation at the entrance of the Pacific Ocean connected Chile with Polynesia because expeditions coming from Europe had to go through Chile. "Without a doubt—he

adds—this is the most important fact to understand the incorporation of Easter Island into Chilean Sovereignty.” Similar thoughts have been promoted by Rodríguez Canessa (1998), and a number of Chilean authors have explored and analyzed the geopolitical impact of the island (Ghisolfo Araya 1985; Martínez Busch 1988). Would France and England, the two powers battling for Pacific possessions, object? Would there be opposition by other parties? The Ministry of Foreign Relations thought that France could not occupy the island without opposition from England and therefore, would be more inclined to let Chile annex it, rather than its rival. Letters from Tahiti seemed to confirm this thesis.¹² Germany was not yet ready to go into the Pacific. Japan had not yet started an expansionist policy and the United States was recovering from its Civil War. Peru, the only South American country that could claim some rights, had been totally defeated and Lima was occupied by the Chileans. The time was right and President José Manuel Balmaceda acted. Toro was ordered to Tahiti and told to negotiate the purchase of the land and buildings owned by French residents.

Toro sailed in a small schooner, the 150 ton *Paloma*, and stopped in Hanga Roa on his way to Pape‘ete. Upon his arrival, and with the help of Consul Alberto Goupil, a distinguished local lawyer, he signed agreements ‘ad-referendum’ for the purchase of the land and properties.¹³ He returned to Chile and legal experts who recommended to President Balmaceda that the French authorities be consulted carefully studied the documents. The President ignored their advice (Vergara 1939). Balmaceda then ordered that Policarpo Toro be given command of the cruiser *Angamos* in order to sail to Tahiti and close the deal.

Acting under the authority of the Ministerio de Colonización, Dávila Larraín, Captain Toro proceeded to pay two of the three sales agreements he had signed the year before. The contract called for the payment of 5000 francs to the local Church for the mission, lands and cattle it possessed on the island. Tatí Salmón was given 2000 pounds Sterling for his property. The last agreement was a bit thorny: the Brander brothers who had inherited part of the land from their father were suing the descendants of Dutrou-Bornier.¹⁴ A French court was to decide final ownership. Toro arranged for a lease agreement from the Branders until the situation was sorted out, although John Brander had agreed during a visit to Valparaíso the previous year, to sell all his properties to Chile for 6000 pounds Sterling.

Once these negotiations were concluded, Toro sailed back to Hanga Roa and managed to convince the native chiefs that annexation by Chile would be beneficial to them. On 9 November 1888 an agreement was signed by nine chiefs and witnesses. They ceded the rights to the island to the government of Chile, forever and without reservation, but reserving their rights and privileges as chiefs (Vergara 1939).¹⁵ Iono, Totena, Hito, Utino, Pava, Leremuti, Ika and Vachere Zoopal, Rupereto, Atamu Arri, and Petericko Tadorna signed the document. Unable to write, the natives marked an ‘x’ next to their names. Immediately after, Captain Toro wrote an *Acta de Ocupación*, taking possession of the island in the name of the Chilean government. It must have been a proud moment for Don Policarpo. After 18 years of constant efforts, letters and report writing, he finally could see the flag of his country flying in full majesty among the *moai* and the three mountains of Rapa Nui. But the chief of

the elders asked that their flag be flown too, insisting that they had sold nothing and that the land was to be under the protectorate of Chile. Wisely, Toro ordered that the Rapa Nui flag be hoisted on the same mast.¹⁶

But Toro’s troubles and tribulations were not yet over. The land had been purchased from the French missionaries. Tatí Salmón had sold the cattle that he had purchased from the missionaries. His brother, Arupaca Salmón had sold the land that he had purchase from the natives. John Brander, the son, was the owner of lands and cattle and was in a legal battle with Bornier claimants. The rest of the land belonged to the Rapanui. The natives had murdered Bornier in 1876; Brander did not survive much longer. The government refused to recognize the lease agreement signed between Toro and Brander. So Toro had to assume the obligation of paying 1200 silver pesos a year for ten years. Thus, Toro leased three-fifths of the sheep and cattle while only two-thirds belonged to the government.

Upon his return to Chile, Toro faced criticism. Many people thought the purchase of the island was a waste of money and the land was worthless. An article written in the Valparaíso press and widely reproduced referred to his negotiations as “unfortunate” and even suggested that Toro was involved in the financial dealing for a profit (*La Tribuna*, 3 Nov. 1888). He was vigorously defended in a subsequent article by a Mr. E. Choateau in *El Mercurio* (19 February 1889) who pointed out that the land was not worthless if it could feed 800 cows and 17,000 sheep.

There were repercussions in France. By 1888 France occupied Tahiti, New Caledonia, the Society Islands, the Marquesas, Tuamotus, the Gambiers and other Pacific Islands. Although these possessions did not represent a great economic prospect, the geopolitical value was enormous, especially after a French company had successfully negotiated with Colombia for the rights to build a canal in Panama. Chile’s move on Easter Island took French public opinion by surprise (Sepúlveda 1936:677).¹⁷ Many felt that, although the island may not be important, national honor and the power of France had been challenged—and the government had failed. In a stormy session of the Chamber of Deputies, the deputies challenged the Minister of Marine, Admiral Krantz. He quoted several reports from French ships in the South Pacific, stating the island had no practical value, for it was too far away from French possessions and it had no natural harbor. But the newspapers would not give up, and the influential *Le Siecle*, precisely on Chile’s national day, September 18, 1888, stated that Chile posed a serious threat to French security in the Pacific. “Our colonial possessions run the risk of being cut off: avid neighbors are trying to take over our rights” (Rodríguez Canessa 1998:9). The controversy known as “*Le conflit Franco Chilien*” would eventually quiet down but was revived by extremists in the future.¹⁸

The Civil War that swept Chile in 1891 brought about the downfall of Policarpo Toro. Having sided with Balmaceda he was dismissed from the Navy at the end of the revolt. Unable to make the payments of the lease, the Branders canceled the contract. On June 20, 1893 the Justice Court in Bordeaux, France, confirmed the ownership of the Brander land and property and since neither the government nor Toro would assume payment for the lease, Brander sold his rights to Enrique Merlet in 1897

for an undisclosed amount. The island seemed to have gone through a period of abandonment and exploitation by unscrupulous entrepreneurs, this time operating under Chile's sovereignty. Merlet eventually attempted to sell his rights but the Chilean government successfully argued in Court that since the French court had ruled five years after Chile had taken possession of the island, the title was not valid. The island was finally registered in 1935 as property of the Chilean government under a court order from the Valparaíso Civil Court (*Juzgado de Letras*).

But the odious system of administration remained until 1952 when the government gave the Chilean navy the exclusive right to administer the island. The naval government brought peace and prosperity to the inhabitants. "This administration lasted for thirteen years and it appears to be the happiest moment in the History of Easter Island during the two and half centuries that have been in contact with western civilization" (Campbell 1973:35).¹⁹

The one sorely resented restriction was an absolute prohibition to leave the island without government permission, which was very hard to obtain. This was caused by fear from the Chilean Health authorities that the natives might carry leprosy to the mainland. Leprosy was and is unknown in Chile, and the Island had a small colony of lepers.²⁰ Several people, however, fled Rapa Nui in small boats or as stowaways in visiting ships.

In 1966, the Island was formally given the legal status of a municipality under the province of Valparaíso and in 1967 elected its first Municipal Council composed entirely of Rapanui. The population had risen to 1865 inhabitants. A year later, Lan-Chile Airlines started regular air service to Santiago and

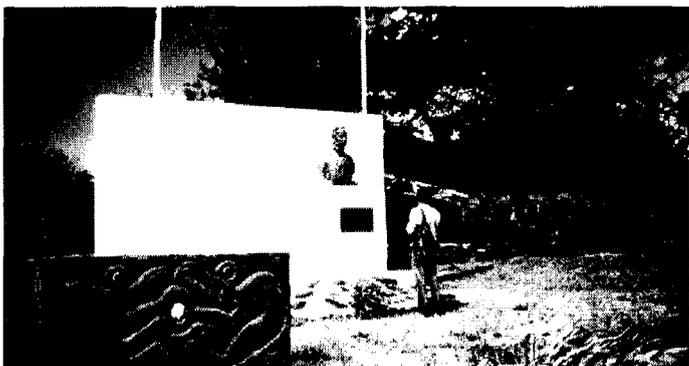


Figure 3. A modern statue and monument in a small plaza at the center of the village marks the grave of Policarpo Toro. The sculpted stone in left foreground was made by local island artists and depicts two birdmen petroglyphs. (Photo by Georgia Lee)

Tahiti

Toro lived in obscurity until 1921. His obituaries praised his services during the War of the Pacific where he earned eight medals and campaign ribbons, but his role in the annexation of Easter Island is barely mentioned.²¹ There is no question that Captain Policarpo Toro was the determining factor in the annexation of Easter Island by Chile. He is recognized today as a pioneer, and numerous articles, commemorative stamps and monuments serve to bring justice to his memory. Recently his bones were brought to the island and placed in a modern monument in the center of Hangaroa (Figure 3), and the main street

in the village is named Policarpo Toro.

However, the initiative—the first spark towards Chile's possession of the island—rests with the missionaries. It was Brother Eugenio who first raised the Chilean flag on the island, and the generous sacrifices of his followers provided the proper conditions for Chile's actions in Rapa Nui.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Actually, the first European to set foot on the Island was a German, Karl Behrens, commanding the landing party. In February of 1606 a Spanish explorer, Pedro Fernández Quiróz, in search for the island of Santa Cruz, sighted a small island which he called Isla de los Cuatro Coronados, which may well have been Rapa Nui.
- ² In 1769 the Peruvian viceroy Manuel Amat sent two frigate captains to take possession of "Davis Island." They were Felipe Gonzalez de Haedo, commander of the San Lorenzo, and Antonio Domonte (or Dumont/Dumonte) of the Santa Rosalia. The act of possession occurred when three crosses were erected on Poike and a psalm of thanks was sung while the natives sang to their god, Makemake.
- ³ For a complete study of the native cultures, language and early history of the island, see Englert, 1995 (7th edition).
- ⁴ All told, three Spanish expeditions anchored off the island. See also, Alicia Romo, "Isla de Pascua, Homenaje al centenario de su incorporación." *Diplomacia*, Number 45:15-20, 1988.
- ⁵ This unfortunate incident is not well documented. Bunster's effort, "Expediciones esclacistas en los mares del sur," is a product of the author's fantasy rather than a serious scholarly work. Vicuña Mackenna published an article in 1862. A search of Peruvian archives may shed some new light on the subject.
- ⁶ Agustin Prat observed inbreeding caused by the lack of men. "The mother has a son as a lover and in turn, he makes love to his sister."
- ⁷ Bornier's activities are presented under a very different light in Prat's article (1902:629 and ff.) After visiting the island in 1901, Prat concludes that Bornier was a very progressive farmer who ruled with justice. He does mention his mysterious death, probably at the hand of the natives.
- ⁸ It is at about this time that the archeological relics began to be taken from the island. The frigate *Topaze* removed two statues now part of the British Museum collection. The French ship *Flore* attempted to load a *moai* on board but since it weighted too much, they cut off the head and took that. The five ton piece can be seen at the Trocadero Museum in Paris. The American ship *Mohican* took another *moai* to Washington. Other ships carried away numerous small items, including the *rongorongo* boards.
- ⁹ The complete report of this trip by Luis A. Castillo, was published by *Diario Oficial de la República de Chile*, 31 October 1892:177.
- ¹⁰ See Archivo Nacional, Fondo Relaciones Exteriores, Vol.368, 1887.
- ¹¹ See Vergara 1939.
- ¹² Letter from Chilean consul in Tahiti A. Goupil (1887); also from the Bishop of Tahiti to the Provincial of the SSCC (1887). Toro also wrote a report stating that the island was too far from the other French settlements in the Pacific to be considered of any value to France.
- ¹³ Toro's report to Agustin Edwards, Minister of Finance, is dated 24 February 1888. It is reprinted as Anexo VII in Vergara (1939).
- ¹⁴ Bornier had two daughters by Koreto, Carolina and Marta. Prat (1902) met them both in 1901.
- ¹⁵ The original of the cession is in the National Archives.
- ¹⁶ This flag is now housed at the Museum of Natural History in Valparaíso. It is made of *mahute* (barkcloth) with classical Easter Island figures over an orange background surrounded by white

feathers. This was the flag of *reimiro* and a hymn is still sung on the island, *Reva-reimiro*, the flag song.

- ¹⁷ Sepúlveda claims that a French cruiser arrived a few days after Toro's proclamation with orders to take over the island but there is no proof that this incident took place.
- ¹⁸ As late as 1991, the French Ambassador to Chile had to publicly deny that France had any interest in the island. See *La Nación*, 30 August, 1991.
- ¹⁹ But see McCall (1994:159) for another opinion of these years under Navy control.
- ²⁰ Hanson's Disease was brought to the island from Tahiti in 1860. Thanks to modern medicine, it is now under control on the island.
- ²¹ In Agustín Prat's otherwise splendid article of 1902, Toro's name is not mentioned once. Toro's biography can be found in Fuenzalida Bade, 1985:238.

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What's New in Polynesia

PITCAIRN ISLAND

AN AUSTRALIAN ELECTRONICS RETAILER may be the savior of Pitcairn. The island's communications officer, Tom Christian, claimed that there are only 30 islanders left on the island, and only eight of them are working men. He voiced the concern that soon they may have to abandon the island due to a shortage of manpower. Their new hope may be an airstrip on the rugged island. Although Pitcairn is Britain's last colony, there is no interest in London for building an airstrip. Enter Dick Smith, who owns a chain of electronic stores in Australia and New Zealand. Smith wants to build a grass airstrip of some 500 meters long, provide a small plane and train an islander to be a pilot. Then tourists could be flown in from Mangareva, the nearest airstrip.

Pacific Islands Monthly, March 1998

POLYNESIAN LITERARY COMPETITION

THE INSTITUTE OF POLYNESIAN LANGUAGES and Literatures and the journal *Rongorongo Studies* are pleased to announce that the winner of the Polynesian Literary Competition for 1998, whose theme area was the Marquesas Islands, is Pierre Kohumoetini of Hakahau, 'Ua Pou, with his poem "Peto 'Enana" ("Dogs of the Marquesas"). Pierre Kohumoetini, who is still a student, has been awarded a Certificate of Award and a cash prize of NZ \$250. The winning poem, with accompanying French translation, has been published in the journal *Rongorongo Studies* 8 (1998): 43-4. The adjudicators for the 1998 Competition were M. Benjamin Teikitutoua and the teaching staff at the Centre Scolaire on 'Ua Pou. Permanent moderators were Dr H. G. A. Hughes of Denbigh, Wales, and Dr Steven Roger Fischer of Auckland, New Zealand.

What's New in Hanga Roa

ISLANDERS SEEK VAITEA FARM LAND

THE NATIONAL PARKS of Chile on the island has received money to provide protection at Vinapu to keep out cattle; and, at Tahai, to build a new entrance, parking, and toilet facilities. The new entrance to the site will be on the north side, approaching from the Museum. There will be a replica *hare paenga* constructed for use by artisans as a place to sell their carvings, and *manavai* will be built for growing native plants, including *mahute*.

The project to create an ethno-botanic garden at Vaitea was cancelled after strong criticism was published in *El Mercurio* by Alcalde Petero Edmunds. The project began with the donation of four huge Chilean palm trees by a Palm tree foundation that also brought in 400 little palms. The garden was to be at Vaitea, in the center of the island. Islanders protested because it comprised a portion of the best farmland on the island.

As for the give-away of land at Vaitea, as announced in RNJ 12(3), the program was cancelled due to action of the Consejo de Ancianos # 2, which has become more powerful in recent times because they now represent more people. President-Frei was supposed to travel to the island to present the land, but