

To:

Direction de l'environnement (DIREN) — secretariat.diren@administration.gov.pf

Mata Tohora (Marine mammal protection association, mandated by Ministry) —
contact@matatohora.com

Réseau des Gardiens de l'Océan (RGO, Strandings network) — rgopolynesie@gmail.com

Présidence de la Polynésie française

Re: Formal Request for Clarification — Case of Baby Toa and Mother, Lagoon of Maraa, Papara, Tahiti, 31 August 2026

Dear Directors and Representatives,

Stranded No More (SNM), an international initiative of stranding professionals, writes to request formal clarification regarding the handling of the case of a humpback whale mother and calf in the Lagoon of Maraa, Papara, Tahiti, on and around 31 August 2026. The mother was found dead, her body trapped in the coral bed on the reef. The calf, named Toa by the community, was found alone and disoriented in the lagoon and was subsequently guided out to open water by firefighters and a specialised association. Toa died on 1 September 2026.

The Réseau des Gardiens de l'Océan, posting jointly with the Direction de l'Environnement, confirmed Toa's death with the statement: "Unfortunately, the whale did not survive. So young, entirely dependent on its mother, especially for feeding, it had no chance of survival without her. It's a sad outcome. To date, we are unable to understand the cause of this failure."

SNM shares the assessment that this was a failure. This letter seeks to understand how and why it occurred, and what will change to prevent it from happening again.

1. The mother and calf were known to be in the lagoon for days

An eyewitness who participated in a whale-watching tour approximately two days before the stranding reported that tour guides mentioned a mother and calf had been present in the lagoon for at least four days. This means the pair was known to whale-watching tour operators as early as approximately 27 August 2026. SNM requests:

- a) When were the mother and calf first sighted in the lagoon, and by whom? What is the earliest confirmed record of their presence?
- b) Were they being continuously observed by any authority, monitoring body, or marine mammal organisation during the days they were present in the lagoon? If so, by whom and with what frequency? If not, why not?
- c) Under current French Polynesian regulations, whales inside the lagoon require mandatory notification to the Direction de l'environnement (DIREN). Was this notification made? If so, when, by

whom, and what action was taken in response? If not, why was the mandatory notification requirement not fulfilled?

d) Were whale-watching tour operators who were aware of the pair's presence in the lagoon required or expected to report this to DIREN or to Mata Tohora? Did any operator do so?

2. The mother's death went undetected

A 15-metre adult humpback whale became trapped in the coral bed on the reef and died without anyone detecting her distress or intervening. This occurred in the Lagoon of Maraa during peak whale season (July to November), in one of the most visited whale-watching destinations in the world, in a territory that has designated itself the world's largest marine mammal sanctuary spanning nearly 5 million square kilometres of protected ocean. SNM requests:

a) How is it possible that an adult humpback whale became trapped and died on a reef without being detected, during peak whale season, in a lagoon where the pair had been known to tour operators for days?

b) Was the mother alive when her pectoral fins became caught in the reef, or does the entrapment describe only the position of the carcass after death from another cause? What is the evidence for either conclusion?

c) Was a necropsy or any post-mortem examination conducted on the mother? If so, what were the findings and what was the determined cause of death? If not, why not?

d) What monitoring infrastructure, if any, currently exists for detecting whales in distress in the lagoons of Tahiti? If none exists, how does French Polynesia reconcile this absence with its designation as a marine mammal sanctuary and its \$3 billion annual tourism economy built substantially on whale encounters?

3. Baby Toa's fate after being guided out of the lagoon

On 31 August, firefighters and a specialised association guided Baby Toa out of the lagoon and into open water. On 1 September, his death was confirmed. The circumstances between these two events remain unknown. SNM requests:

a) After Baby Toa was guided out of the lagoon, was any attempt made to locate, monitor, or follow the calf? Was a boat or drone deployed to track his movements? Was a satellite tag or visual marker attached?

b) Where and how was Baby Toa found dead? Where was the body discovered? Was the body recovered?

c) Was any attempt made to find a surrogate mother, locate a pod that might adopt the calf, or provide supplemental feeding? If not, why not? If the answer is that no such capacity exists, this is precisely the gap this letter seeks to address.

d) Was the decision to guide the calf out of the lagoon made with full awareness that a calf of this age, estimated at only a few months old and entirely dependent on its mother's milk, could not survive independently? If so, what was the rationale for guiding the calf to open water rather than retaining it in the lagoon where it could be monitored and where intervention, including supplemental feeding, might have been possible?

e) Was any veterinary assessment conducted on Baby Toa before or during the intervention? Was a blood sample drawn? Was a blow sample collected? Was the calf's body condition assessed?

4. The \$3 billion question

French Polynesia generates an estimated \$3 billion annually in tourism revenue, with whale-watching representing one of the most popular and lucrative activities during the July to November season. This revenue depends entirely on the presence of living whales in French Polynesian waters. The Chami et al. (2022) IMF ecosystem services valuation framework estimates the value of a single living great whale at over \$2 million at current carbon prices, accounting for phytoplankton-mediated carbon capture, ocean nutrient cycling, fisheries productivity, and ecotourism revenue.

Despite this economic dependence on living whales, French Polynesia appears to have no contingency plan for a whale in distress in its lagoons, no monitoring system capable of detecting a whale trapped on a reef for days, no veterinary capacity for emergency cetacean medicine, and no rehabilitation infrastructure for orphaned calves. A territory that earns billions from whales does not invest in the infrastructure to save them when they are in trouble. SNM requests:

- a) What percentage of whale-watching tourism revenue is currently allocated to whale conservation, monitoring, and emergency response?
- b) Does French Polynesia have a formal whale stranding response protocol? If so, was it followed in the Baby Toa case? If not, will one be developed?
- c) Will French Polynesia establish a whale monitoring network for lagoon areas, capable of detecting whales in distress in real time?
- d) Will French Polynesia invest in emergency veterinary capacity and rehabilitation infrastructure for cetaceans, including the establishment of a seaside sanctuary as proposed by SNM and others?

5. Accountability and future prevention

The joint statement by the Réseau des Gardiens de l'Océan and the Direction de l'Environnement acknowledged this outcome as a failure but stated: "To date, we are unable to understand the cause of this failure." SNM respectfully suggests that the cause is not mysterious. A mother and calf were in the lagoon for days. Tour operators knew. No authority monitored them. The mother became trapped and died undetected. The calf was orphaned. The calf was guided out to open water without monitoring, without supplemental feeding, and without any plan for its survival. The calf died. The cause of the failure is the absence of the systems that would have prevented it.

SNM requests:

- a) Will an independent review of the response to the Baby Toa case be conducted?
- b) Will the findings of any review be made public?
- c) Will French Polynesia commit to establishing, as a matter of urgency, a whale stranding response protocol, a lagoon monitoring network, emergency veterinary capacity, and rehabilitation infrastructure?

French Polynesia declares itself the world's largest marine mammal sanctuary. A sanctuary that cannot detect a dying whale on its own reef, that cannot save an orphaned calf in its own lagoon,

and that earns billions from the animals it cannot protect is a sanctuary in name only. SNM publishes this letter and will publish the response, or the absence of a response, at strandednomore.org.

Yours sincerely,

Stranded No More

strandednomore.org