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Eric Vidal, Thibault Martin, Karen Bourgeois

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We understand the concerns of Philippe Borsa and colleagues over the New Caledonia government's plans to open the Chesterfield reefs to ecotourism cruise ships. In our view as conservation

biologists, conservationists also need to consider context — such as the benefits that tourism could bring to the islands' fragile economy — and to discuss with government how to make such tourism sustainable.

The Natural Park of the Coral Sea, which harbours the reefs, is one of the largest marine protected areas in the world. As it becomes increasingly autonomous, New Caledonia is legitimately looking for ways to diversify its economy and is turning to the resources offered by its maritime exclusive economic zone. The zone measures 1.74 million square kilometres and hosted 219 cruise liners carrying some 500,000 passengers in 2017.

We call on the scientific community to work with local authorities in guiding New Caledonia towards sustainable use of its wild and remote oceanic space. More data are needed on the seabirds that inhabit the fragile, low-lying island ecosystems in these areas, including on the ecological and behavioural consequences of human incursions on seabird breeding. These data must be shared openly. Lessons can also be learnt from tourism management of other tropical islands, such as those associated with Australia's Great Barrier Reef, and in the polar regions.

**Eric Vidal, Martin Thibault,  
Karen Bourgeois** *IRD Research  
Center, Nouméa, New Caledonia.*  
*eric.vidal@ird.fr*