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CLIMATE CHANGE COOK ISLANDS
Office of the Prime Minister

MEDIA RELEASE

SCIENCE EXPO CONNECTS AND INSPIRES YOUNG COOK ISLANDERS

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The 2026 Climate Change Cook Islands (CCCI) Science Expo at Te Tapora Kai in Avarua was a resounding success last week, with almost 2000 school students from Rarotonga and 45 from across the southern Pa Enua attending over three days from September 22-24.

One of the largest events of its kind to be held regularly in the Cook Islands, this year's CCCI Science Expo was the third to date, following the inaugural 2022 expo in Rarotonga (with another smaller event that same year in Aitutaki) and the 2024 expo in Mangaia.

Following extremely positive feedback from the Mangaia expo, special efforts were made to include as many Pa Enua students as possible in 2026, with funding made available to bring across 31 students and five teachers from Aitutaki, Atiu, Mitiaro, Mauke and Mangaia. A group of 17 from the children and youth-focussed civil society organisation GROW Aitutaki also made their way over to Rarotonga for the expo.

This year's theme was 'Te Moana Ripiri la Tatou - The Ocean That Connects Us', highlighting the importance of our oceans as a vast and vital resource for all life on Earth. As Prime Minister Mark Brown pointed out in his opening address, "This theme reminds us that although we are islands spread across a vast ocean, we are deeply connected – through our people, our culture, our environment, and our shared responsibility to protect the future of our nation".

With this in mind, all 17 exhibitors – 11 from the Cook Islands and six internationals from New Zealand, Australia, the Pacific and the US – centred their displays and demonstrations around the ocean in some way. Featured subjects included ocean conservation, coral restoration, seabed minerals, land erosion and undersea volcanos.

"I think there's been a lot of good work here," said Tereora College Head of Science Alison Price. "Our students got to see the wealth of work that's happening behind the scenes to keep our oceans thriving."

"There were local organisations that our teenagers could join to learn and take action now, and examples of research that they could use as inspiration if they decide to continue down an academic path. Overall, this was an excellent event to showcase the options open to our students, young and old."

GROW Aitutaki co-founder Colette Clarke agreed. “We really valued our time at the expo – our students enjoyed visiting the different booths, asking questions and interviewing people about their work, their journeys and the advice they would give to young people.

“It was also great for them to realise that they had knowledge and experiences from Aitutaki that they could share and put into practice. By helping with outplanting coral in the lagoon area near The Rarotongan, they were able to utilise some of the knowledge and skills they have developed through their environmental work at home.

“Our students came to Rarotonga to learn about climate change, but they returned to Aitutaki with new experiences, new connections, greater confidence, and lots of stories to share.”

On the other side of the booth, our exhibitors themselves also valued the experience and the connections they were able to make.

Cook Islands Meteorological Service Climate Officer Bouchard Solomona described the event as “a bit hectic at times”, but overall a constructive and satisfying three days for the Met Service team.

“We really enjoyed the interactions between the kids – especially the little ones. They’re our favourites. They ask a lot of questions – too many questions at times, but it was really good because at least we know they’re keen to learn what we do and the importance of the weather and the climate.”

Having travelled from New Zealand to attend, botanist Dr Peter Heenan from the Bioeconomy Science Institute said that “connecting with the kids has been the biggest positive”.

“We did the Mangaia one a couple of years ago and we’ve run into a couple of kids from over there that we got to know well, so that followup is quite valuable to see what they’re doing now, and keep encouraging them.

“And because we’ve got a research programme here in the Cooks, we will get to some of the other islands, so building on new friendships here and getting to know some of the kids is very interesting for us.

“I had a Year 13 girl come up to me and ask how she could get a job in the environmental or horticultural space, so I said come back and see me at the end of this session, and we had a little bit of a chat about that. She was engaged, asking questions – not only that but having another discussion about the answer and other things.

“We know we’re not going to connect with every student at a high level, but when you get a few that are really engaged like that, that’s what you remember.”

CCCI Director Wayne King said he “couldn’t be more pleased with how the expo went”.

“This is a special event for us at Climate Change and I think for the Cook Islands as well,” he added.

“I am really proud of our team, the work they’ve put in, and the end result we were all able to see last week. It’s not an easy thing to organise, but when you walk along all those booths and amongst the kids you can feel the energy and in some cases even the excitement they have to see and learn about all these new things.

“As the PM said, science and technology are all around us, and if even a small percentage of these kids go on to achieve a career in science or related areas then I would call that a huge success. We need more Cook Islanders working in these fields and it starts right here with our young ones.

“Having the Pa Enua kids with us was also really special and I’m incredibly glad we were able to bring them over. Once they’d had a good look at all the exhibits they were also on hand, willing and able to help out wherever we needed them to as well.

“Now that we’ve completed this year’s expo, we’ll take a deep breath and before Christmas sometime consider the next future science expo, location and theme.”

For a full list of all the exhibitors who attended the 2026 CCCI Science Expo, see below:

International Exhibitors

- Bioeconomy Science Institute (NZ)
- Earth Sciences New Zealand
- SPC – The Pacific Community
- University of Florida
- University of New South Wales
- US Embassy

National Exhibitors

- CIC Ocean Research
- Cook Islands Climate Change
- Cook Islands Meteorological Service
- Cook Islands Red Cross Society
- Kōrero O Te ‘Ōrau
- Ministry of Marine Resources
- National Environment Service
- Ocean Ancestors
- Ocean Toa
- Te Ara o te Akau
- Te Ipukarea Society

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