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CONSERVATION OF CHATHAM ISLAND DENDROGLYPHS: A FATAL CURE?

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At the end of his recent paper on the preservation of Chathams dendroglyphs Robin Watt (1982:70-71) suggests that the best of the dendroglyphs should be cut out of the trees to undergo conservation treatment, and be replaced with fibreglass replicas. He justifies this suggestion on the grounds that the remaining carved trees have a life expectancy of no more than "up to twenty years" or thirty years in the case of a prominent carving, and that the dendroglyphs need to be "well and truly preserved for posterity". We wish to offer some comments on this approach.

Museum collections and fieldwork records

First it is appropriate to draw attention to the substantial body of information now available on the dendroglyphs. A major contribution to their conservation is still to be made by getting the relevant records and specimens now in New Zealand in order.

There are three Chatham dendroglyphs at the National Museum. They are catalogued as ME3956 (see Watt, 1982:Pl 3). No Chatham Islands locality was noted. They are "ex-Colonial Museum specimens so they probably entered the collections around the turn of the century, or perhaps a little before" (R. Watt, pers. comm.).

There are at least 21 specimens in the Otago Museum. Two of them (D24.348 and D24.349) are from Taia Bush and were presented by John Renwick (W. Harsant, pers. comm.). The others do not appear in Teal's (n.d.) index of Chathams material held in the Otago Museum. They were all collected by Simmons in the summer of 1963-64 and are as follows (W. Harsant, pers. comm.):

Accession Number	Comments in Register
D72.57	-
D72.58	No. 104 Glyphs on both sides
D72.59	-
D72.60	-
D72.61	2 glyphs
D72.62	No. 629 2 glyphs
D72.63	Bark removed "cameo" type Taia B377

D72.64	No. 717
F72.65	No. 643
D72.66	No. 57 (8?)
D72.67	No. 416
D72.68	No. 644
D72.69	No. 417
D72.70	3 glyphs

There are three examples in the Canterbury Museum which appear to have been acquired by purchase in 1901. Two have catalogue numbers, M.H. 112 and E138.1178. According to museum records, "there should be several more: two were presented by A.W. Mitchell in 1924, some 'Moriore carved Trees' were presented by Miss M.O. Stoddard, and possibly another which is listed as a 'Carved Post'. These are not in the Canterbury Museum, however, and have presumably been exchanged to another Museum, although they are not in (the) exchange book" (M. Trotter, pers. comm.).

There are five Chathams dendroglyphs in the Auckland Institute and War Memorial Museum. They were gifted to the Museum in 1906 by Mr F.A.D. Cox. They are registered as follows:

5158 MHW.2.1
5159 MHW.2.3
5160 RR10
5161 MHW.2.1
5162 MHW.2.3

and described in the Register as "5 portions of Karaka trees showing Moriore carving" (D. Simmons, pers. comm.).

Other specimens may be held in smaller museums or privately in New Zealand. Examples held in the British Museum are listed by Simmons and Park (1981) as follows:

98.10-21	81	Man (tree)
98.10-21	80	Man (bark)
98.10-21	79	Man (bark)
98.10-21	82	Man (piece)
98.10-21	81	Man (piece)
1944. Oc 2.899		Carving
1944. Oc 2.897		Carving
1944. Oc 2.901		Carving
1944. Oc 2.900		Carving
1944. Oc 2.899		Carving
1944. Oc 2.902		Carving

No others were found in 17 major museums in Europe, the United States of America and Australia which contain Chatham Island artefacts (Simmons and Park, 1981).

Substantial records of dendroglyphs exist but are not fully discussed by Watt (1982). Thanks to Stuart Park, Christina Jefferson's field notes and her original drawings are now in the Hocken Library. Some of the drawings were reproduced in Jefferson's (1955) published work but the quality of the art work in that source is unsatisfactory. The drawings now in the Hocken appear to show a wider range of forms and more examples than were published.

Simmons' (ms) field notes and photographic records of dendroglyphs are at the Auckland Museum. Some of the photographs are on deposit at the Otago Museum. His publications include detailed descriptions and some analysis of the dendroglyphs (Simmons, 1964, 1965, 1980).

Park's fieldwork in the Chathams during the summer of 1975-76 was supported by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. It resulted in a report (Park, 1976) and an extensive photographic record of the petroglyphs and, to a lesser extent, the dendroglyphs.

Discussion

Without discussing the specimens now held in museums or these fieldwork records Watt proposes removing dendroglyphs from the trees and replacing them with fibreglass replicas. A number of questions arise. Not the least of these is how would the replicas look? We are not instantly convinced that the expertise required to make faithful and attractive replicas is available. Would the trees survive the proposed treatment? It seems at least possible that they would be badly affected by it. Certainly there is no evidence in Watt's paper of sufficient thought being given to this matter.

The authors are also concerned about Watt's assessment of life expectancy of carved trees. It is easy to say that they will all be gone in 20, 30 or 40 years, but is it true? The basis of Watt's estimate is that he could not find many of Simmons' 'possible' carved trees, recorded 20 years ago. The present authors believe that in the absence of an empirical assessment of rate of forest loss, as would be possible from an overlay of dated and successive aerial photographs, this problem might in part be attributed to the difficulties of finding these trees even during the very thorough and methodical survey carried out by Simmons. How can Watt reasonably expect to find the elusive carvings Simmons found without using Simmons' method (which involved clearing trees) and without using Simmons' notes as to their whereabouts? Watt (1982:69) used instead "a detailed walk through the kopi".

Also, while some of the recorded dendroglyphs are indeed recent, as the late Mr Bollon Goomes used to remark with glee, all those who have worked on them agree that most are prehistoric or early historic and that they are the work of the Moriori. This means that they had survived in form and proportions for at least a hundred and forty years by the time of Simmons' survey. This point does little to support Watt's assessment of the life expectancy of the remaining carved kopi trees.

We suggest instead of removing the dendroglyphs to the questionable safety of New Zealand museums that every effort should be made to press ahead with the formation of reserves, in cooperation with government and private interests. The Barker family of Harwarden in North Canterbury have generously allowed a portion of the Hapupu bush on their property at Kaingaroa to be fenced off. This is the Hapupu Historic Reserve mentioned by Watt (1982). The fencing was supported by Lands and Survey and the Historic Places Trust. The result has been a rapid regeneration of some tree species (see Hamel, 1977:10), a revitalisation of native bird song which was almost wholly lost on that north coast of Chatham Island, and the beginning of an advance of the forest edge to windward. Park (1976) quite rightly states that wind destruction of fringe vegetation is the most serious hazard facing the carved trees. Begg (1979:10ff) notes that putting cattle, pigs and sheep into similar mixed broadleaf stands on the south-west coasts of Chatham Island was a method of forest clearance. The stock let the wind into the subcanopy by breaking or grazing the protective fringe species (see Hamel, 1977) and the canopy trees began to die soon after.

Stopping the retreat before the wind of the Chathams mixed broadleaf forest requires fencing to keep stock out and some planting of windbreak vegetation, like flax or the tough ake ake (*Olearia* sp.) seedlings, on the windward margins. This would stop the trees dying unnecessarily, thus conserve the carvings, save the islanders and visitors from having to gaze at fibreglass replicas of Moriori art and, as a bonus, help save the birdlife and native vegetation of the island.

Watt is concerned that regrowth of the trees at the edges of the dendroglyphs is blurring their outlines, as though the living tree is seen as a danger to the carving it bears. Accordingly (Watt, 1982:69), "it is ironic that successful efforts to preserve carvings ...ensures their eventual disappearance." This idea is used as part of the justification for cutting the carvings out of the trees. Given the age of the prehistoric carvings and their condition we suggest that the blurring process is slow indeed, and we most certainly prefer these signs of life in the trees to their systematic mutilation in the name of conservation.

The other issue raised here relates to what might happen to the dendroglyphs once they are removed from the trees. While access to the conservation of wooden objects is improving in this country a large amount of tremendously valuable material in urgent need of treatment already exists. Under these pressing conditions it would be necessary to demonstrate that the Chatham dendroglyphs which are still in the bush cannot survive unless cut out of the trees now before committing the Historic Places Trust or the Conservation Council to the conservation of the dying wood of detached dendroglyphs. No such need is demonstrated by Watt and the conservation facilities available would be more usefully invested in dealing with the dendroglyphs (and the other material) already in storage. Some of these dendroglyphs are tightly bound with steel straps in an attempt to stop them falling apart due to uncontrolled longitudinal splitting. Others leave little heaps of woodworm dust when, rarely, they are moved around within the vaults of the nation's museums.

One final point; although the broadleaf forest in the Chathams and the carvings within it may appear to be in a state of disarray, short term and other visitors to the islands should not underestimate the feelings which exist for those things. Cutting the Moriori pieces out of the trees and taking them off to New Zealand would not be well regarded - perhaps because it is just another metaphor for the economic history of the Chatham Islands.

We contend that it would be better to make multipurpose reserves of the few remaining kopi groves, to publish more of the existing records of dendroglyphs and to make a tangible commitment to the future of the Chatham Islands museum, than to cut further into the bush and to take more things away.

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