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HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES OFMOTU-O-KURA (BARE ISLAND), HAWKE'S BAY

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Motu-o-Kura, commonly called Bare Island, is a small island on a coastline almost devoid of islands. Its distinctive profile (Fig. 1) is well known to Hawke's Bay residents looking from Waimarama, but its outer side is known to few. In fact, so little was known of the island itself that Department of Conservation, Napier, commissioned DSIR, Havelock North, to carry out a resource survey of it. The material for this article has come out of that and is a modified extract from the report by Walls, McLennan and Watt (1988).

The island lies 1.5 km east of Te Puku on the Waimarama coast (Fig. 2). Only about 800 m long and 300 m wide, it rises to a height of 106 m, with a backbone that runs NE-SW, and has an area of about 13.5 ha. Its near-vertical north-western face, of exposed crumbling mudstone (papa) is what most people see. Its outer side however (Figs. 3 and 4) is gentler and is covered in greenery: mainly wharariki or coastal flax (*Phormium cookianum*) with a few trees and shrubs of taupata (*Coprosma repens*), karo (*Pittosporum ralphii*), rangiora (*Brachyglottis repanda*), karamu (*Coprosma robusta*) and cabbage tree (*Cordyline australis*).

Motu-o-Kura is Maori land, owned by Ngati Kahungunu, the sub-tribes Ngati Whakaiti and Ngati Kurukuru being the main ones involved. Our little survey team, of John McLennan (Ecology Division, DSIR), Jim Watt (Soil Bureau, DSIR) and I, visited the island in early February 1988 with their permission, and were accompanied by Walter Broadman as their representative.

Ngati Kahungunu association with Motu-o-Kura goes back many generations. In the past the island was apparently used both as a defensive retreat and as a fishing base, and was virtually denuded of vegetation. Since European arrival, Maori use of the island has diminished, allowing re-establishment of plants and animals. Now the main animal inhabitants are blue penguins (*Eudyptula minor*) and Norway rats (*Rattus norvegicus*), although there are also a few other sea and land birds, lizards and invertebrates.

Oral traditions

There has been some doubt about the correct Maori name for

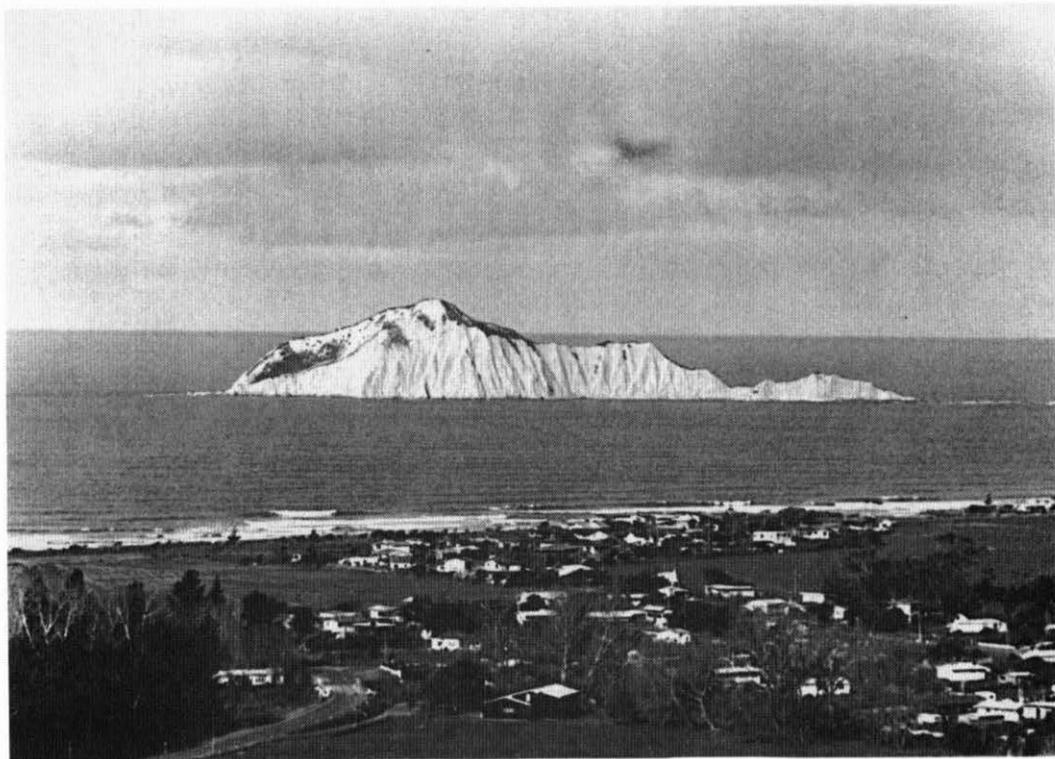


Figure 1. What most people see: the north-western cliffs of Motu-o-Kura from Waimarama, a barren inaccessible-looking visage that belies its wealth but hints at its possible role as a defended refuge.

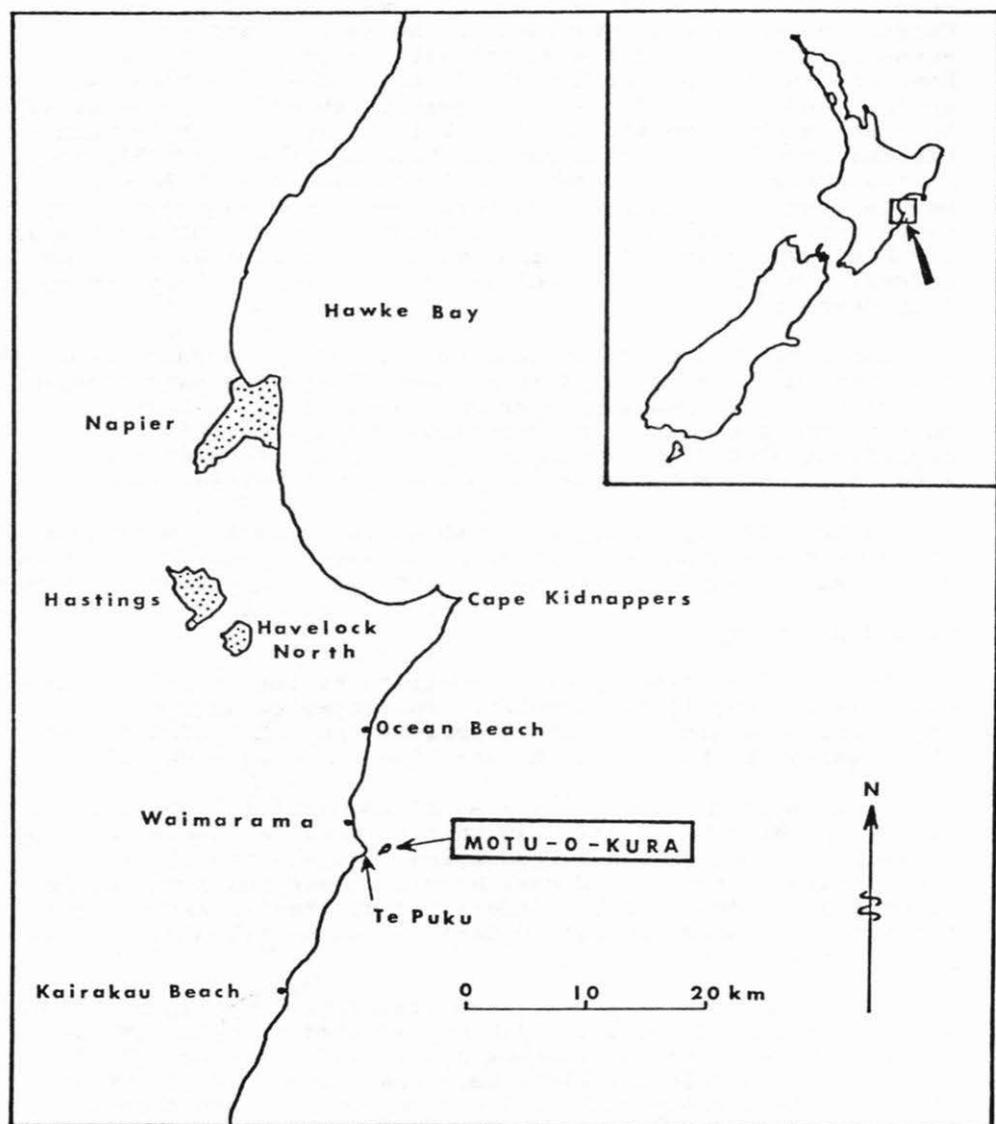


Figure 2. Location map, Motu-o-Kura

the island, although Motu-o-Kura is regarded by the Maori owners as being correct and is therefore used in this report. The island is believed to be named after Kura, a woman who had uncommon swimming ability. During times of strife, the Waimarama people would retreat to the island, and the attackers, thinking there was no water supply, would wait. However, in the sea south-west of the island is a fresh-water spring, and at night Kura would swim there and fill containers to sustain those on the island. This story is briefly told in the Waimarama School 75th Jubilee book produced in 1981, and various versions of it are in oral circulation. However, because the island appears to have been a splendid gathering place for crayfish (koura), an alternative name, Motu o Koura, has been supported. This name, which could have arisen from d'Urville's writings (see below), was in use, at least on maps, last century.

Local tradition has it that the island was used by Maori as a fishing base, a few days at a time. There are many stories too of the local people preparing and using the island as a refuge from attackers. Motu-o-Kura also has sacred significance to Ngati Kahungunu, not just because of its ancestral land, but because of predecessors buried there.

Muttonbirds (probably sooty shearwater chicks) were known to be on the island last century, and were probably harvested, but in what quantities and under what restrictions is not known.

Recorded history

The first written records referring to the island are as early as for any in the country. The voyaging European explorers Cook (in 1769) and d'Urville (in 1827) both sailed close enough to the island to describe it in some detail.

Cook (quoted from his journal by Beaglehole (1955), Grant (1977) and Wilson (1939)), had this to say: "At 2 p.m. past by a small but pretty high Island lying close to the shore, on this Island we saw a good many houses, Boats and some people, we concluded they must be fishers because the Island was quite barren". He named the island Bare Island on his chart of this part of the coast.

D'Urville (from his narrative translated by Wright (1950)) was a little more explicit: "at ten minutes past ten in the morning we were running quickly about half a league from Cook's Bare Island (L'Isle Sterile) whose real name is Motou-Okoura. It is merely a steep rock, quite bare and not more than a mile from land. A pa (or stronghold) of considerable size occupies the summit and must have a quite impregnable position. There are also a few scattered huts to be seen on the slopes of the little island. With the telescope we could easily make out the

inhabitants moving about their stronghold and keeping a careful watch on us as we went by. As on other parts of the coast they had been careful to light a big fire on the summit to attract our attention". His boat, the *Astrolabe*, was approached by a fully armed canoe from the island, but did not stop to make contact.

Walter Lorne Campbell, who leased the Waimarama Block in partnership, wrote in his diaries (Mr S. Grant pers. comm.) of canoe loads of crayfish being brought back to the mainland from the island by local Maori in 1868, but whether the island itself was still in use then is not clear. James Buchanan interviewed the Waimarama people fairly extensively, and gives the name *Motu o Koura* for the island in his book (Buchanan 1973). The Waimarama School 75th Jubilee book (Waimarama School Committee 1981) contains frequent references to Maori connections with the island (referred to either as *Motu-o-Kura* or *Bare Island*), and has several historical photographs of Waimarama with the island in the background.

These historical references appear to be all that exist for the island. It is remarkable that neither the observant and energetic William Colenso nor the equally exploratory Herbert Guthrie-Smith seem to have been curious enough about the island to visit it or even mention it in their writings. The earliest photograph located, taken in the 1890s, shows the mainland-facing profile of *Motu-o-Kura*, little different from now: the print is too battered to reproduce here. Two drawings of the island exist in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington: the first is a watercolour of the Waimarama-Cape Kidnappers coast done in the 1850s; the other is a crude sketch of the seaward side of the island in the 1890s showing a "scrubby" vegetation. Neither has sufficient detail for meaningful comparison with conditions now.

Archaeological sites

There are no records in the file of *Motu-o-Kura* as an archaeological site (Mary Jeal, N.Z. Archaeological Association regional filekeeper, pers. comm.). But because of Cook's and d'Urville's observations and the wealth of sites along the Hawke's Bay coast, the island has long been expected to reveal remains of former Maori presence.

The 1988 survey was no doubt the first serious attempt to search for and document archaeological remains. This was made difficult by the dense cover of wharariki (coastal flax) on the habitable side of the island, effectively masking features on the ground. However, depressions, small terraces, midden material and soil charcoal were found, and are convincing evidence of former Maori occupation. The following list is of these finds, which are also shown in Fig. 5.

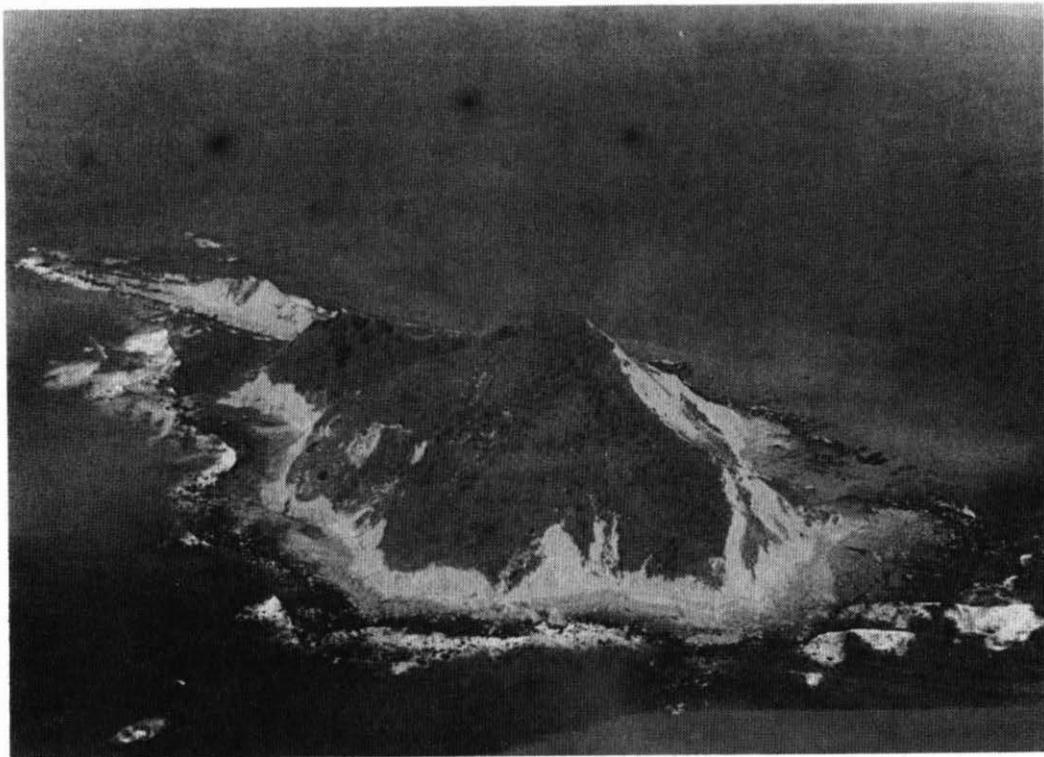


Figure 3. The other side: aerial oblique view of Motu-o-Kura's rarely seen seaward (eastern) flank. Scarps, old slumps and coastal platform show clearly, as do the vegetation patterns of flaxland and shrubs. Almost all the archaeological sites are found on this side.



Figure 4. The central part of the seaward flank of Motu-o-Kura, clothed in dense wharariki flaxland and scattered shrubs. This slope contains a pronounced depression containing large limestone boulders, and a gentle surface near the shore that has several large depressions, suspected to have been deliberately excavated.

1. Within what appears to be a small natural slump terrace on the western lip of the ridge crest south of the summit is an elongated hollow about 8 m long, 2 m wide and a metre deep. Although rather indistinct, this hollow may well have been human-excavated.
2. There is a larger slump terrace north of 1. It has at least four (possibly six) depressions about 3 m x 2 m and 0.5-1 m deep. These too could have been deliberate earthworks.
3. About 50 m north-east of the summit, on the ridge crest, is a distinct hollow about 10 m x 4 m and 2 m deep. It is possibly an embellished slump feature.
4. On the same ridge, but about 80 m further north-east, are two small terraces, 4 m x 2 m and 2 m x 2 m. The lower is the larger one. Both appear deliberately excavated.
5. A further 50-60 m north-east, still on the leading ridge crest, is a hollowed-out slump feature approximately 5 m x 2 m and 0.5 m deep. This is neither clearly a pit nor a terrace, but could previously have been either. Below it, on the steep north-facing scarp, were found sea shells, probably midden remains, described more fully in 11.
6. Near the very north-east end of the same main ridge, about 30 m from 5, are two small but distinct terraces, about 4 m x 2 m and 2 m x 2 m in size. Spilling downhill at these sites are sea shells, evidently from midden deposits: mainly tuatua (*Paphies* sp.), but also puaa (*Haliotis iris*), limpets (*Cellana* sp.) and catseye snails (*Turbo smaragdus*).
7. On the side ridge descending south-eastwards from the summit is an elongated trench-like depression about 8 m x 1.5 m and 1 m deep. It is possibly an embellished slump feature.
8. There is a gentle slope at the eastern extreme of the island. On it are at least three large depressions approximately 20 m x 5 m in extent and 1 m or so deep. As this was probably the easiest dwelling place on the island, the depressions may have been excavated for that purpose.
9. North of 8 is a large slump, with flattish land (produced by slumping). No actual evidence of past human occupation was found, but the ease of access to this site of easy terrain could make it a place worth searching more thoroughly for such signs.
10. In the centre of the main north-eastern flank of the island is an area of large limestone boulders encircling and strewn a major depression at least 50 m in diameter. Although now covered in wharariki, trees, shrubs and vines,

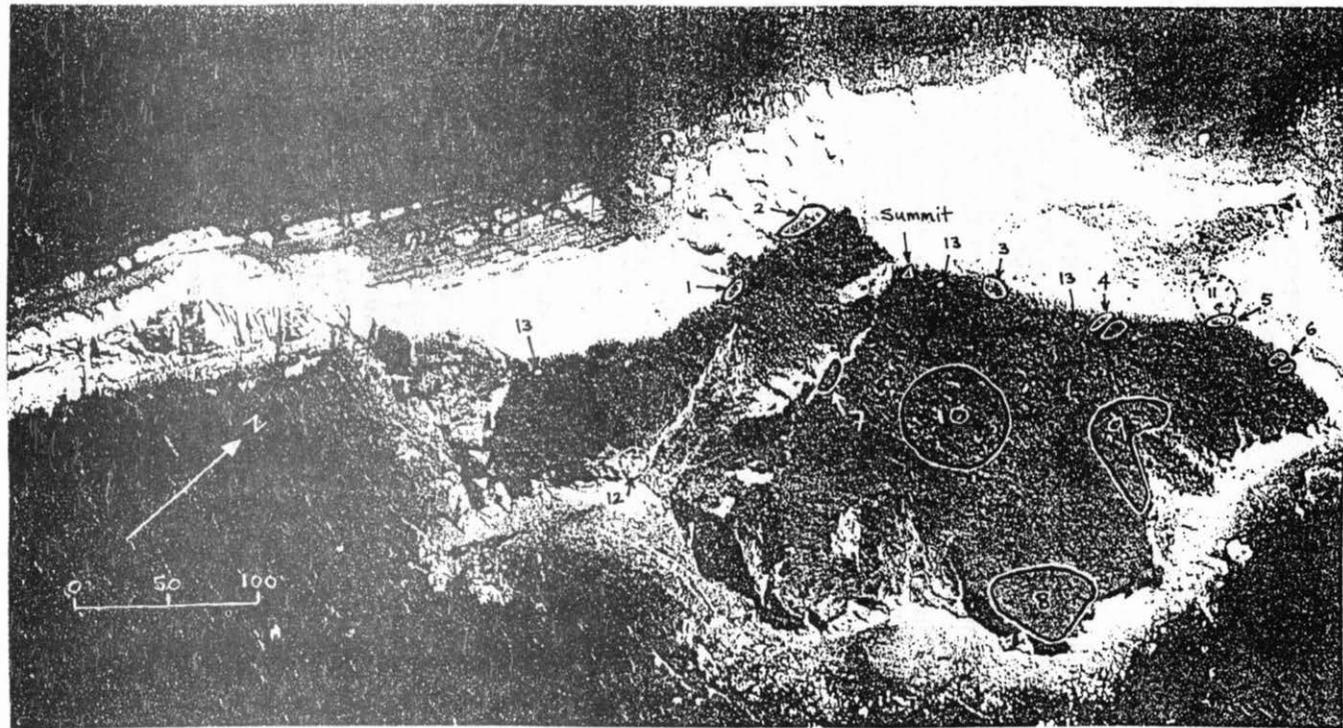


Figure 5. Archaeological features found on Motu-o-Kura, February 1988. See text for explanation. Aerial Photo 1980.

this could once have been a useful dwelling place, in the hollows between the boulders. The only rock crevices on the island are also found in these and adjacent limestone outcrops.

11. Sea shells were found cascading down the steep scarp at the north end of the island, below the slump hollow described in 5. These shells of tuatua, paua and Cook's turbans (*Cookia sulcata*), were between 30 and 50 m above the sea, and are too recent in origin to be of a fossil or subfossil nature. They, like those found associated with the nearby terraces (6) and the shells described in 12, are presumed to represent human middens, most likely of Maori origin before or around the time of European arrival. The nearest tuatua are in the sands of Waimarama beach, and most likely those on the island were brought from there. The other shells could have come from the reefs and coastal platform surrounding the island itself.

12. A few shells, mostly tuatua, were found trickling downslope at the mouth of the gully on the south-west of the island. These too are assumed to be from past Maori middens.

13. Fragments of charcoal were found in the soil in several widely scattered locations on the island (only the sites of the three soil test pits, all containing charcoal, are shown in Fig. 5). Their depth in the soil (well beneath the litter layer) indicates at least pre-20th century origins. They suggest also that the island had a cover of woody vegetation in the past and that this was burnt. If this was done by Maori occupants before Cook and d'Urville arrived, it would explain why they saw a bare island. There are other possible explanations though: that the charcoal came from wooden structures such as the dwellings or fortifications that Cook and d'Urville recorded, and that these were subsequently burnt; or that it came from beacon or cooking fires. If this is so, the wood may have been brought from the mainland, or have been gathered as driftwood, but confirmation of this would require identification of the plants or origin and carbon dating of the charcoal. However, because of its widespread occurrence it is most likely that the majority of the charcoal come from trees and shrubs of the island's former cover, burnt by Maori occupants long before the arrival of the first Europeans.

Conclusion

No special management is required at this time to protect the known archaeological features of Motu-o-Kura: the present vegetation is affording adequate protection. However, if human use of the island, now low, increased significantly, it might be necessary to be alert to possible deterioration of sites. This is, after all, a small, delicate and special island.

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