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INTERIM REPORT ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE R09/251 INVESTIGATIONS, TAWHARANUI REGIONAL PARK

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Between the 13th and 16th of January, an ARC Heritage team (Ian Lawlor, Sarah Ross and Charlotte Judge) worked with the Ngati Manuhiri resource management unit (Jacob Tahitahi and Ringi Brown) investigating archaeological site R09/251 in Tawharanui Regional Park, as part of the Mainland Coastal Open Sanctuary Project. The site is located in the sand dunes at the northern end of Tawharanui Beach.

The investigations were undertaken in accordance with conditions imposed by the NZ Historic Places Trust under Authority No. 2004/82 (refer to Historic Places Act 1993 ss.10–18). These included: an archaeological assessment of the route of the proposed fence to minimise or avoid any damage to archaeological site R09/251; a report be submitted within six months of the on-site archaeological work; and (3) the NZ Archaeological Association Site Records be updated. This report is an interim statement of the work undertaken. Shell midden and natural history specimens that were sampled during the investigations are currently being analysed. These will be returned to the site once report writing is completed. Work is continuing with tangata whenua to establish good recording systems that parallel the ARC Cultural Heritage Inventory (CHI).

Site R09/251 is located 100 m from the MHW line of Tawharanui Beach, in the path of the northern end of the new pest exclusion fence being constructed across the peninsula as part of the Tawharanui Mainland Island Project. Here, just above the actively eroding wind-blown sand immediately behind and west of the beach, are a series of old raised dunes, the front of which have shell middens exposed along the seaward face. In between are large basins or bowls where the old dune surfaces have disappeared and some scatters of shell and stone lie deflated without stratigraphic context. In behind the bowls are tall “recent” dunes, created from the wind-blown deposits and they overlie older cultural soils where these have not previously eroded away.



Figure 1. Site R09/251, shell midden prior to investigation



Figure 2. Excavated shell midden R09/251 showing archaeological deposits including a fire scoop and rake-out of charcoal-stained sand, ash, shells and fishbone.

Shells collected from the middens indicate that both local and more distant sources were being exploited. Tuatua and pipi are the dominant species present, reflecting the proximity of potential sources of these species on nearby

Tawharanui Beach. Scallop, mussel, cat's eye and black nerita, and a few other gastropod species, including limpet, whelk, paua and Cooks turban, were also present in much smaller numbers (probably sourced from around the Comet Rocks or Pukenuhiniuhi Point also known as Pukeruhiruhi). Numerous cockles possibly indicate exploitation of the estuary located in the adjacent Whangateau Harbour some 5 kilometers to the north.

Bone from snapper and barracouta were present, and the stone used in fire scoops indicated local resource use. A few obsidian flakes used as cutting tools have been imported from outside the locality, probably from Mayor Island and possibly Aotea (Great Barrier Island).

To speculate, evidence suggests that at least 350 years ago, when the land was occupied by Maori, there was a continuous surface of old but stable dune sand. Across the surface were deposited the remnants of food gathering and processing by Maori who occupied the ridge immediately behind the beach some 300 m distant. Here terrace and pit earthworks cluster along the ridges and on the hilltops, delineating settlements where Maori lived, stored kumara in semi-subterranean storehouses year-round and processed food in earth ovens. Gardening, as evidenced on historic maps and within soil profiles, was undertaken on the sand flats between the beach and the base of the ridge.

The original dunes were most likely vegetated in low coastal kanuka and manuka scrublands as evidenced by the brown-stained sand and sparse present-day remnants. Occupation, gardening and burning of vegetation resulted in wind erosion of the foreshore and sand movement inland. Erosion and deposition produced variable deflation and covering of the old surface that we now see as shell and stone exposures associated with the charcoal stained sand.

Preliminary examination of the 'on the surface' (i.e., without detailed analysis) evidence indicates local resource use, with possible short distance canoe trips to Whangateau Harbour to harvest cockles from the more extensive estuarine habitats on a low tide.