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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Taranaki petroglyphs

Dear Sir,

I was most interested to read Mr Kelvin Day's very useful article in Volume 23 No. 2 recording petroglyph sites in coastal Taranaki. I would like to comment on his remark as to why this part of the coast should have many fine examples of petroglyphs.

Large andesite boulders have provided a good medium for the carving of petroglyphs in Taranaki. Andesite boulders are to be found in most rivers of the region and form the dominant lithology of clasts on most Taranaki beaches, having been derived from the Quaternary volcanics of Pouakai and Mt Egmont. Inland of the coastline, the sources of many andesite rocks are buried by thick accumulations of volcanic ash. However in the region from Okato in the north to about the Punehu Stream in the south, extensive late Quaternary lahars (volcanic mudflows) from Mt Egmont constructed the present landscape resulting in numerous boulder strewn hills. It is within this area that all of the petroglyphs described in Mr Day's article occur.

Carvings on boulders in streams and on beaches would tend to be removed or destroyed in floods and storms. In contrast boulders of the lahar landscape have been relatively undisturbed in historical times. It would seem that the abundance of petroglyphs in coastal Taranaki is probably a function of the local abundance of coarse andesite rock in the lahar deposits. Maoris living in the region inherited an opportunity to carve petroglyphs upon a readily available and lasting rock type. This does not imply this area was necessarily unique for petroglyph carving, but rather it is one of the few localities where widespread petroglyphs were carved upon materials that have only slowly weathered and have not been physically eroded and abraded up to the present-day.

As a footnote, it should be stressed that the glyphs are slowly weathering and gradually losing their clarity. It is of some concern to me that fully exposed to the climatic elements and lichen growth some of the glyphs are unlikely to last a further century or two of weathering. Some form of shelter for some of these unique carvings is in my view a matter of national importance.

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