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MOTURATA ISLAND: SITE PROTECTION IN ACTION

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INTRODUCTION AND BRIEF HISTORY

Moturata Island (Taieri Mouth, Otago) has been the focus of a revegetation project initiated by the Moturata Whanau (Kai Tahu), to protect the waahi tapu and waahi taoka sites on it from erosion. Conducted in partnership with Te Papa Atawai and the local community, the project has proved to be a success. Seven years after the initial steps were taken to stop erosion, the project stands as an example of iwi and authorities successfully working together to manage archaeological sites.

Moturata (Island of Rata) is located 1.5 kilometers off the mouth of the Taieri River, 45 kilometres south of Dunedin (Figure 1). Moturata covers an area of approximately 7 hectares, with the highest point 35 metres above sea level. A sandbar connects Moturata to the mainland at low tide, allowing foot access for several hours at a time. The changeable nature of the river mouth causes the sandbar to become impassable, sometimes for months at a time, when the river channel changes course. This restricts access to boat or helicopter.

Moturata holds special significance to local Kai Tahu, because it was used by their tupuna. The early Maori settled on the Taieri River above the gorge. Their pa Te Moua was on the hill near Henley and later kaika on the flats at Taieri Ferry. The Taieri River provided a route to the coast, both by canoe and transversing the gorge. Middens and umu ti have been found along the gullies and ridges on both sides of the river. The river flows around Moturata, and it was used as a place to rest and to gather kai, which was abundant around it. Moturata was also an important seasonal titi and

kaimoana mahika kai. Likewise the island was used by various hapu as a resting and stop off site on heke huarahi.



Figure 1: Moturata Island, Taieri Mouth

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The Island has an interesting archaeological record with both Maori and European sites. Prehistoric sites are located on the north end, where there are three features that represent several phases of occupation. Erosion was critical on the north end, revealing a stratigraphy of brown soil, a black cultural layer visible from the beach below, and clay. The site consists of an urupa (feature 1), middens and a cooking area (feature 2), and a stone rectangular hearth (feature 3).

Feature 1:

Human skeletal remains have eroded out of the northern point of Moturata, where there is an urupa facing the direction the sun comes up. The skeletal

remains of a 40 year old woman were found in a crouch-burial. She was around 156cm tall, probably had several children in her lifetime, and was in relatively good health despite indications of a rough diet dominated by shellfish. P. Houghton (n.d.) estimated that she died between 250 and 200 years ago. Other remains have eroded out of the site including an unregistered skull and mandible held by the Otago Museum. In 1994 a large greenstone pendant was found by a member of the community immediately above the urupa.

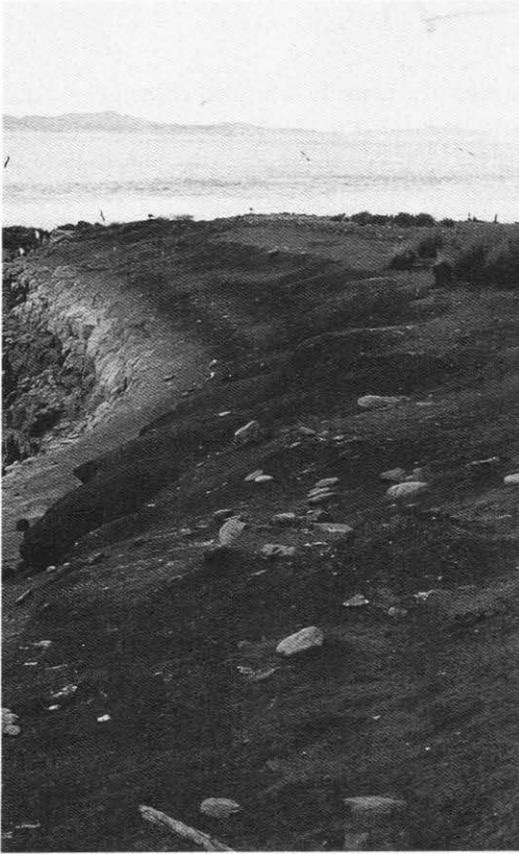


Figure 2: The eroding northern end of Moturata Island, which prompted the Moturata Whanau to take action

Feature 2:

This consists of a large cooking area situated on a terrace on the north end. The site was recorded by Hamel (1991) and was described as oven stones scattered over 20 to 40m above the urupa, in a band 5m wide (I45/60). Hamel also recorded a midden layer over 10m, below the bank on the north point. Blue penguin, barracouta and limpet were identified in a deposit 5 to 10cm thick.

Small pieces of greenstone and obsidian have been found scattered over the surface of this area.

Feature 3:

On the southern side of feature 2, is a small rectangular stone hearth located on a lower terrace with the soil rapidly eroding away. In 1991, the outline of the stones barely showed on the surface, and in 1994 the four stones were clearly visible. The hearth has a maximum length of 50cm and width of 26cm. There is no evidence that it was surrounded by a structure (Palmer 1994:24).

Whaling Station:

The whaling station has been known to locals for generations, and is a significant reminder of the beginnings of our European society (I45/62). The station was owned by George and Edward Weller between 1839 and 1842. It was revived by Johnny Jones after 1844, but was abandoned during 1845 (Palmer 1974:2).

Located on the south-western end of the Island, the site consists of a domestic area, and a working area in a cove where the whales were dragged up the beach, cut into small strips and boiled in try-pots. The domestic site is located on the upper slopes of the islands south-western side. Here Peter Coutts directed the excavation of TI/4, one of four huts lived in by the whalers and their families (Coutts 1976:296; Campbell 1992:50).

Pilot Station:

Two pilot station houses were situated on the northern end of Moturata Island, between the prehistoric sites and the whaling station. The station was established to provide some help to the vessels navigating the bar at the

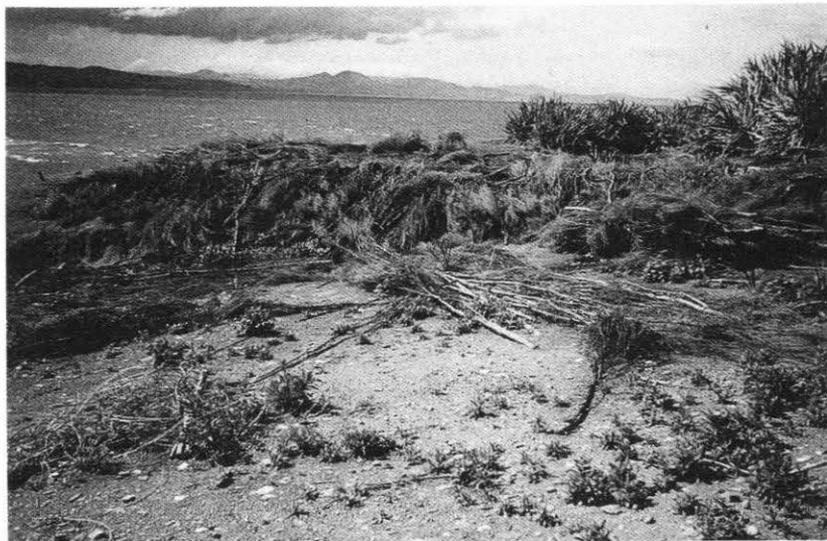


Figure 3: Manuka was laid in a grid formation across the northern end of Moturata to trap top-soil and give protection to young plants (1995)



Figure 4: Martin Palmer looks over the manuka brush laid in 1995, which is now completely covered by vegetation (1996)

entrance to the Taieri River. The station operated between 1862-1864, during the period when traffic to the goldfields was greatest.

The house sites are located on a flat terrace, surrounded by thick flax bushes. The area is covered in small pieces of brick, shell, bone and glass. In 1864 the houses were removed to the mainland by Captain Antonio Joseph, leaving only the base of a brick fireplace (Palmer 1994:29).

EROSION

All of the archaeological sites on the island have been exposed by devegetation and erosion, caused by the action of the wind, rabbits, nesting gulls, titi and blue penguin. Of greatest concern was the northern end, where the environment was particularly fragile and sites were rapidly being destroyed (Figure 2).

In 1991 the Moturata Whanau established a Management Committee with Te Papa Atawhai, to initiate a vegetation restoration project. In 1994 a Management Plan was approved as a means for the Moturata Whanau to establish their Kaitiakitanga and a partnership with Te Papa Atawhai. The project identified the need to reduce the loss of top-soil caused by wind and water erosion, while protecting vegetation from rabbit destruction. A trial experiment was conducted by Martin Palmer, who developed the idea of laying of manuka brush to trap loose material, and promote seed germination and regrowth under a protective covering. The trial was a success, and the whanau was able to obtain funding from Tikanga Atawhai to transport scrub by helicopter to Moturata to be laid over the worst affected areas. The method involves placing manuka scrub in a grid formation, held down by string attached to wire pegs placed at the edge of the site (Figure 3). This allows the top soil to build up, forming a protective layer over the site. Plants are then grown in the top soil, sheltered by the scrub (Figure 4). A rabbit poisoning programme is also in progress, using pindone.

The replanting of native trees and scrub is also a priority to return the island to its former habitat. Several hundred flax from the Yellow Eyed Penguin Nursery were planted in 1996 and survived well, although flax divided from plants already on the island have done much better. A small number of pingao were also planted in September (1996) as a trial, with plant protectors to prevent rabbit browse. It is intended that indigenous plants from the Taieri

Mouth-Akatore area will be planted on the island during 1997.

COMMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The Moturata Whanau have recently been allocated Lotteries Funding to continue the project. The archaeological sites covered by the brush have been recorded and photographed over the years by Brian Allingham, Jill Hamel and myself; without this protection they would have naturally eroded away. The whanau have taken the initiative to protect the waahi tapu and waahi taoka that are so important to them, and have been supported in their work by Te Papa Atawhai. It is hoped this project will encourage other iwi to not only take an interest, but actively manage sites in their rohe because the potential is enormous.

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