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**NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER**



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THE ASSOCIATION OF KARAKA AND PRE-EUROPEAN SITES IN  
THE WAITAKERE RANGES, AUCKLAND

Jack Diamond

Mitcalfe's investigation into "The Significance of Karaka in an Assessment of Pre-European Land Utilisation in New Zealand" (Mitcalfe, 1969) closely parallels my conclusions regarding the distribution of this tree around the shores of the Manukau Harbour and the Waitakere Ranges westward of Auckland city.

Unlike his group which made a scientific investigation of karaka in relation to land utilisation, my conclusions have been formulated after experience over a long period of years during which the realisation of the value of the association of karaka trees with pre-European sites has brought about significant results in my search for and locating these sites. Many of the sites listed in "The Maori in the Waitakere Ranges" (Diamond, 1955) have karaka trees growing in or near them and were located because of this association.

The Waitakere Ranges, actually a plateau averaging 800 feet in height and some nine miles wide, extends for a distance of about 16 miles from the shores of the Manukau Harbour on the south to Muriwai Beach on the north (Searle, 1944).

This area was covered in dense rain forest except for a distinctive maritime vegetation on the coastal belt facing both the Tasman Sea and the Manukau Harbour (Wall and Cranwell, 1943). Even after the timber trees were removed for milling, the bush cover on the central plateau proved too costly to clear for cultivation so it was the coastal margin, that, in the early eighteen sixties, the settlers started clearing for mixed farming.

When I first tramped around the Waitakere Ranges in the late nineteen twenties, much of the coastal area was still in grass, but by the end of the nineteen thirties the land from Bethells Beach southwards was beginning to revert to its former cover with strong competition from the introduced gorse.

The karaka in the area under review are found today in three distinct environments:

1. In association with the rain forest of the central plateau.
2. On the cleared and grassed coastal farms at the northern end of the Ranges.
3. On the coastal belt to the south where farming has been abandoned and the land is in the process of reverting to its former cover.

To Mitcalfe's observations I would like to add the following:

As karaka, along with pohutukawa and small groves of manuka are the only shelter available to animals on most of the coastal farms, the ground under the majority of these trees is kept bare of vegetation, thus greatly facilitating searching, especially for middens.

Karaka flourishes in the dense rain forest inland, although it is considered to be a purely maritime tree (Wall and Cranwell, 1943), and while searching through binoculars the steep, heavily bushed hillsides for likely locations of pre-European sites, I invariably note the presence of karaka and have in many instances, found rock shelters or terraces close to them.

I would consider that because karaka associated with these sites are located below the level of the habitation floor, they would have grown from seed discarded during occupation of the sites rather than that the occupiers were attracted to the site because of the presence of the karaka. It would have been more rewarding to collect ripe berries from the trees growing prolifically around the coast than harvest berries from the scattered trees growing on the steep faces inland.

Along the coastal margin where farming has been, or still is carried on, the live karaka trees generally tend to be single trunked with a canopy of branches forming a rounded head of leaves starting from about six feet above the ground, while those in the bush and on the ungrazed coastal margin can have or have become multi-trunked with branches spreading out and assuming a shape conforming with the surrounding trees and undergrowth.

During the time I have been searching for and recording pre-European land utilisation in the Waitakere Ranges, I have not found even one site that I can confidently record as a pre-European garden owing to the complete lack of reliable information and field evidence. Although associated with karaka, the places that have been pointed out to me were used in European times, and there is no evidence to prove they were in use in pre-European times.



