

What was it like for the first Polynesian settlers living along the east coast of the South Island? How easy, or difficult, was it, to make a living in a new land . . . a new land with unfamiliar cycles. Some birds became scarce, but that was just what happened. Weren't there always other animals? This was a land of plenty.

The first settlers lived on the coast, feeding on seals, dolphins and fish. Nearby, streams ran sluggishly through lowland swamps forests breeding fish and eels. To the north and south of the Waitaki River limestone caves provided shelter within a day's walk for hunters gathering birds to supplement coastal diets. It is thought that the lowlands of Canterbury were particularly abundant in moa. Strong winds and fire had already turned the forest into a mosaic of vegetation types suitable for browsers, and the limestone bluffs of South Canterbury and North Otago provided sheltered nesting sites.

After 300-400 years of human settlement, the combination of introduced rats, hunting, and fires wrought considerable changes on the big game species. They were rapidly becoming extinct. Their memory is captured in drawings on rock faces done by Maori hunters and travellers, probably during the 1300s and 1400s. Moa, eagle, goose, swan, pelican . . . the drawings remain like a cold shiver along the spine of South Canterbury and Otago; memories of an amazing diversity of animals now gone.

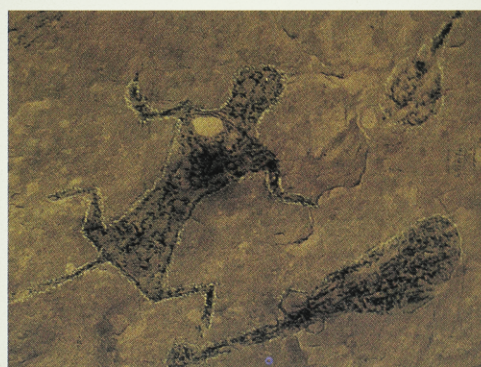
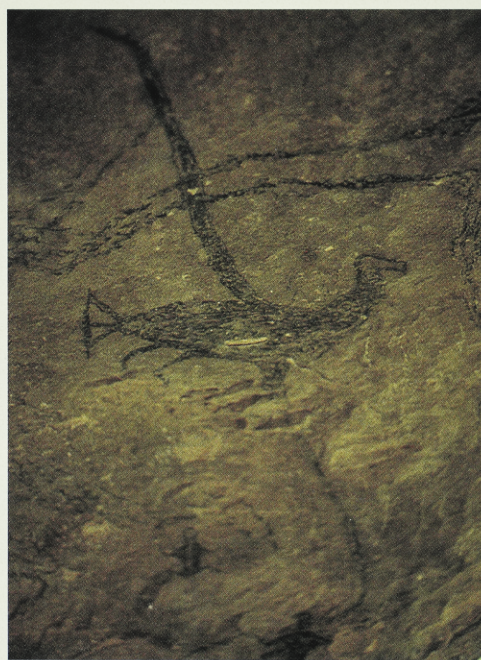
Moa and seagulls were becoming severely depleted after three centuries of human settlement. By the 1500s moa were probably gone from South Canterbury, along with swans, geese and eagles. Burning of forest, for bracken, by accident, for route clearing, eventually reduced wildlife diversity and volume to the point where it no longer supported growing settlements. Once-sluggish creeks winding through swamp forest became free flowing streams and lagoons. People no longer went on hunting expeditions for moa to the big limestone bluffs. They turned to fish for food. As the big game moa and seal colonies were depleted, they moved on, rather than developing new technologies to exploit the less productive lands.

The southern South Island climate denied people the opportunity to garden, so they remained a hunter-gathering community apart from deliberate bracken regeneration and minimal kumara planting. The entire South Island population was probably not more than 5000. It may be that, within their technological restraints, the land had reached its 'carrying capacity.' A new sort of society was emerging: one which took resource rights far more seriously and defended infringements with violence. And in the 1500s new people were arriving in the area.

In the limestone rock shelter, figures drawn in red ochre are probably from this period. In some places they have been deliberately drawn over the top of earlier figures. They are more abstract, and include some motifs reminiscent of later Maori sculptural art. Red is the colour of tapu; perhaps the newer figures were drawn by new settlers to protect themselves from ancestors, and to establish their own rights

SIGNPOSTS TO THE PAST

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Bones are not the only traces left of extinct species, such as the great eagles. Drawings in limestone caves of South Canterbury and Otago hint of lifestyles and species now lost forever. Photo: Isobel Gabites

Figures like these are best preserved by recreating the environment they are drawn in. By replanting the vegetation around cave entrances, moisture and dust levels are minimised. Photo: Isobel Gabites

to the land? More recent still, are 'European contact' drawings of sailing ships and horses.

Whereas many of the charcoal and grease drawings obviously represent the wildlife and activities familiar to the artists (birds, dogs, fish, dolphins, lizards, hunting, and fishing), there are other figures which are ambiguous. There are human-like motifs,

symmetrical designs and taniwha forms. Do they hold spiritual connotations? Does, for example, the positioning of animal forms beside 'hollow' human forms suggest recognition of a spirit shared by all creatures?

Speculation runs rife amongst anyone who sees the cave drawings, of which there are hundreds. The Opihi 'taniwha' has been a focus for interpretation for decades. Detailed, large, precisely crafted, this drawing appears to contain several interlocking skeletal, but stylised forms. Those that trace its origins to lizards may wonder if it is symbolically linked with death. Those who suggest that it represents the fossilised, or even decaying remains of the presumed extinct marine dinosaur, *Plesiosaurus*, can easily understand people being so amazed by this rare, unfamiliar monster that they'd want to capture its memory in art form.

An obstacle to a better understanding of the drawings is the absence of a comprehensive catalogue that shows, in colour, all the drawings as they appear on shelter walls. So little dating has been possible, that perhaps distribution maps of similar drawings will provide a useful chronology of what group travelled where, and when. It's a task worthy of proper funding before sheep, vandals, exposure to dust and rain, decay the drawings beyond recovery.

The rate of loss has been slowed by some landowners who are prepared to fence stock out of the shelters, and replant protective vegetation around them, but more protection is needed. Both the Historic Places Trust and the Department of Conservation are able to assist farmers with protection work, as Historic Places Trust and Lands and Survey have done successfully in the past in South Canterbury. DoC, HPT and museums are building up a record of the drawings, using photography and tracings, before they fade altogether.

To stimulate interest in the drawings, an exhibition of life-size photos and real samples of 21 drawings is moving through the country this year. DoC has produced four high quality posters which include rock drawing illustrations of extinct wildlife, partly as a reminder that settlers everywhere cause rips in the ecological fabric of new and strange lands, and partly to share an insight into the artistry and expression of the earliest settlers. Proceeds from sales will fund fencing, planting and recording activities in Canterbury and North Otago (the posters can be bought or ordered from DoC, Central Office, PO Box 10-420, Wellington).

The earliest drawings, deceptive in their simplicity, have been handed down from ancestors for us to treasure. Some of the ancestors may not, in fact, be long dead! The extraordinary continuity of Maori art (and recent graffiti) found within the shelters signpost some of the most momentous moments in New Zealand's Polynesian settlement history; deforestation, extinctions, cultural change, European settlement, farming and urbanisation.

Information about protected sites open to the public, with the kind permission of the landowners, can be obtained from Historic Places Trust (PO Box 2629, Wellington), DoC offices in Timaru and Dunedin, or Canterbury and Otago Museums.