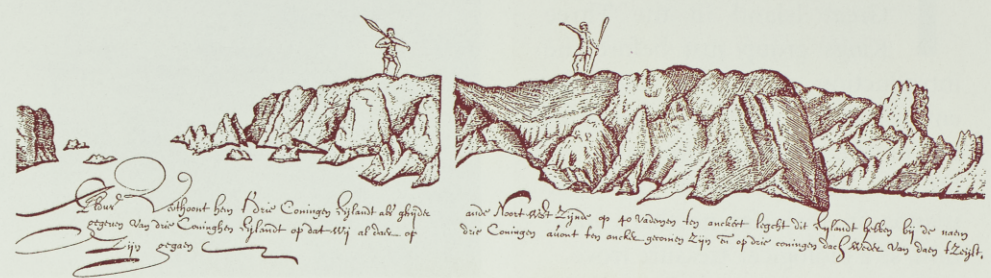




At Left: Rugged coast of the Great King, bull kelp in the tide.
 Below: Abel Tasman recorded 'giants' roaming the barren clifftops of the Three Kings. The picture is from the log of his voyage



Natural Heritage of The Three Kings

The Three Kings Islands are truly special for New Zealand biology. Declared a sanctuary in 1930, the group has 14 (and possibly 16) terrestrial plants found nowhere else but on these islands.

They also support massive numbers of breeding seabirds, together with special populations of skinks, geckos, wetas, spiders, and a large array of land snails all peculiar to the group.

The islands have their own distinct species of milk tree, as well as a sub-species of bellbird found nowhere else.

These remarkable plants and animals include many resilient populations pushed to the brink of extinction over past centuries — by forest clearances on Great, North East and possibly South West Island, as well as pressure from goats on Great Island.

Forest was cleared by Maori and supported an estimated 100 inhabitants in the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1643, the explorer Abel Tasman described a barren treeless landscape and 'giant' men standing tall on the sea-cliffs. Today no-one lives on the islands, and archaeologists and scientists are searching for clues to the group's rich history.

Goats, introduced in 1889, soon took over Great Island, and the original four animals bred to near 400 by the time their descendants were culled in 1946. The extermination of these goats was one of the first instances in New Zealand of this type of action being taken to save plants from extinction.

Without pressure from browsing goats the physical signs of long-term habitation — stonework drains and terracing — were quickly covered over by tangles of kanuka and regenerating broadleaf forest.

The group remains rat and mouse free.



WENDY NELSON