

Poor Knights Islands

Poor Knights Islands Marine Reserve

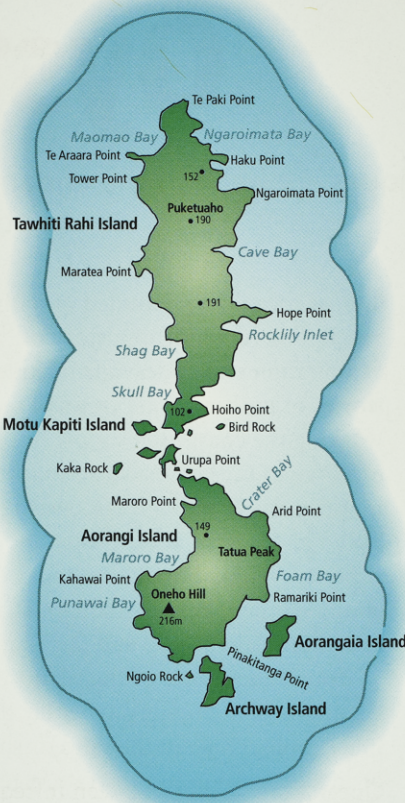
The Poor Knights Islands appeared during the Pliocene period some 13 million years ago. They were originally part of the mainland, separating around 120,000 years ago and are the lava domes of ancient volcanoes.

There are two large islands, Tawhiti Rahi to the north and Aorangi to the south, and many smaller islands. The Pinnacles group and the Sugarloaf, some miles to the south, are also part of the marine reserve.



The massive Rikoriko Cave is visible near the right hand tip of Aorangi Island.

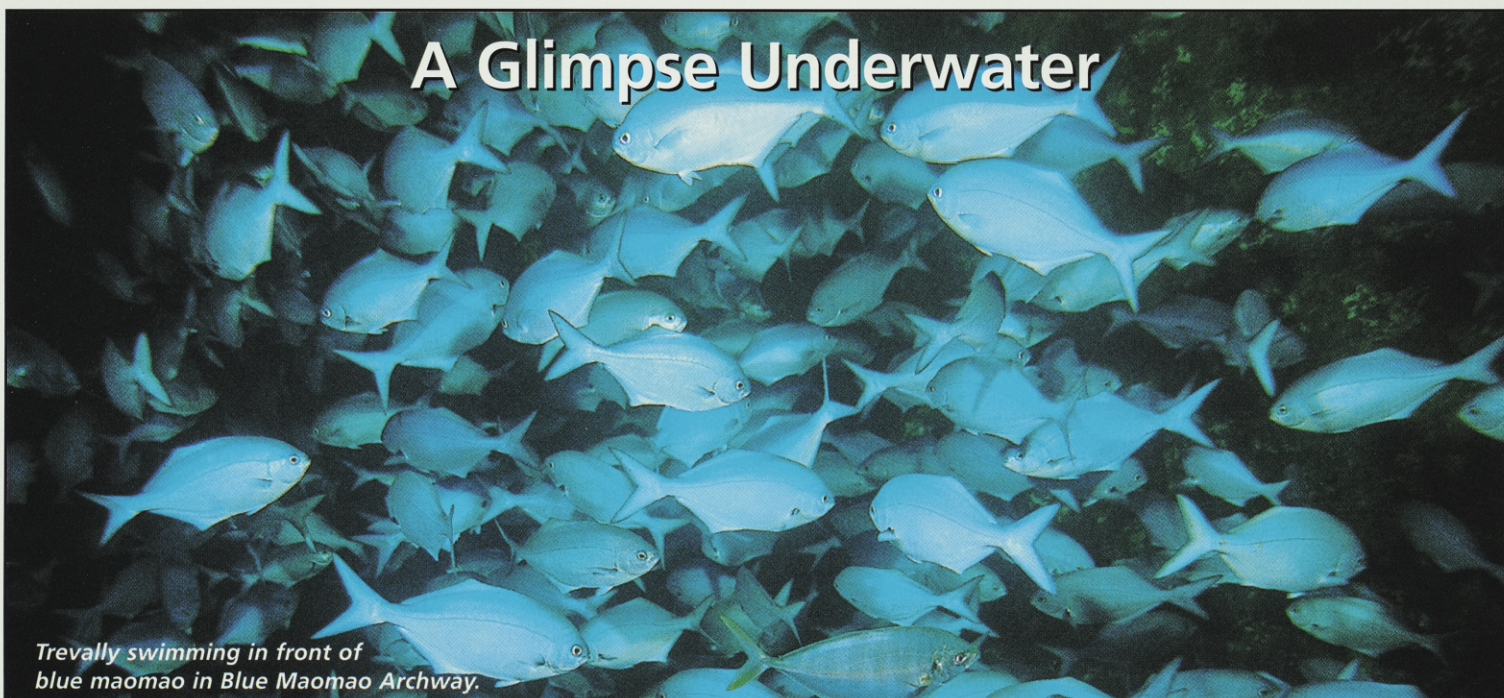
Maori were the original inhabitants with approximately 350 Ngatiwai and Ngatitoki living on the main islands. The steep cliffs have few landing places which made the islands easy to defend.



Looking through Archway Island into South Harbour.

Maori lived there until 1823 when the chief Tatua left with his warriors to join Hongi Hika in his musket wars with tribes further south. During their absence a rival Waikato tribe, attacked and wiped out all but a few of the inhabitants. On his return, Tatua declared the islands tapu, effectively stopping any further landing by Maori and they have remained uninhabited since.

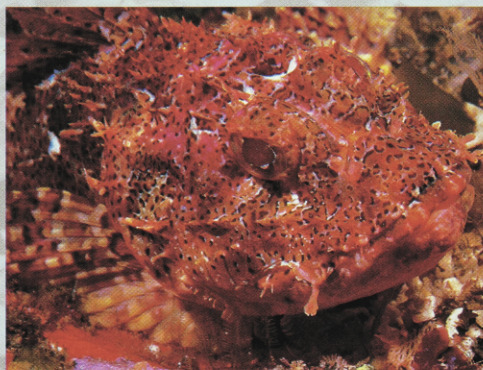
The islands were classed as a wildlife sanctuary in 1929. The waters around the islands were declared a marine reserve in 1981, but limited fishing was permitted until the islands gained total protection in October 1998.



Trevally swimming in front of blue maomao in Blue Maomao Archway.

We were diving inside Blue Maomao Archway, at the Poor Knights Islands Marine Reserve. The archway, just off Labrid Channel, flows into South Harbour and the sights are typical of the rich and diverse life of the Poor Knights Islands.

A curtain of blue maomao parted as we swam towards them. They closed behind us and we were surrounded by a moving wall of fish, so organised they could have been choreographed. Dozens of two-spot demoiselles flitted over the rocks below us and red pigfish, Sandager's, banded and



Scorpionfish are common, but well camouflaged against the invertebrates.

scarlet wrasses hovered like interested spectators.

The rocks and walls completed the stage with a backdrop of colourful invertebrates. Anemones, sponges, bryozoans, hydroids and ascidians covered everything. Splashes of contrasting colour among them were grazing nudibranchs. (See *Forest and Bird* November 2002).

A scorpionfish, like the villain in the scene, watched with expressionless eyes. It raised its dorsal fin and changed from brown to bright red in our torchlight.