

## Rākau Momori (Moriōri memorial trees) – Fact sheet

Rākau momori are unique Moriōri carvings (or bruising) into living kōpi trees (*Corynocarpus laevigatus*). Today they are found only on Rēkohu (the main Chatham Island) and are becoming increasingly rare due to a range of environmental factors. This fact sheet is intended to inform people of the importance of rākau momori and the efforts being undertaken to protect the few remaining engraved trees.

Rākau momori were found in groves along the eastern coast of the island, all around Te Whaanga lagoon and on Rangihau (Pitt Island). When recorded in the 1950s by Christina Jefferson they numbered over 1,000, of which she sketched 450. Today only about 130 remain in the forests and many of these are barely visible to the naked eye.

The nature of the cut or marking into each tree is such that it does not penetrate the cambium (layer between the wood and internal tissues). The result is a broad dent into the outer bark layer that does not result in scarring.

The carvings are complex and diverse portrayals of karapuna (ancestors) and possibly events. Many of them are memorials for departed loved ones. The belief was that by carving the image into the bark, the spirit of the departed would be infused into the tree, which then acted as a kind of portal to the spiritual homeland. These places are very tapu to Moriōri and are used for inspiration, communication, meditation and reflection.

Jefferson categorised the carvings she sketched into 4 types. She also noted that several different methods were used. The most common method is incision, leaving the bark in between features untouched. She describes other methods as etching, where the bark is removed and the figure is etched at various depths to show shadow and a third method involved removing the bark in an oval shape and then carving the bare trunk of the tree – she calls this the cameo method. Some carvings use a combination of these techniques.

1. Human figures. These are the most common form and show a wide variety of artistic styles, many of which incorporate a heart shaped head, often with kura (feather) adornments and frequently with extended arms;
2. Zoomorphic images. Most of these are of fish and birds, as well as seals, seaweed and crayfish;
3. Trees, and;
4. Assorted other objects.

Further surveys and studies of the trees have been carried out, including David Simmons (1960s), Stuart Park (1976) who carried out a survey of tree and cave glyphs, and then in the late 1990s the National School of Surveying team and DOC carried out a photogrammetric study of the rākau momori. In 2010 HMT, DOC and Otago University completed a valuable laser scanning study of all remaining carvings.

The 2010 study showed that many of the groves (and esp Hāpūpū) were in decline and many of the carvings were starting to deteriorate, many within a few months of damage to tree canopy. In 2011 8 trees were removed from Hāpūpū for conservation of the carvings, and in 2013, 10 more trees came out. These are being treated and conserved at Kōpinga marae under guidance and advice

from Te Papa conservators. The long term plan is to have these on display at the Whare Taonga to be established at Kōpinga Marae.

The historical loss of mature kōpi and associated rākau momori is the result of several factors, changes to land use, the impacts of grazing and browsing animals, and wind exposure and storm events. In the first instance, land clearance for pastoral farming from the nineteenth century substantially reduced lowland kōpi forest cover on Rēkohu. In a botanical survey carried out in the 1970s, Hamel observed that kōpi forest survived in areas of Rēkohu with substantial protection from the wind. Hamel (1977:8) noted in particular that the “browse-and wind-resistant tree-myrsine (matipo)” usually sealed the edges of kopi forest. Hamel described the process of destruction through wind exposure.

“Karakā is even less tolerant of ‘wet feet’ than tree-myrsine [matipo] and also requires more shelter...Mature trees are readily killed if destruction of the forest edge allows the wind in under the canopy”. (Hamel 1977: 12)

Soil and fungal samples are being regularly taken at Hāpūpū and the results show presence of the pathogen *Phytophthora multivora/citricola*, which is a destructive pathogen responsible for tree die-back and blight and readily attacks bark. Symptoms include crown die-back, bark disintegration and root rot. Basically the infection is permanent. It is likely that visitors to the grove have inadvertently spread the infected soils on the soles of footwear.

In a bid to arrest the decline and save remaining trees HMT and DOC have initiated a remedial strategy at Hāpūpū with a view to extending successful measures to other small groves and rākau momori on the island. Remedial measures include increasing soil fertility, minimising plant competition, mulching, and the planting of wind shelters. HMT has also constructed trial wind filters at one site with beneficial results showing in less than a year.

Hāpūpū has also been important as a place for locals and tourists to visit. For this reason we seek the co-operation and understanding of the public to help us in our efforts to slow the decline and disappearance of these precious taonga in their natural state.

The temporary closure of Hāpūpū is essential for the survival of the grove and for public health and safety reasons. We know that kōpi were introduced to the island by the ancestors of Moriori and successfully developed into large groves for cultivation of berries and kōpi nuts – a vital carbohydrate to the Moriori diet. The kōpi nut was as important in the Moriori diet as kumara was to the Māori diet in New Zealand. The health of the groves depended on human intervention. Their future survival will require the same levels of human intervention along with assistance from the island community and visitors alike.

In addition to exploring opportunities for creating new rākau momori, we plan to develop alternative visitor experiences whilst the reserve is closed. Please contact HMT or DOC for further information, or keep an eye on the web sites.

HMT 0800 MORIORI [www.moriori.co.nz](http://www.moriori.co.nz)

DOC 03 3050098 [www.doc.govt.nz](http://www.doc.govt.nz)