



Motutapu Archaeological and Historic Landscapes

Heritage Assessment

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Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

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Eroded ash block of Rangitoto ash from Sunde site exhibiting human and dog footprints.
Photo A Dodd



Sunde site today as viewed from the north-east with Rangitoto in background.
Photo A. Dodd



Artist's impression of the Sunde site prior to the Rangitoto eruption with Auckland isthmus in the background. Source: Diorama in 'Auckland Landscapes—Past and Future', Auckland Institute and Museum. Reproduced in Davidson 1984:43



1. SITE OVERVIEW

Occupation of Motutapu began early. Ngati Tai is the principal iwi with features of Arawa and Tainui traditions. Archaeological sites predate the c.1400 Rangitoto eruption. Subsequently, Motutapu was used for gardening — over 300 sites are recorded. European activity from 1840 includes farming, picnic excursions, and a defence fortification 1936-1958. (50 words)

The archaeological sites include one of the most acclaimed sites in New Zealand — the ‘Sunde site’ from which ash footprints have been excavated. The landscape is significant as one of New Zealand’s first systematic, archaeological site recording projects. The WWII military landscape survives relatively complete and includes the coastal defence battery, US Navy ammunition bunks, and a artillery camp. (66 words)

- » Motutapu Recreation Reserve
- » Administered from Auckland Area Office.
- » Access by causeway via Rangitoto wharf, or private boat
- » A moderately significant visitor site with an estimated 15,000 visitors per year.¹
- » Motutapu Archaeological and Historic Landscapes are actively managed historic sites.
- » Island area 1510.37 hectares.

2. HISTORY DESCRIPTION

Motutapu has an occupation history that encompasses virtually the full span of New Zealand settlement. It was one of the earliest places inhabited both by Polynesians, and later by Europeans in the Auckland region. The earliest evidence for occupation of Motutapu dates to before the eruption of Rangitoto in c.1400.² The eruption smothered Motutapu in ash and caused widespread deforestation, but also produced friable soils suitable for gardening. Archaeological deposits bracketing the ash suggest the eruption prompted a shift from broad spectrum hunting of forest birds to intensive marine exploitation and horticulture.³

Following the eruption, Motutapu is reported to have been visited by both *Arawa* and *Tainui* canoes and was subsequently settled by Tainui ancestors of Ngati Tai. c Tai⁴ maintained rights of occupation from that time until its eventual sale with only minor incursions from other groups. Ngati Huarere of Arawa descent claimed bird snaring rights over kaka by right of conquest, and from the 18th century reciprocal fishing rights were negotiated with Ngati Paoa on Waiheke.

In the 1820s many of the islands in the Hauraki Gulf, including Motutapu, were evacuated in response to the threat of Hongi Hika and Ngapuhi armed with muskets. Many Hauraki tribes retreated south, and Ngati Tai are said to have taken refuge at Maungatautari.⁵ Occasional ventures were made back to former territories in the gulf, sometimes not without

consequence, as with when a local fishing party was attacked at Motutapu by Ngapuhi with several casualties.⁶ From 1836 many of the evacuated territories were resettled, and the Ngati Tai remained on Motutapu until the northern part of the island was sold to Thomas Maxwell in 1840.

Maxwell had lived at Maraetai with Ngati Tai and was married to Ngeungeu the daughter of the principal chief, Tara Te Irirangi.⁷ From 1840-45 the northern end was leased out to James Moncur. The southern end was purchased by Williamson and Crummer in 1845, but subsequently granted to Robert Graham in 1857. The Reid brothers purchased the island in 1869-70 and retained ownership until 1943. A series of homesteads and outbuildings were built at Home Bay, the first between 1840-57, and the present Reid Homestead was built 1901-3. A homestead was built at Emu Bay c.1869-70, occupied by James Reid and demolished in 1976.

Work began on the Motutapu counter-bombardment battery in 1936.⁸ In May 1936 roads had been formed, and the battery and observation post were completed by June 1937. Guns were mounted by the end of August 1938, and a temporary camp established at Administration Bay in 1937. War broke out in September 1939 and the military population on the island went from 10 to 200, requiring the construction of additional buildings at Administration Bay and at the Observation Posts. Plotting rooms were constructed in 1941-2, and searchlights installed at Billy Goat point. The US Navy intended to use Auckland as a staging point into the Pacific and this led to the construction of deepwater wharfing facilities, and 50 ammunition magazines between 1942-3. The war ended in 1945, and within five years the entire complex had been abandoned.

3. FABRIC DESCRIPTION

Geologically Motutapu comprises Waipapa series greywackes, cherts and argillites, overlaid with Waitemata tertiary sediments, and blanketed in Rangitoto ash. The cultural landscape of archaeological sites includes pre-Rangitoto eruption archaic campsites and adze making sites, 13 pa, numerous open settlements, midden deposits, storage pits, and agricultural areas. In all 372 recorded sites and it is likely that many more subsurface deposits remain unrecorded.⁹ Some sites will have been damaged or destroyed by farming and military activity.

Sizes of recorded sites vary as might be expected over time, with fluctuations in demographics and blurring boundaries of a mobile population. Settlement sites are spread across the whole island, with some apparent clustering on the western leeward side of the island around the mountain and causeway stream catchments, and early archaic settlements at open stream mouths and adjacent spurs. Davidson notes that a clustering around stream mouths and the high number of distinct sites might suggest a rotational garden system.¹⁰

Pa sites are present on most of the easily defendable coastal headlands. However, the relatively small amount of habitable land enclosed within defensive earthworks compared to the area of occupied open settlements