



Poor Knights Islands Marine Reserve



Northland

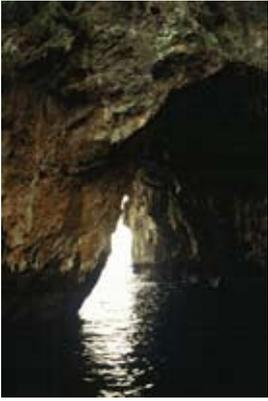
The Poor Knights Islands Marine Reserve was established in 1981. It is significant not only because it was New Zealand's second, but because of the spectacular life above and below water and the landscapes it features. The reserve extends 800 metres from any part of the islands and associated islets, rocks and stacks including Sugarloaf Rock and High Peaks Rocks (Pinnacles). This means everything found within this area is totally protected – wow! Research shows there has been a marked increase in the number and size of snapper in particular in these waters since full protection was accorded in 1998.

It is regarded internationally as one of the world's significant dive sites, whilst nationally acclaimed dive photographer and writer Wade Doak, captures the essence of exploring the reserve with this statement: "You don't just dive at the Poor Knights – you dive in them".

The Poor Knights Islands have been separated from the mainland for at least 18,000 years. Because of this many native species that have disappeared from the mainland still find refuge in them such as tuatara, many species of lizard, giant wētā, flax snails and a giant centipede. The islands are also home to a number of plants found only here including the spectacular vivid red Poor Knights lily (*Xeronema callistemon*). There is only one other known *Xeronema* species in the world – in the mountains of New Caledonia! To help protect these fascinating species from fire, pests or other damage the islands themselves are a nature reserve. You cannot land on any of them without a permit from the Department of Conservation.

R. Morris





Natural highlights

The Poor Knights lie 24 km off the east coast of Northland. They are the eroded remnants of a large volcano which erupted around 10 million years ago. Beneath the waves which surround the islands an ocean of diving has been compressed into a relatively small area. The caves, arches, tunnels and sheer cliffs provide a stunning variety of habitats to explore. From the open, sunlit waters and kelp forests at the upper reaches of the tumbling 'giant staircase' to the sheltered waters of the islands' many caves, the Poor Knights offer an extraordinary sub-tropical underwater experience. Sponge gardens and gorgonian fields are inhabited



Giant wētā M. Aviss

by a myriad of fish, shellfish, urchins and anemones with black coral found in deeper waters. The steep cliffs that fringe the islands plunge 100m below sea level in places before reaching a sandy floor. The arches are some of the most fascinating places to explore. A rich nutrient soup is washed through them feeding the countless animals that compete for space on the walls. Squadrons of stingrays can also be found cruising the archways during warmer

months. Many of the sub-tropical fishes that are recorded in the marine reserve have not been recorded elsewhere in New Zealand, having found their way to the Poor Knights on the warm East Auckland current. Some of these include spotted black grouper, the mosaic moray and striking Lord Howe coralfish. Nursery Cove and some of the shallower parts of South Harbour are the best places for novice divers while experienced divers can find spectacular and challenging dives all around the islands.



Anemone and sponges

Culture & history

The last chief of the islands was a warrior called Tatua. Oral history suggests that sometime around 1820 Tutua left the islands with his warriors to join the notorious Hongi Hika on a fighting expedition to the Hauraki Gulf. During his absence a slave named Paha escaped and made his way to Hokianga, where he reported to Chief Waikato of the Hikutu tribe that the islands were undefended. Chief Waikato, having been insulted by Tatua several years previously, immediately gathered his warriors and set out for the islands. He reached

them after nightfall and the remaining islanders were soon defeated. Few survived, with many jumping to their deaths from the high cliffs rather than being taken prisoner.

However among those who were captured was Tatua's wife, Oneho and their daughter. Later a chief from Whangaroa recognized Oneho and helped her and her daughter escape.

Tatua returned to find that few had survived, but amongst them was his son Wehiwehi, who had hidden in a cave during the fighting. Tatua left and never returned. He made his way to Rawhiti in the Bay of Islands where he was unexpectedly reunited with his wife and daughter.

The Poor Knights were declared tapu (sacred) and have remained uninhabited since.

Ngatiwai, is held to be the tangata whenua of the Poor Knights Islands.

What's in a name?

It is unknown why Captain Cook named the islands the Poor Knights and views diverge on how they gained their name. One story tells of Captain Cook admiring at the flowering pohutukawa and being reminded of the jam on his 'poor knights pudding' breakfast. Another relates to the outline of a knight which can be imagined when looking at the main islands. As most of the dive sites at the reserve are named after their geographic or main features, either of these could be true!

Did you know?

- The largest sea cave in the world is at the Poor Knights. Rikoriko Cave means dancing light, from the shimmering that can be seen on the water at certain times of the day. Its acoustics are so good that New Zealand band Split Enz played a concert there and divers attested to the vibrations felt beneath the sea.
- It's the only nesting place in the world for the Buller's shearwater – flocks of these plump birds are often seen as you travel to the islands.

For more information

Contact the DOC Whangarei Area Office, phone 09 430 2133 or visit the DOC website www.doc.govt.nz

