



Turakirae Head Scientific Reserve



Wellington

The name Turakirae refers to the headland (rae) where the Rimutaka Range descends southward and meets with the sea (turaki). The windswept Turakirae Head Scientific Reserve provides valuable habitat for a variety of plants and wildlife, and preserves a well-defined sequence of earthquake-raised beaches.

It takes about 45 minutes to walk to Turakirae Head from the car park. The eastern edge of the reserve is a further one hour's walk.

Human history

Human settlement in the area dates back to moa-hunting times. More recently, this section of the coast was the main route for European settlers and farmers travelling between Wellington and Wairarapa. Numerous ships were wrecked along this coast during the nineteenth century, some with great loss of life. The headland marks the tribal boundary agreed upon between Te Ati Awa, Ngāti Kahungunu and Rangitane in the late 1800s.

J. Rolfe

Geological features

The five earthquake-raised beaches are internationally-renowned in scientific circles for the continuous record they provide of geological upheaval over the past 7,000 years. The most recent uplift occurred in 1855 when an earthquake measuring 8 on the Richter scale raised the beach 2.5 metres at Turakirae Head and 1.7 metres in Wellington Harbour. The second beach ridge was uplifted by a similar quake around 1460 AD. This is now about 8 metres above sea level and is separated from the 1855 beach by a platform of large boulders. A similar platform separates the third beach at about 16 metres above sea level. This beach is estimated to have been uplifted about 3,000 years ago.



Two other ridges are mostly obscured by screes from the steep slopes behind. They occur at 22 and 25 metres above sea level. Evidence of much earlier uplift can be seen in the hills west of the Orongorongo River.

The associated soils and ecological sequences provide an example of natural succession from colonisation of coastal shingles to dry coastal forest. There is potential conflict between preservation of recognisable raised beach profiles and the regeneration of natural vegetation, which is likely to obscure the older terraces as it matures. DOC is working to protect both the geological features and the processes of ecological succession.

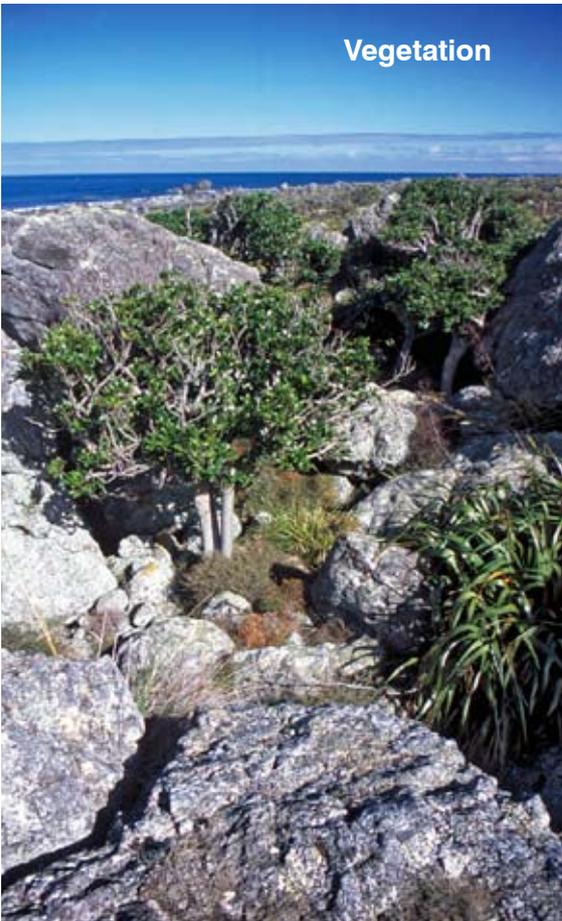
Wildlife

Up to 500 New Zealand fur seals stay at Turakirae Head each winter. The colony mainly comprises juvenile males, which spend their time here building up condition before moving to breeding colonies in other areas. During the breeding season they will not eat for three months or more, living off the fat reserves they build up over winter. This colony began in 1950 and has steadily increased since then to become the largest colony on the south Wellington coast.

Turakirae Head Scientific Reserve also provides habitat for a variety of native birds and reptiles. Banded dotterels, caspian terns and variable oystercatchers are among the bird species that may be observed. The coastal habitat is particularly important for four lizard species (copper skink, spotted skink, common skink and common gecko) and two rare species of cicada that have been found at the mouth of the Orongorongo River.

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Vegetation



The vegetation within the Turakirae Head Scientific Reserve consists of a mixture of salt-tolerant herbs, tussock and reed associations, dune associations and coastal forest. Fire, both pre-European and more recent, has been the principal environmental factor influencing the present vegetation pattern. The vegetation is still subject to grazing by sheep, cattle and rabbits.

A nationally-threatened plant, the shrubby tororaro (*Muehlenbeckia astonii*) occurs within the reserve. A new population of shrubby tororaro was established at Turakirae Head in 1998 as part of a programme to avert the extinction of the species. Unusually large boulders provide a microhabitat

for ferns, lichens and mosses unparalleled around Wellington's coastline.

Visiting Turakirae Head Reserve

- Access to Turakirae Head is via a covenant area across private property. Please keep to the seaward side of the fence. The landowner's permission must be obtained for access over the vehicle track which is outside the covenant area. Phone: (04) 564 9638.
- Dogs are not permitted on the access covenant or in the scientific reserve.
- Fires may not be lit anywhere in this area because of the high risk to vegetation.
- Mountain bikes may not be taken onto private property, including the access covenant.

Other Wellington coastal reserves

The Department of Conservation administers three other tiny reserves along the Wellington South Coast between Owhiro Bay and Karori Stream.

- Red Rocks Scientific Reserve covers a small area of wave-cut platform exposed by the 1855 earthquake, and it protects the most accessible outcrop of pillow lava in the lower North Island.
- Sinclair Head Scientific Reserve is an equally tiny coastal reserve specifically protecting a seal colony.
- Further west, the Speargrass Reserve protects a steep coastal escarpment which in the past has been an important habitat for the nationally threatened speargrass weevil.

Red Rocks and Sinclair Head are steeped in Māori and pākehā history. Māori legends explain the red rock variously as blood from the nose of Maui, bait for the hook he used to haul up the North Island, bloodstains of Kupe's daughters distressed by Kupe's absence, or as blood from Kupe, wounded by pāua. Sinclair Head is the site of several very old pā whose origins are uncertain. A World War II lookout is still evident on the headland.

The coastal escarpments and gullies near the three reserves retain considerable ecological values. There is a characteristic Cook Strait assemblage of plants and invertebrates which share many features with alpine communities. A small dune area adjacent to the Speargrass Weevil Reserve is notable for its spinifex and pingao associations. All of these areas are under threat from browsing animals, vehicles, and quarrying activity.

Further information

For more information about Turakirae Head and other scientific reserves along the Wellington South Coast, contact the Department of Conservation Poneke Area Office in Wellington (phone 04 472 5821), or visit www.doc.govt.nz.