



Seabirds and people

The cultural importance of seabirds



Myths and legends

There are many stories about seabirds from Māori tradition. One story that is told on the west coast of the North Island is about a young man named Monoa.

When Monoa went down to the sea one day his enemies were hiding there and waiting for him. Monoa ran and tried to hide amongst birds like shags, black-backed gulls and oystercatchers, but each time his enemies could easily see him and chase him. Monoa saw a flock of terns and decided to hide in amongst them. There were so many terns that his enemies couldn't see him. Monoa hid until his enemies all left and then he went back to his home.

Why do you think he was able to hide from his enemies amongst the terns? Could Monoa do that today?

Source: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Māori Myth and Legend by Margaret Orbell

Weaving our past to our present

Birds of significance

Māori harvested some types of seabirds for kai/food. They also gathered seabird feathers to make cloaks and hair adornments. Seabird bones were used to make fishing hooks and musical instruments. The bones were also fashioned into chisels that were used to engrave moko/tattoos on people.

Toroa/albatross are of spiritual importance to a number of iwi. For iwi who are affiliated with Taranaki and the teachings of Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi, the white raukura/feather of the albatross is the symbol of peace and Parihaka's non-violent resistance movement.

Key words

Aotearoa – New Zealand

kai – food

kaitiaki – guardian

kaitiakitanga – guardianship

raukura – feathers

Manu moana

ōi – grey-faced petrel

tītī – sooty shearwater

toroa – albatross



Portrait of an unidentified Māori woman. Photographer: Thomas Pringle 1858-1931. 1905. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, N.Z.

Tītapu

Because of their beauty and scarcity, feathers from albatrosses were of special value to Māori. Known as Tītapu, the feathers from albatrosses were normally worn by high-ranking individuals. In fact the phrase "te rau o Tītapu" (Tītapu's plume) is a way of showing respect for a person.

There are many different stories about where the name Tītapu comes from. In one Māori legend, Tītapu was an island in Raukawa/Cook Strait where many albatrosses lived. One day the island sank and the albatrosses lost their home.

Source: *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Māori Myth and Legend* by Margaret Orbell



Reproduction of Māori rock drawing. Alexander Turnbull Library

Tufts of toroa raukura/feathers are worn by Moriori from the Chatham Islands to show their commitment to Nunuku Whenua's covenant. As a Moriori chief nearly 500 years ago, Nunuku Whenua became sickened by warring and bloodshed. He gave an order to all his people stating that from that day forward people were only allowed to fight until first blood was drawn and then the fighting must stop.



When Europeans arrived they too harvested seabirds, in fact many birds were hunted nearly to extinction in the 1800s because of the feather trade. During Victorian times people gathered eggs for scientific and personal collections. During this time many seabird species were at risk of disappearing forever.

Today, most seabird species numbers are so low that even killing a few might endanger the entire species. For this reason most seabird harvesting is illegal in New Zealand.

Troops from the Māori Battalion with barrels containing tītī/sooty shearwaters for a Christmas meal in Italy. War History Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library.

Sustaining traditions

Two seabird species that are still legally harvested include the tītī/sooty shearwater and ōi/grey-faced petrel. The chicks of both species have been traditionally gathered by Māori.

Tītī, which are also called muttonbirds, are the most numerous of all the seabirds in New Zealand. They have an estimated global population of 20 million and breed in many parts of the Southern hemisphere.

As kaitiaki/guardians of the Tītī Islands, Rakiura/Stewart Island and Murihiku/Southland Māori have sustainably harvested tītī for centuries.

Kaitiakitanga is an ethic where people who use a resource have an obligation to maintain it for their children and their children's children. One way Rakiura and Murihiku Māori are practising kaitiakitanga now is by working with researchers to track tītī numbers and look at ways they can continue to harvest tītī that doesn't reduce the population.

People involved with the project hope that the 14-year research programme will increase understanding of the way kaitiakitanga, mātauranga (traditional environmental knowledge) and science can help each other in conserving our natural resources.

Even though there are millions of tītī left, their numbers have fallen by 30–40 per cent over the last 20 years. Scientists think there are a number of reasons for their population decline including climate change and the accidental catching of tītī in commercial fisheries all over the world.



Moko/face tattoo pattern used by a New Zealand chief to sign a land deed in 1840. Dominion Post Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library

Keeping traditions alive

New Zealanders are working hard to reduce the number of seabirds accidentally caught by fishing vessels, but sometimes seabirds are killed this way. These dead birds are sent to scientists who perform an autopsy on them to learn more about the species.

The Department of Conservation then provides some of these seabirds to tangata whenua upon request. These seabird bones and feathers can be used for many traditional purposes—from making musical instruments to being sewn into a ceremonial cloak.

Museums and other organisations also sometimes request these seabirds so that they can put them on display and use them for educational purposes.