



Archaeologist Brooke Tucker at the St Clair Moa hunting site, 2008. Photo: Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga

Archaeology is important

Archaeological sites tell us about Aotearoa New Zealand's rich and special history. Archaeologists use sites and artefacts to discover new things about our past and the people who lived here before us.

We need to protect archaeology – once an archaeological site is damaged or destroyed, it is gone forever. Most archaeology in New Zealand is done in response to development. Archaeologists document archaeology disturbed or destroyed by earthworks for new buildings, roads, and pipes.

Who administers archaeology?

You need to contact Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga if you want to dig up or disturb an archaeological site. It is illegal to damage an archaeological site without their permission.

Fact file

Archaeology is different to paleontology - the study of fossils of dinosaurs, animals and plants.

What is an archaeological site?

Any place in New Zealand associated with human activity before 1900 is an archaeological site. If humans lived or worked on a site, they probably left traces behind. New Zealand was settled by Māori more than 700 years ago so there are many layers of land use over hundreds of years. Consultation with iwi is a very important part of archaeology.

Archaeological sites in New Zealand include:

- Māori pā sites – fortified settlements with banks and ditches
- Old gardens – garden walls, garden terraces, storage pits
- Māori middens – bird/fish bones, shells, charcoal, oven stones
- European rubbish pits – broken china, bottles, old shoes and clothing
- Māori rock art sites – paintings, carvings, fireplaces
- Gold mining sites – earthworks, machinery, colonial artefacts
- Shipwrecks – remnants of sunken vessels and their cargo



Archaeologist Andrew Winter inspects Butement's Woodshed in Glenorchy, 2013. Photo: Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga



Archaeologists Vanessa Clark and Nikole Wills inspect a midden at Pleasant River, 2021. Photo: Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga

Artefacts recovered from the Ng King Brothers Chinese Market Garden Settlement, Ashburton, 2019. Image: Chris Hoopmann



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