

# Te Ana Māori Rock Art Centre: Building back after Covid shock

As one of the key guardians of Aotearoa's rock art sites, the Te Ana Māori Rock Art Centre plays a critical role in the protection, education and community management of these ancient artworks, though this role was put into jeopardy with the arrival of Covid. After a transformational eighteen months, they're building back stronger by equipping staff members with new skills and refocusing their energies on new projects.

Established by the Ngāi Tahu Rock Art Trust in 2010, Te Ana is the only dedicated place in Aotearoa to learn about the ancient practice of Māori rock art. As such, it's an important focal point for community education which is a vital part of the Trust's wider work in the protection, management and celebration of the 761 Māori rock art sites within Te Waipounamu/ South Island.

The Centre hosts a permanent state-of-the-art interactive exhibition that complements nine real-world examples of rock art taonga that were removed from nearby sites a century earlier.

Using a blend of digital technology and real artworks, visitors are transported back in time. From the

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Waimataitai School students in the Cave of the Taniwha, Te Ana Māori Rock Art Centre. Photo: Rob Brown





kaikaranga that calls you into the Centre, to the Taniwha Cave, where rock art appears stroke by stroke on the ceiling of a cave, the Centre allows visitors to wormhole back across the centuries to experience Ngāi Tahu's rich mana whenua history.

Ngāi Tahu guides, descendants of the people that created the art, offer onsite tours of the centre and offsite tours to a number of iconic Māori rock art sites at nearby Ōpihi. These personalised tours have been critical for educating local school children about the taonga in their backyard – indeed over 20,000 tamariki have passed through Te Ana's doors since it opened in 2010.

### **Pandemic shake-up**

Te Ana's Team Leader Rachel Solomon says the survival of the Centre itself and its programme of outreach work looked increasingly uncertain after Covid arrived on Aotearoa's shores. With no pandemic playbook at hand, the team had to quickly come up with all number of solutions to retain staff, balance the books and work within the rules rolled out by the Government.

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ABOVE: Waimataitai School students at the rock art rubbing table, Te Ana Māori Rock Art Centre. Photo: Rob Brown

**“International visitors and schools make up 70% of the visitors at Te Ana and Covid completely took that out of play. It was like a sinking ship, you were scrambling to salvage things, we were out in the open and didn't know who to contact,” says Solomon who has been a team leader at Te Ana for the past 3 years.**

As tourist numbers dried up overnight, Te Ana's bottom line was being severely impacted with a 70% fall in revenue from admissions and merchandise over April to August 2020. Crisis funding was needed to make up for the shortfall, so Solomon applied to the Museum Hardship Fund to help cover rent, electricity and wages.



While it waited to find out whether it would receive this money, the board took a fine tooth comb to its expenses. By cost cutting and delaying the recruitment of staff, it was able to absorb some of these costs, though it was cognisant that this was just a stop-gap measure.

Of equal concern for the board was the issue of retaining staff and keeping them safe during Covid. Widely known as Te Ana's most valuable asset, the guides provide vital connections for visitors, losing them would have put the Centre's whole operation at risk.

**“Our guides are descendants of the people that created the art and are deeply embedded in Ngāi Tahu culture. It takes a long time to train them to get a deep understanding of full scope of Ngāi Tahu heritage, culture and rock art. Losing staff would have been catastrophic, so it was important to us to keep them employed.”**

On top of these weighty concerns, pressing operational issues had to be addressed as the day-to-day running of the Centre was impacted by a whole new set of rules under Covid. Adhering to the rules proved to be tricky as the Centre's exhibition space wasn't fit-for purpose for hosting larger groups. “Te Ana has quite a small exhibition space – only 200 square metres which is full of interactives, so when we were able to open to the public again physical distancing made it hard to work with larger groups, such as schools. To work around the risk we have switched the focus of our school programme out to the rock art sites at our leased property at Ōpihi.”

### Restoring ancient eco-systems

Once Te Ana received the news that they would \$20,000 from the Museum Hardship Fund for operational costs such as rent, electricity and wages,



the team was able to plan for the future, though engaging staff was still of critical concern.

By drawing on a number of funding streams, they were able to fast track existing plans to restore the ecology surrounding a group of 14 Māori rock art sites at Ōpihi, engaging new and existing staff in this important mahi.

The funding to expand this project enabled the team to shift focus; re-energise the team and, importantly, create a safe socially distanced work environment.

“We've been working on the project for a few years now, with the idea of bringing back the wider natural and cultural values that would have been there

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TOP: School children help with the ecological restoration at the Ōpihi rock art sites. Photo: Rachel Solomon

BOTTOM: Ecological restoration at the Ōpihi rock art sites. Photo: James Hustler





centuries ago, at the time the rock art was created. Initially we had a ten-year plan to plant 47,000 native seedlings at the site, but a grant from the Jobs for Nature Fund has allowed us to kick the project up a gear. Together with the grant from the Museum Hardship Fund, we were able to shift our focus to ecological restoration, so that staff members weren't losing massive hours as a result of Covid," says Symon.

As well as educating visitors to the region about Māori rock art, a key strand of Te Ana's work is to work alongside landowners with rock art sites on their property, to help them better protect the sites. Often the sites are on working farms, so re-thinking farming practises such as irrigation is an important part of this work.

"Limestone can act as a sponge and soak up water. Once that water is there, it can change the nature of the rock and cause it to flake off, so our work with local landowners is critical to ensure the ongoing care of these sites, many of which are on operating farms,"

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ABOVE: Whānau enjoying the Ōpihi rock art sites.  
Photo: Amanda Symon

says Trustee and Curator, Amanda Symon.

Te Ana's team of guides help to provide an important space for local landowners to learn more about the Māori rock art on their properties, as well as the role of local Ngāi Tahu people as the kaitiaki (guardians) of the sites. Skilled at imparting their knowledge in a non-judgemental manner, the guides are vital to ensuring the ongoing protection of sites located on private land, so retaining them was paramount.

"Of the 761 sites in Te Waipounamu, only 10-15 are on public land, so by giving advice and providing a supportive environment for people to ask questions about the rock art on their land, we're ensuring wider stewardship of these important heritage sites."

### Shapeshifting times

Despite facing an uncertain future, Solomon says one of the bright spots during lockdown was the way in which museums and iwi organisations banded together to share ideas and skills.

"Over lockdown, we connected with a number of Ngāi Tahu operators, Directors of Small Museums and made connections through Museums Aotearoa, some great ideas came out of that. We also connected





with educators through the Te Pū Tiaki Mana Taonga network which improved our knowledge about ways to reach kids in their homes. I would have never had that contact if Covid hadn't happened," says Solomon.

As a result of funds from the Museum Hardship Fund, Te Ana could retain key staff members and by upskilling them through the educators network, staff created a range of online activities – something they're looking to continue as part of a digital outreach programme.

"During lockdown, we created two online activities - how to make putiputi (flowers) and making manu tukutuku (kites) – which is something we've never done before. Covid has made us change the way we look at things. We would love to create digital resources to enable greater accessibility, though it's hard to upskill in these areas when there is only three of us. Instead we've been working with specialists in the area - such as videographers – to create educational resources."

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LEFT: Te Ana Guide, Wētere Home, Ōpihi Taniwha Cave.  
Photo: James Hustler

RIGHT: Ōpihi Taniwha. Photo: Rob Brown

Now that the Delta strain has settled into Aotearoa and Omicron is surging across the world, the team is bracing themselves for another bumpy year of shifting levels, though they are now confident they have the skills and team to ensure they're well placed to find opportunities at every point.

"In hindsight, Covid has given us a golden opportunity to look at how we do things, to find new ways of achieving our goals, and to build new skills amongst our team. This has put us in a much stronger position going forward and we're incredibly grateful to have received crisis funding from the Museum Hardship Fund through what's been an incredibly tumultuous 18 months," says Solomon.



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