Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

NEW ZEALAND: MAORI LIFE G43

The Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand - or *Aotearoa*, as it is called in the Maori language. They settled there in about the twelfth century and the Europeans arrived in the late eighteenth century.



New Zealand is made up of two large islands and several smaller island chains. The country has a really varied landscape with miles of coastline, mountain ranges and unusual vegetation and animal life. The diverse and dramatic landscape is due to millions of years of plate tectonic movement. New Zealand sits on top of the line where the Pacific and Indo-Australian plates meet.



Dramatic landscape in Fiordland National Park, South Island.

Fish hook



When the first Maori arrived from Polynesia, the sea was as important to them as the land. Seafood (*kaimoana* in Maori) provided the main source of protein, fat, vitamins and minerals in their diets. They were expert sailors and knew a great deal about the behaviour and life cycles of fish. In fact, in 1773 Captain Cook commented 'we were by no means such expert fishers as them, nor were any of our methods of fishing equal to theirs'. Nets and fish traps were made from flax or strong vines and the hooks were made from stone, shell or bone - like the one in the box. The Maori also developed a fishing calendar, which was based on the cycles of the moon. The fish were easier to catch at particular times of the year.

All this knowledge has been passed down through the generations and is still used today, even though many Maori don't live in the same traditional way. Seafood remains an important element of their cuisine.

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Two mats, two brushes, whip and sandals



The strong leaves of the *phormium tenax*, or New Zealand Flax, are traditionally used by the Maori to make baskets, mats and other goods, like those in the box. The long leaves of the plant are woven or plaited together by hand. In the past, the leaves were cut away from the plant with sharp mussel shells, but now a knife might be used. Sometimes the leaves are dyed and used to make decorative patterns on the panels inside traditional-style houses. Can you find any examples of this in the picture book *The Maoris*?

The Latin name, *phormium tenax,* was given to the plant in 1803 by the French naturalist Jacques Labillardière. The name translates as 'wickerwork' and 'holding fast', and was chosen after Labillardière had noticed how many uses the Maori had for it.

The plant (pictured below) is most commonly found in low lying and damp areas, but is very tough and will grow just about anywhere! People in Britain often plant them in their gardens for decoration.





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Tiki

Tikis are a type of jewellery worn around the neck. They are usually made from a stone called nephrite or *pounamu* in the Maori language. Nephrite is a very hard stone, closely related to jade, and is difficult to carve. A great deal of time and energy is devoted to making these ornaments. Today they can be mass-produced using machinery, which makes the job look easy.

Tiki are normally worn during ceremonies and are passed down through the family as heirlooms and treasured. For this reason, it is rare to find one on an archaeological dig because they were never just thrown away. If they were common, it would be easier to explain their origins. We don't really know when they started to be made and why - this remains a mystery.

You will find many examples of tikis in the picture book *The Maoris*.





An unpolished piece of Nephrite