

MAUNGATAUTARI MOUNTAIN TREASURE UNCOVERED

A small graceful mountain daisy found on Mt Maungatautari maybe a new botanical treasure according to Bruce Clarkson (a University of Waikato botanist). Almost two hundred and fifty different species of native plants are known to occur on Mt Maungatautari. Many are plants that are common on many other North Island hills and mountains, but current botanical research has raised the possibility that Maungatautari supports its own special plant treasure.

Hidden away on a rocky outcrop near the summit is a small population of a slender-leaved mountain daisy. These plants are slightly different in appearance to those of the closest neighbouring populations on the Volcanic Plateau. But they may be different enough to be considered a variety or subspecies in their own right. A recent University of Waikato study on the variations within the slender leaved daisy complex suggests they may mirror climatic changes that have occurred regionally and on the Mountain. Twenty thousand years ago when climates were much cooler the daisies were more widespread because forest was less extensive. As the climate warmed 15, 000 years ago, and forest progressively reclaimed more of the landscape, the mountain daisy populations became more confined to isolated habitats which suited them.

Forest clearance and burning in the last few hundred years may have even given them an opportunity for temporary expansion before extensive farm development. Their continuing isolation meant they were no longer able to cross breed with other populations. In some other North Island areas this led to differences sufficient to consider the populations as unique varieties or even subspecies, for example, on Te Mata Peak near Hastings. The Te Mata form of the slender-leaved daisy has become extinct in the last 30 years. In the meantime, the scientific jury is still out on how special the Maungatautari daisy is.

Whatever the verdict, its situation is precarious; less than 30 individual plants growing on a single rocky outcrop surrounded by native forest. It will demand special attention as part of the wider restoration plan proposed for Maungatautari Ecological Island to ensure it does not become extinct like its Te Mata relative...

Ends

- **Bruce Clarkson**