

Voyages of the Pacific Ancestors: *Vaka Moana*



Duncan Kerr, Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, officially opened the exhibition

Who doesn't love the history of the sea?

Brave Europeans pushing off into the unknown. Ships that, for their time, were the technological equivalent of a space shuttle. Cutting edge technology. Down the coast of Africa and eastwards into the Indian Ocean, or westwards to the New World and eventually the unknown Pacific. The stuff of 'ripping yarns' and Russell Crowe movies.

But what if the new discoveries weren't new? What if there were already well-established shipping lanes travelled by hi-tech vessels with world class navigators? What if sailing thousands of kilometres was already considered 'business as usual'. The gloss falls off the achievements of the great western explorers somewhat.

And that's the story of the Pacific. For thousands of years before Europeans tentatively poked their ship's bows mouse-like into the Pacific, from both east and west, Indigenous navigators had made the Pacific their own. Now there's a movie-in-waiting!

From June to October 2009 the National Museum of Australia was host to the *Vaka Moana* exhibition. Curated by the Auckland Museum, this exhibition detailed the achievements of the human colonisation of the islands of the Pacific Ocean. It is a complex story of human endeavour, knowledge and technology.

The settlement of the western Pacific occurred at least 60,000 years ago. Remember, Australia and Papua New Guinea are part of the Pacific too! We can guess that watercraft were used to cover some of the greatest leaps across water. However we can also be reasonably confident that, for the most part, the voyages were leap frogging along coastlines, or making short dashes across open waters to distantly visible features. Certainly brave explorers but predominantly assured that some landfall was close at hand.

The settlement of the Pacific was a different matter, with the first push suspected of being around 4000 years ago. What happened? Had maritime technology and knowledge been progressively refined in Asia and Melanesia until it was time for the new frontier of the open seas? Imagine making the decision to sail into the unknown. What was the motivation? Ecological pressure? Warfare? Or just that damned human spirit of adventure and enquiry?

Whatever the cause, people sailed into the Pacific 4000 years ago and never looked back. Over the ensuing years they progressively discovered and occupied the Pacific. Animals and plants were imported. Complex trade networks established. Ideas exchanged across thousands of islands and thousands of kilometres. All dependent upon a maritime culture.

The *Vaka Moana* exhibition takes us on a tour of time, space and cultures. It describes the prehistory of Pacific occupation. It looks at the animals, plants and technology that accompanied the travellers. It looks at their technologies, arts, histories and cultures through to their first encounters with Europeans — those 'Johnny-come-latelys' to open sea travel.

The exhibition is presented through the means of wonderful objects from across the Pacific. These include full sized vessels, or vaka, plus the sacred and secular objects that characterise the cultures of the navigators. Exquisitely carved ancestral beings, paddles, house and boat panels, bowls and jewellery. All go to present a unique insight into the exhibitions theme of the 'Voyages of the Ancestors'. This exhibition is a tribute to our Indigenous neighbours of the Pacific.

Michael Pickering, Head, ATSSIP

View inside the exhibition



Te Reve O Te Tarakakao Canberra and Queanbeyan Maori Culture Group performing at the opening



Guests viewing the exhibition



Trish Kirkland, Warwick Anderson, Duncan Kerr, Craddock Morton and Mike Pickering touring the space

