



# Historical analogies as tools in understanding transformation



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 13 September 2015

Received in revised form 4 January 2016

Accepted 12 January 2016

Available online xxx

### Keywords:

Adaptation

Transformation

Indigenous peoples

Historical

Wetlands

## ABSTRACT

Historical analogies of environmental change and stress are a well-established method of examining vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. In our view historical analogies of social transformations can similarly illuminate what factors are conducive to transformation. In this paper we draw on the historical example of the environmental transformation of Aotearoa New Zealand from predominately woodlands into farmlands; a transformation which was inextricably linked with the social transformation of indigenous Māori society following European colonisation. The Aotearoa New Zealand case study illustrates how both incidental and purposeful transformations can be instigated by small groups of committed individuals working in formal or informal networks, but can also be imposed by outside experts who instituted widespread changes under notions of progress and improvement without local support or consent. Such transformations involved widespread changes to Indigenous governance regimes, agricultural systems, production and consumption patterns, lifestyles, values and worldviews, and inevitably involved both beneficial and negative outcomes for local peoples. We argue that thinking historically about transformational change provides an opportunity to assess the processes that shape both vulnerability and resilience, and the circumstances under which transformational change occurs, as well as the potential dangers of irreversible changes.

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## 1. Introduction

The majority of climate change scholarship is, understandably, directed at present and future climate conditions, impacts, and responses (Fincher et al., 2014). Emphasis is placed on climate conditions, often at the expense of social, cultural, and economic processes and drivers of change (Liverman, 2009; Hulme, 2011; Carey, 2012). However, this narrow focus on climate as the driver of human societies is critiqued by a wide range of scholars (O'Brien et al., 2007; Liverman, 2009; Hulme 2011; Veland et al., 2013). Hulme (2011) and Liverman (2009), for instance, critique much of the climate impacts research for being a new form of environmental determinism, so called 'climate determinism' in which climate conditions are elevated to become a universal predictor and cause of human behaviour (Hulme, 2011, 246). Schipper and Burton (2009) and O'Brien et al. (2007) identify the need for greater attention to contextual vulnerabilities to ensure that climate adaptation is sustainable and equitable (and linked in with broader human development goals). In the context of Indigenous

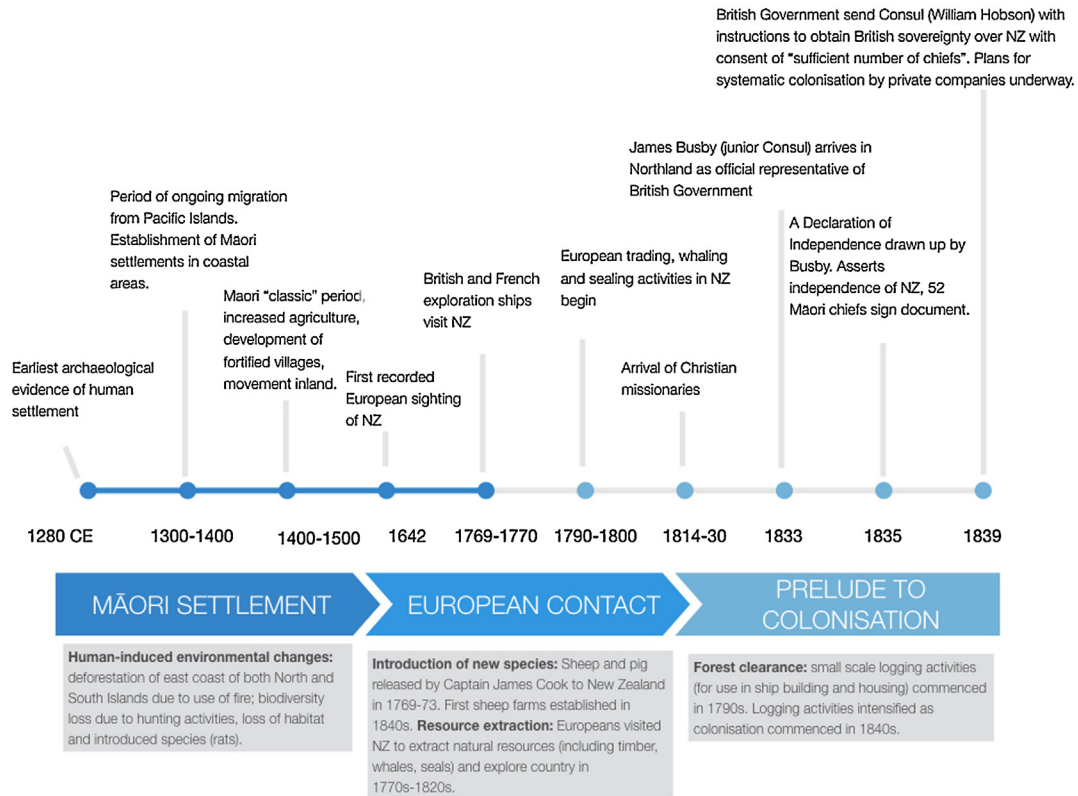
Australian societies, Veland et al. (2013, 2) identify examples of procedural vulnerabilities wherein non-climatic change-related issues (most notably neocolonial government policies and the continued restriction of indigenous rights to self-determination) 'pose greater threats to Indigenous livelihoods than biophysical processes'. Such a framing of vulnerability rejects the idea that climate change is an absolute and measurable variable that can be transplanted between contexts, and instead reframes it as a relational issue that requires reinterpretation through a wide range of political, cultural, personal, and environmental elements (Veland et al., 2010). Such 'critical geographies of climate change' (Rice and Lansing, 2010) require consideration to the methodological approaches that underpin global environmental change research and the ways in which climate change is 'a cultural and psychological phenomenon' (Hulme, 2011, 28).

The current inattention to the histories of space and place, vulnerability and resilience, as well risk and responses represents a significant impediment to the production of successful, sustainable, and transformative plans, policies, and practices inasmuch as we ignore the temporality of change. Climate scientists, archaeologists, and environmental historians have long recognised the value of historical records as a way to reconstruct climate over past centuries, especially when no instrumental or other similar sources are available (Kumar et al., 2006; Endfield, 2008).

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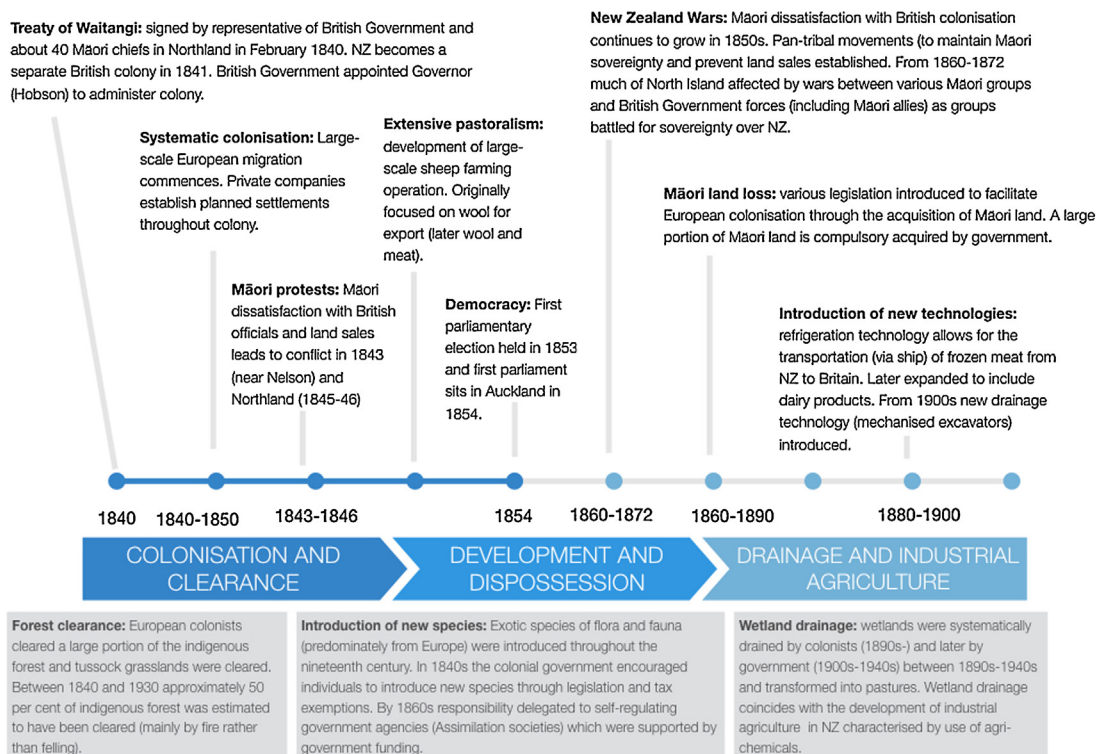


Fig. 1. Timeline outlining key historical events in Aotearoa New Zealand between 1280-1900CE. Source: Belich (1996), Belich (2015), Boast (2008), Brooking and Pawson (2011), Pawson and Brooking (2013).

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