

Getting to know you

Alex Morrison

Q. How did you get into archaeology, and specifically Rapa Nui archaeology? What triggered your interest?

A. I originally became interested in archaeology at a very young age. My mother and father lived in Mexico City in the early 1970s and I remember them speaking about archaeological excavations that were going on around Teotihuacan while they were living there. They also took me to the magnificent Maya site, Chichen Itza when I was around 12 years old, which made a big impression on me.

My interest in Polynesian archaeology and Rapa Nui more specifically came from a course I took as an undergraduate student at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I believe the course was called *Seafaring in Prehistory*. It was taught by Brian Fagan. Sparked by this initial interest, I attended the University of Hawai'i's Rapa Nui Field School directed by Terry Hunt in 2001. After this first visit to the island I was hooked.

Q. Who or what do you consider as your most significant influence (scientific or otherwise) either as a person or a particular work (or series of works)?

A. In terms of integrity, hard work, and sincerity, my biggest influence has been my father. My mother has always been overwhelmingly compassionate and I generally strive to be more like her. My brother is probably the funniest person I know.

Regarding science, I am still impressed with Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution.

Q. What theory or project of yours turned out differently from what you had expected as, for example, a complete surprise?

A. I recently worked on a project on the island of Maui, Hawaiian Islands in which we recorded about 1,300 archaeological features in an area thought to have been devoid of archaeology. I'm consistently surprised at the incredible amount of modification of the landscape that took place in both Rapa Nui and Hawai'i.

Q. What would you have done if you had not pursued your current line(s) of research and interests?

A. If I would have been more talented I would have pursued a career as a jazz musician. A close second would have been to work for NASA doing something in the field of remote sensing.



Q. What was your best Eureka moment?

A. I recently discovered that the total station Compact Flash Card was not damaged after all and two days of data were safe. I was pretty happy about that. I also learned that students learn better when presented with multiple types of teaching media rather than listening solely to my pedantic monologues.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish (in archaeology) on Rapa Nui in the future?

A. I think the prospects of using low elevation remote sensing platforms such as UAVs and quadcopters has great potential for acquiring a lot of information about the island's archaeology and natural environment with very little impact. I am a big believer in non-invasive archaeological techniques and a conservation ethic. It would be very exciting to integrate LiDAR and hyperspectral data into three-dimensional models much like the ground breaking work being done by Greg Asner and his colleagues at the Carnegie Airborne Observatory.

Q. What is your favorite Rapa Nui site and why?

A. While it is almost impossible for me to choose one site on Rapa Nui as my favorite, I am partial to the area from Ahu Te Peu to 'Anakena because of its remoteness and ruggedness.

Q. What myth or misinformation about Rapa Nui would you like to dispel?

A. I think there has been a lot of misinformation about the island that is only recently starting to be discussed through serious academic inquiry. Most of the new evidence that has been presented over the last five years or so questions the timing and causes of the "collapse" of pre-contact Rapa Nui society by focusing more on the effect of European contact rather than some internally caused societal breakdown. This new suite of research more accurately fits the archaeological data and supports what we know to be true about the impact of European encounters in other regions of the world.

Q. What's the most important thing you'd like visitors (or scientists, for that matter) to know about Rapa Nui?

A. The archaeology of Rapa Nui is only one of many aspects that make it a remarkable place. The Rapa Nui people who carry on this living culture are among the most genuine, sincere, and talented people I have ever met. I think Rapa Nui music is also fantastic.

Q. What advice would you give to a person interested in Rapa Nui archaeology or anthropology (or those fields generally)?

A. While I am hardly in a position to give anyone advice, I will say that there is no substitution for spending a lot of time doing fieldwork. Every chance you have to learn from somebody who has more

experience and encompasses more knowledge than you, whether it be someone who has lived on the island their whole life, or an archaeologist who has worked in the Pacific region for four decades, is a time to be humble and listen up.

Q. If you could, what would you change about the fields of archaeology and anthropology?

A. I don't know if this is specific to archaeology and anthropology or a more general problem with academia but there seems to be an unhealthy amount of disagreements over academic issues that carry over into personal affairs. A geologist friend of mine recently told me that in order to be a good scientist you have to let go of your ego, accept criticism when it is valid, and be genuinely interested in arriving at the correct conclusions.

Q. What are you currently reading?

A. I am reading three books right now. 1) *The Quiet American* by Graham Greene, 2) *The China Study* by Colin Campbell and Thomas Campbell, and 3) *Prehistoric Rapa Nui: landscape and settlement archaeology at Hanga Ho'onu* by Christopher Stevenson and Sonia Haoa Cardinali.

Q. Credentials?

A. B.A. 2001, UCSB – Anthropology, Graduated with Distinction

M.A. 2005, University of Hawai'i, Manoa – Anthropology

Ph.D. Expected June 2012, University of Hawai'i, Manoa – Anthropology

Q. Date and place of birth?

A. November 29th, 1976, Los Angeles, CA, USA.