

# Reports and Commentaries

## Conservation of cultural resources in the National Park of Rapa Nui: challenges beyond material preservation

Irene Arévalo Nazrala

The National Park of Rapa Nui (Parque Nacional Rapa Nui, PNRN) covers a non-contiguous 7,000 hectares (17,290 acres) of land – roughly 42% of Easter Island. The greatest concentrations of archaeological remains on the island are located within the park limits and present serious challenges in stewardship and conservation.

Within the context of the eroded landscape, the vast quantities of archaeological resources, and the constant socioeconomic developments that characterize the island, the Provincial Office of the National Forestry Corporation on Rapa Nui (CONAF) administers the Park with the objective of protecting both natural and cultural resources for future generations to enjoy.

One of the biggest challenges for CONAF is the conservation of archaeological remains. Megalithic structures, statues, rock gardens, and petroglyphs are just a few examples of the many types of prehistoric sites that present unique qualities that make a comprehensive strategy for conservation exceptionally difficult on the island. Perhaps the most famous of the archaeological resources are the nearly one thousand *moai* (monumental statues) on the island – most of which were sculpted from lapilli tuff, a conglomerate formation with relatively high hygroscopic and anisotropic properties. The geological properties of the tuff render the material susceptible to rapid weathering and deterioration by climatic elements.

Different studies, including recommendations made at the International Meeting for Lavas and Volcanic Tuffs (Charola 1990) suggest that climatic agents and conservation conditions specific to the island work synergistically to affect significant impacts upon the well-being of the statues' parent material.

With this understanding, in 2009, CONAF reached an agreement with the School of Applied Arts in Santiago, Chile to oversee a novel conservation program (Figure 1). The immediate objective of this collaborative effort was to launch a project to begin treating various statues with a chemical preservative while offering training to members of the local community in the same methods and technologies that could be reapplied in future conservation efforts on the island.



Figure 1. CONAF Conservator Irene Arévalo Nazrala removes lichen from a statue.

This conservation initiative is one of the largest and most visible projects in which CONAF has participated in recent years. However, when it comes to the megalithic statues of the island, the problems involved in conservation outweigh the potential benefits of any single isolated project by far. Therefore, CONAF is using this project as a foundation to develop a long-term strategy for the conservation of artifacts composed of lapilli tuff.

Many of the problems facing conservation that we consider to be of primary importance are clear when it comes to the *moai*, the petroglyphs carved in *papa* (flat basalt outcrops), the pictographs, the rock gardens, and other archaeological structures. Yet there is another aspect of conservation on the island, which encompasses an enormous part of the island culture that is not always obvious.

The different eras of the island have often left their mark on the landscape – like the *pircas* (stacked stone walls) erected during the time of the Compañía Explotadora to fence in livestock. These *pircas* were built with stones that were found on the island landscape, and unfortunately many of these stones may have belonged



Figure 2. A photo from the Agassiz Expedition taken in 1904 shows historic *pircas* within the ceremonial precinct of Tongariki (photo courtesy of Phillipe Guasch Pont).

to *ahu* (ceremonial platforms) or other archaeological features before the Compañía Explotadora arrived on the island. But the damage caused by the exploitative ranching is not limited to the physicality of the site – the construction of the *pircas* often divided historic sacred landscapes (Figure 2). Later on, the construction of the first road for automobiles along the south coast of the island managed to pass directly through major ceremonial centers including Vaihu and Akahanga. The physical damage to the sites may be the obvious type of damage to the site to the casual tourist, but to those people who are more sensitive to the island culture, there are also visual impacts, auditory impacts, and a dismantling of the *mana* (spiritual power) of the sites. Many of the artifacts or materials that were displaced as a result of construction of *pircas* or modern roads have been removed from a corresponding cultural context. CONAF is now attempting to address many of these “secondary” conservation problems as part of the general conservation strategy on the island.

CONAF has now initiated a new phase in conservation that goes beyond simply salvaging and conserving archaeological remains. Recovering and curating are only a couple elements within a greater new strategy to keep historic cultural properties in the best possible condition so that they can be repatriated to the island community to maintain some aspects of cultural context. The new approach to conservation integrates cultural awareness and education, and the formulation of projects to conserve and rehabilitate spaces for public use within the limits of the Park.

Conservation of the cultural heritage of Rapa Nui is a complex topic that can only be addressed

effectively through integrative efforts. It has become clear that the fragility, richness, and complexity of Rapa Nui cultural heritage extend beyond the capabilities of a single local conservation institution whose abilities are often limited to administrative changes. CONAF must create a permanent and fluid dialogue amongst research/educational institutions, local administrators, government agencies, and the Rapa Nui community. Technical and administrative specialists at the national level must become involved if we are to effectively implement solutions to conservation problems on the island.

Once we have reached this state of integrative efforts, will we put an end to the traditional project-by-project piecemeal approach to conservation? Only inclusive and collaborative efforts on the island will truly succeed in creating a conservation strategy that is scientifically-informed, that aims not only to protect materials, but to celebrate their cultural value, and that protects the historic cultural context and not just each archaeological site.

With this philosophy, CONAF continues to encourage all relevant parties to become involved in a variety of innovative programs that integrate administration of the cultural sites in the Park and their conservation for continued everyday and ceremonial use by the public.

## Reference

- Charola, E.A. 1990. Lavas and volcanic tuffs: Easter Island, Chile. In *Abstracts of the contributions to the International Meeting: 25 - 31 October*. Santiago: Dirección de Bibliotecas, Archivos, y Museos.