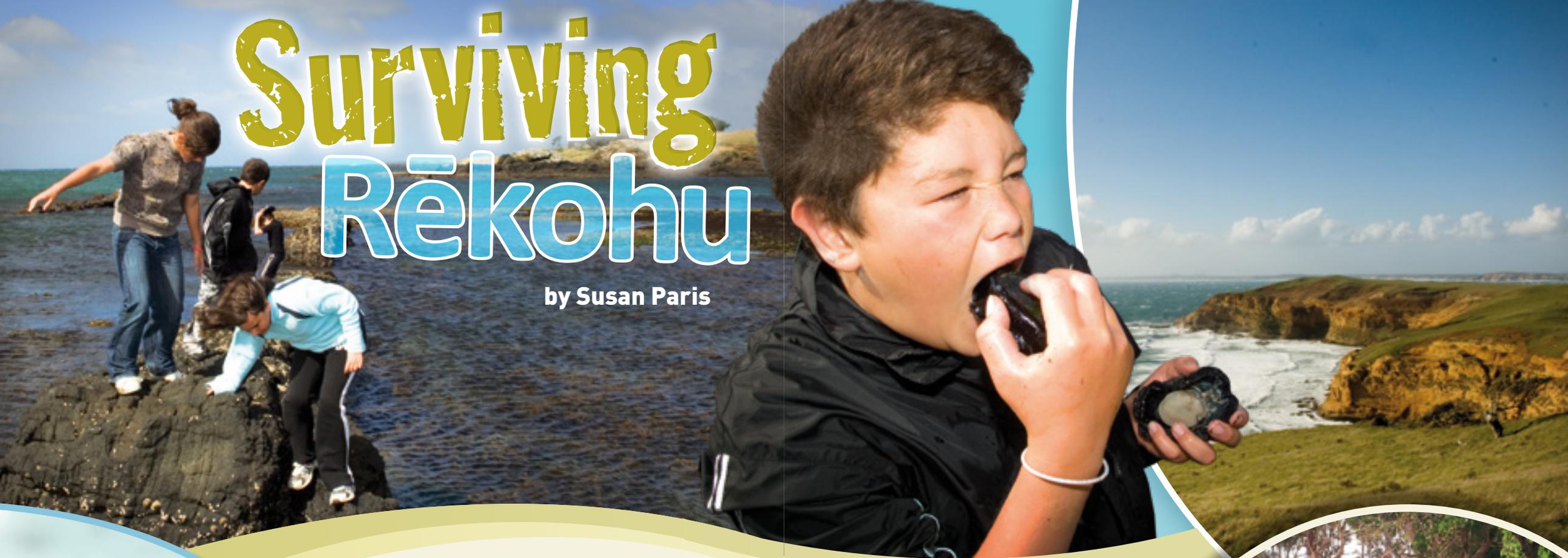


# Surviving Rēkohu

by Susan Paris



Every year, the students from Room Four at Te One School spend a week camping at Plum Tree. No one seems to mind that the school is just down the road – and if they really wanted, they could walk back to their desks in ten minutes. On Rēkohu, nearly any spot is a perfect place to pitch a tent, which is one of the reasons the kids say the Chathams is a great place to live.

This year, as well as learning all the usual survival skills – building a bivvy, bush medicine, and outdoor cooking – the students face a special challenge: finding food in the same way as the Mori **karapuna**, which many of them share. That means no fishing lines or spears, no knives, torches, or dogs, and definitely no four-wheelers. And in case gathering

traditional food in the traditional way isn't hard enough, Room Four's teacher, Mr Gray, gives them only four hours to do it.

Luckily, Rēkohu provides free food like nowhere else, and these hunter-gatherers are well used to searching it out. Almost everyone on the island, no matter how young or old, spends time hunting, fishing, or eeling. Most people do all three – and it's been that way for generations. Like Keanu says: "Fish, kina, crayfish ... we eat the same things as our Mori ancestors. We just cook them up a different way."

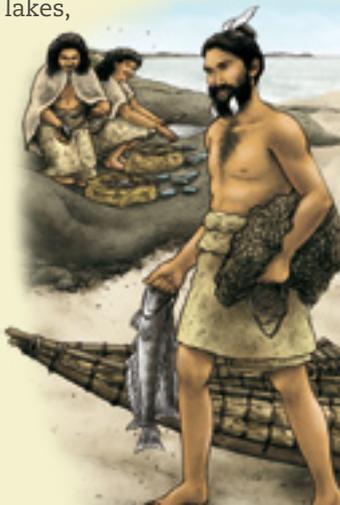


# The First Hunter-gatherers

The first people of Rēkohu, the Moriori, faced a tough existence. Alone in a harsh and isolated environment, they quickly learnt to adapt, becoming skilled hunter-gatherers who could live off the land no matter what the season. Summer and autumn were especially busy times, when food was gathered and stored for the long winter months.

By far the most important source of food was the sea. Seals were especially prized for their fatty blubber – as were pilot whales, which sometimes stranded on the beaches. From spring till late summer, when the sea was calm, the women and children collected shellfish. Crayfish, crabs, and seaweed were also abundant and easy to gather. Fish in the lagoon and close to shore were caught in nets by the men. The cod-fishing grounds were further out, and these were reached in specially built boats called waka kōrari and waka pahī.

Unlike Māori, the Moriori didn't keep gardens. Instead, they ate the plants that grew around them, including bracken, kopi kernels, the hearts of nīkau palms, and fern roots. Although they didn't cultivate vegetables, the Moriori knew how to keep these species strong and healthy to ensure a steady supply. Food also came from the streams, lakes, and Te Whanga lagoon (especially eels) and to a lesser extent from the bush (parea, tūi, and korimako). The kiore that arrived with the Moriori were another valuable source of protein.

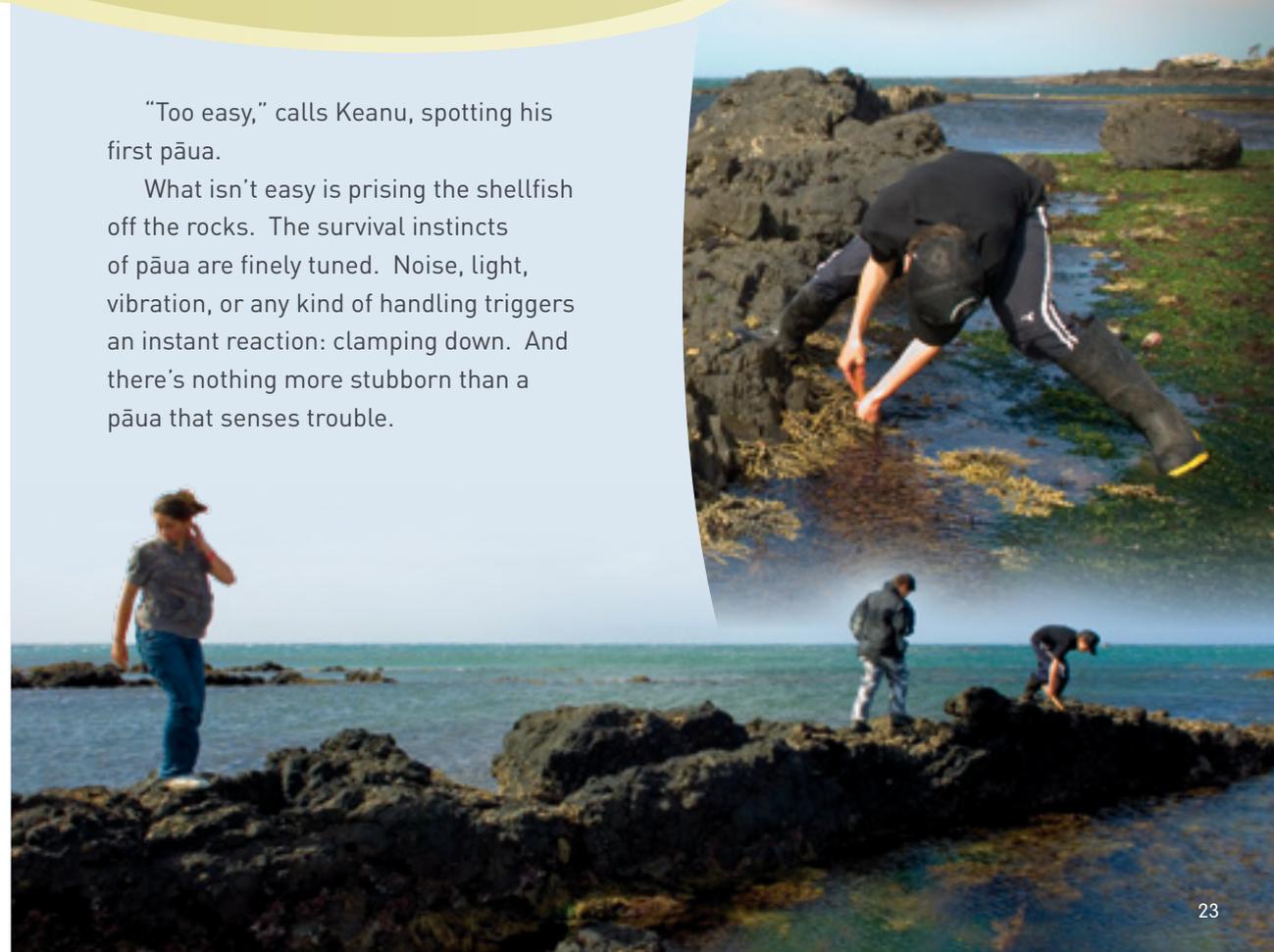


Keanu and his classmates Slade, Storm, and Natalia decide to try their luck with pāua. It's definitely a traditional food – they've all seen the ancient middens on the lee side of the island, some of them measuring almost 10 metres across, which are filled with pāua and pipi shells. Natalia suggests heading for the reef at nearby Owenga. "If the tide's out, you can reach the pāua without getting your feet wet."

Access to the reef is down a craggy rock face. Slade goes first, carefully lowering himself with the help of a rope. The others follow, and within a few minutes, they're searching the shallow rock pools at the edge of the reef. They don't look for long.

"Too easy," calls Keanu, spotting his first pāua.

What isn't easy is prising the shellfish off the rocks. The survival instincts of pāua are finely tuned. Noise, light, vibration, or any kind of handling triggers an instant reaction: clamping down. And there's nothing more stubborn than a pāua that senses trouble.





Along with speed, the successful pāua gatherer needs some kind of implement to coax the shellfish from the rocks. A flat blade works best, although this is obviously out of the question today because the Moriori didn't have metal tools. Luckily, Storm has thought to bring a reasonable substitute – a long, thin piece of wood, a bit like a spatula. It's not exactly high tech, but it will keep Mr Gray happy.

Working quickly, Storm slides the wooden spatula underneath the pāua. "Never touch the top of the pāua shell, or it will hold on tighter," she warns. "And be careful with your fingers. Getting them stuck really hurts."

Meanwhile, Natalia has her own technique – dropping starfish into the rock pools. "Starfish suffocate pāua by covering their breathing holes," she says. "They're one of the main predators. If you put a starfish beside a pāua, the pāua bolts ... and if you're fast enough ..." Natalia demonstrates, plunging her hand into a pool at just the right moment. Within half an hour, the students have enough pāua for a meal. And Natalia was right – their feet are still dry!



Back at camp, the hunting and gathering has obviously been an all-round success. There's an abundance of edibles: fern roots, watercress, pipi, cockles, seaweed, kina, and kāeo (also known as sea tulip). One group even managed to catch a fish using a piece of flax tied around the flesh of a pipi. They plan to cook the fish tucked inside a piece of kelp. It promises to be a feast, and the students are keen to start building a fire. Dessert isn't looking promising, but hopefully, they'll be too full to care.

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by Susan Paris

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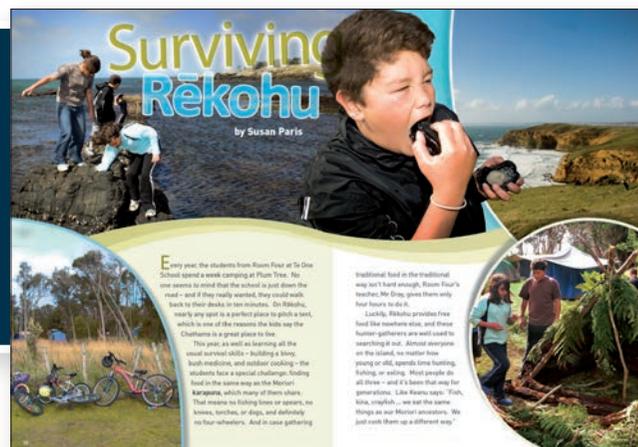
Every effort has been made to contact the following people: Storm, Natalia, and unknown children (pages 20–25), and Allen Gray (for his photographs on pages 21 [bottom right] and 25). Please get in touch with any information relating to these images.

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