The Easter Island sheep farm cultural landscape

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Abstract

Easter Island is a mysterious and unusual historic landscape. Much has been written about its evolution from early times and events that led to a near obliteration of its natural resources. But is what the tourist sees today purely a result of the ‘moai’ era? Since c1880 the Island’s cultural landscape was further transformed by sheep grazing. And it is most unexpected to see fields of lupins, wild horses, a sheep dip and a shearing shed surrounded by *Eucalyptus* trees. These elements represent a darker story of the Island’s recent past when the local people were confined to a tiny peninsula while sheep dominated the Island’s resources. A Rapa Nui goal is to tell visitors about the sheep period by adapting the Chilean listed heritage shearing shed as an interpretation centre. As tourism is the Island’s main income, broadening the range of activities has multiplier benefits to sustain the local economy and to engage visitors with a greater understanding of the Island’s recent history. This is also a story of shared cultural heritage with Australian connections.

Introduction

Easter Island, also known as Rapa Nui or Isla de Pascua, is a triangular shaped island in the Pacific Ocean under the political jurisdiction of Chile (Figure 1). The island is about 24 kilometres long and 12 kilometres wide, with a land area of 163.6 square kilometres. According to the Chilean 2017 census, its population is 7,750. The Island is isolated. Its nearest neighbour is Pitcairn Island some 2,000 kilometres to the west. Australia is 11,000 kilometres to its far west. Most tourists arrive via a five-hour flight from Chile’s capital, Santiago, located 3,600 kilometres to the east.

![Figure 1: Location of places discussed in the paper.](image-url)
The population is now concentrated in the capital, Hanga Roa, in the south-west corner of the Island. Here too are located the Island’s transportation infrastructure—the Hanga Piko boat harbour, Mataveri International Airport, commercial activities, and most tourist accommodation. The rest of the Island is an open grassland and predominantly hilly landscape.

Rapa Nui National Park

The Rapa Nui National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site declared in 1995 (UNESCO 1995), covers 44% of the Island. It is managed by the Corporacion Nacional Forestal (CONAF) of the Government of Chile and Ma’u Henua Polynesian Indigenous Community (Ma’u Henua). The Park aims to preserve the archaeological sites containing stone houses, cave paintings, rock carvings, burial chambers, and other artefacts of an earlier civilisation. This rich archaeological cultural heritage, especially the ‘moai’ statues, continues to captivate the modern world.

The ‘Moai’ Landscape

Around 900 ‘moai’, monolithic human-like figures of different representations and sizes, are positioned strategically along the Island’s coastline. Only one group face out towards the sea. A ‘moai’ was exhibited at the Japanese World Fair ‘Progress and Harmony for Mankind’ in 1970. Its return to the Island led to the resurrection of some of the standing statues on an ‘ahu’ (stone platform) by concerned organisations, governments and archaeologists from all over the world (Keller 2001). Carbon dating associated with the statues indicate that they were in use from 700 CE to 1700 CE. The ‘moai’ are carved from volcanic stone and their ‘hats’ are made from yellow-brown lava tuff. The stone quarry is at the base of the inland crater of Rano Raraku volcano.

Much has been written about the removal of vegetation in order to transport the ‘moai’. Most native tree species and other significant vegetation are now extinct on the Island. Explorers, scientists and archaeologists in the 19th century described the Rapa Nui landscape as mostly grassland, devoid of trees. An initial impression of the Island by renowned archaeologist Katherine Routledge, upon her arrival in 1914, was ‘not a vestige of timber or even brushwood was to be seen’. She described her delight in pitching a tent next to a mature ‘umbrella tree’ which she said was ‘the only example of its kind in the Island’ (Routledge 1919). From these historical accounts, the only known tree species in the Island was the toromiro tree. Once endemic, the toromiro tree became extinct in the wild and now can only be found in botanical gardens in Europe (Püschel et al 2014).

Figure 2: The Easter Island gassy landscape is largely a legacy of sheep ranching (Hanga Roa on the right) 
Easter Island Pastoral Landscape

Today, providing a backdrop to the ‘moai’ statues and the archaeological sites is the predominantly grassy landscape (Figure 2). The undulating slopes feature prominently around lagoons and streams flowing from the Island’s extinct volcanoes. This seemingly pastoral vista is not only noteworthy for its scenic qualities, but also has historic significance to the Rapa Nui people as a tell-tale of the Island’s recent past.

Intensive sheep grazing is also blamed for the demise of native vegetation, particularly the toromiro tree. Sheep are rarely found on the Island today but horses and cattle roam and graze freely. A 1914 account recorded about 500 horses (Routledge 1919). By 2017 horses had multiplied to 6,000 (McCormack 2017), almost equalling the human population. A German journalist, Heinz Hell, described in 1933 the use of horses for local transport, herding sheep, and hired to Island visitors (Hell 2008). More recently, to protect monuments, the government has erected fences rather than cull horse numbers (Püschel et al 2014), which demonstrates how their number has multiplied over recent years (Figure 3).

For over 100 years the Island’s grasslands were used by a number of foreign companies to graze sheep for their wool. Between 1904 and 1923 sheep farming was overseen by an Australian, Henry Percival Edmunds (Fischer 2006). He had the shearing shed and sheep dip built (Figures 5 and 6), left an extensive series of photographs taken during his time on the Island (Edmunds / Bryan 1901), and today Islander descendants carry his name as Clan Edmunds.

Within the grasslands landscape the exception are groves of Eucalyptus trees (Figure 4) (New World Encyclopaedia 2006). These mainly cover the Island’s middle section in the Vaitea area and grow readily in the Island’s subtropical climate. Australian Eucalyptus were introduced in the early 1900s by Compania Explotadora Isla de Pascua (the Company), under its manager H P Edmunds, for fast growing timber required for fences and to provide wood for a proposed furnace for the Island’s electricity generation (Wynter 2011). Routledge described her impression of the Company’s ‘Mataveri’ residence (Figure 4), located about two miles to the south of the village, as ‘surrounded by modern plantations (Eucalyptus) which are almost the only trees in the island’. More Eucalyptus trees were planted by the government’s reforestation efforts in the 1970s. Francesco di Castri, an expert sent to Easter Island in 1961, recorded white Australian merino sheep and groves of Australian Eucalyptus trees. He noted then about 60,000 sheep in Hacienda Vaitea area and that ‘the natives’ were in a very miserable situation (Di Castri 2010).
19th Century Sheep Ranch, Island Segregation and Poverty

The Island’s rolling and treeless landscape proved to be highly suitable for raising sheep for an annual wool clip. In 1868 a Tahitian, Alexander Salmon Jr., bought the Island land previously owned by the Rapa Nui who had perished in the slave trade during the 1860s and 1870s, ‘with the aim of creating a large sheep ranch for exporting wool’ (Wynter 2011). He appointed Frenchman, Jean-Baptiste Dutrou-Bornier as manager. By 1883 there were 10,000 sheep and 400 cattle. Dutrou-Bornier ruled as a tyrannical ‘king’ and was also responsible for displacement of Rapa Nui to Tahiti as indentured labour on Company owned coconut or oil plantations throughout the Pacific islands. The census revealed that Dutrou-Bornier depopulated the Island in 1877, with only 111 Rapa Nui remaining. This happened in the same year he died under mysterious circumstances (Boersema 2015) and when horses were introduced to herd sheep.

Despite the Chilean annexation of Easter Island in 1888, the Santiago-based government proceeded to lease the Island to a number of individuals. Enrique Merlet controlled the entire Island as a sheep ranch, confining the Rapa Nui to Hanga Roa Village by constructing a wall supplemented by guards.

The most notable lease from 1903 to 1933 was to the Williamson Balfour & Co., a Scottish owned Chilean company with a local name of Compania Explotadora Isla de Pascua, or ‘The Exploiting Company of Easter Island’, formed specifically for commercial production of wool (Fischer 2006). During its half-century tenure, it erected paddock fences over the bulk of the Island and continued to prevent access by the Rapa Nui people. As recently as the 1960s, the Rapa Nua remained restricted to Hanga Roa, a land area of just 1,000 hectares (Chartier et al 2012). Very few Rapa Nui gained employment with the Company, and were limited mainly to shearing for the annual wool clip and loading bales onto export ships. During their first two decades on the Island, the Company forced Rapa Nui to work without pay. With very limited land resources, the Islanders could barely produce crops or raise animals for food. Water on the Island was also in very short supply and had to be shared with the sheep farm. Most of the Islanders lived in abject poverty and some survived by eating rats (Douglas & Nadler 2011).

At its peak in the mid-1930s, 70,000 sheep roamed across the Island (Fischer 2006). Fischer notes:

the Company introduced grasses ideal for sheep grazing to enhance soil quality, rejuvenated the old livestock bloodlines, planted thousands of trees to provide windbreaks, sun shelters and for building material and to halt erosion. It expanded and built roads, enlarged then modernised Hanga Piko’s quay, walled in and laid out Hanga Roa, erected a complete ranch at Vaitrea, and hereby provide a permanent infrastructure for the island. (Fischer 2006)

The Company’s contract with the Chilean government ended in 1953 at the same time as wool prices fell. Even so, the government continued operating the sheep farm until the 1970s.

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Figure 4: ‘Mataveri’ Vaitrea Farm Manager’s house (demolished in early 2000s), with Eucalyptus trees, on Easter Island in c1904; (photography P Edmunds, University of Hawai’i archives accessed 2017).
In 1955, Vaitea (Figure 1), two miles from the village, continued to be the commercial centre and by that date the island was already heavily forested by *Eucalyptus* trees. The Rapa Nui became full Chilean citizens in 1966 and during the same year the sheep farm fences were taken down (Fischer 2006) and most sheep disappeared from the Island. The Islanders still call sheep a derivative of ‘namoi’ after a river catchment in New South Wales, the original blood line for export to the Island in the 19th century (Figure 1) (Carey 2006; Namoi CMA 2010; Time Toast n.d.).

**Post Sheep Era and Expanding a Tourism Future**

The 2011 census showed that there was a total of 36 clans on Easter Island (Douglas & Nadler 2011) including a Clan Edmunds. The village lands were finally transferred to the Rapa Nui in 1979. Between 1998 and 2000, 1,500 hectares were also transferred to newly arriving Rapa Nui families (Observer’s Report 2011).

As of 2007, the Island’s land ownership divisions were: 40% Rapa Nui National Park, 40% government land for forestry and beef grazing (including the former Vaitea Ranch), and 20% private ownership (Rapa Nui Easter Island 2016). In 2001, the village accounted for 3% of land and 17% was rural common domain (Keller 2001), mainly for free-ranging horses. The government owned Sociedad Agricola de Servicios Isla de Pascua (SASIPA), including the former Vaitea farm, reputedly planned to reduce its cattle herd to 1,300 and its land usage to 1,000 hectares to allow for more land to be distributed to the Rapa Nui (Ramirez 2000).

Sheep farming finally ceased in 1985 and the Island’s economy is now based on agriculture, fishing, government services, transportation, and tourism. Personal incomes are mostly dependent on activities connected to Rapa Nui archaeological heritage. Island tourist visitation rates have risen exponentially since the World Heritage inscription of Easter Island. There were about 5,700 tourists in 1980, 11,130 in 1990, and 30,500 tourists in 2000 (Keller 2001), showing a steady increase in visitor numbers. Primary concerns now for the Rapa Nui are immigration control and uncontrolled influx of tourism (Di Castri 2003), while the uptake of permanent residency on the Island was restricted in 2017.

Key to commercial operations are Mataveri International Airport’s scheduled services from Santiago, commencing in 1967, when the airfield was paved and co-used as a USA base. It was extended in 1987 for its potential use as an abort site for the NASA Space Shuttle program.

The Rapa Nui community agitated for the formal establishment of the Ma’u Henua Polynesian Indigenous Community (Ma’u Henua), achieved in 2016, to serve as co-administrator with CONAF in management of the Rapa Nui National Park (Ma’u Henua community 2016). As the representative of the Easter Island community, the co-sharing arrangement allows Ma’u Henua to have control of the conservation and management of their ancestral lands.

**Vaitea Sheep Shearing Shed**

The Vaitea Sheep Shearing Shed (Figures 5 & 6) is a significant historical item in Easter Island’s cultural landscape and also to the Rapi Nui identity as part of their recent past. It continues the historic theme of depleted resources driven to near annihilation but in a very different way. This shed serves as a testimony to almost a century of sheep farming on the Island which deprived the indigenous people economically, physically and socially, making them second class citizens in their own land.

![Figure 5: Vaitea Farm Shearing Shed c1904. The shed remains in 2017 but the foreground shallow pitched drying shelter no longer exists. (photograph by Henry P Edmunds, University of Hawai‘i archives, accessed 2017).](image)
The Shed is located at Vaitea in the mid-section of the Island (Figure 1), along the main road that leads from the village to the beach at Anakena. The shed remains readable today within its landscape setting as a representative vernacular farm structure, despite its ruinous state. The roof and walls are clad in corrugated iron panels, the floor is concrete and the columns are wood. Some horizontal wooden plank linings and stone abutments remain. Other smaller structures, the sheep dip (Figure 7) and sections of the fence, are also extant.

The overall form, character and use of materials, such as corrugated metal, echo those of eastern Australian wool sheds of the early 1900s. Some internal portions display tongued and grooved wall lining boards that became popular in Europe in the late 1800s, and were shipped to colonies in Australia, South Africa, and the Americas.

The remains of the Vaitea Sheep Shearing Shed Complex are a testimony to more than a century of sheep grazing that has helped shape the cultural landscape of Easter Island. The heritage values associated with it could be summarised as below:


Figure 7: Vaitea Farm Shearing Shed in 2017 surrounded by Eucalyptus trees; the former wool press housing and timber lined walls, with brand marks, above the concrete base wall (photos by author).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical Significance</th>
<th>The extant Vaitea Farm vernacular structures and its associated landscape is characterised by sprawling hilly grasslands, wild lupins, herds of wandering horses and groves of <em>Eucalyptus</em> trees, and all have historic associations with the sheep farming industry on Easter Island from the 1880s until 1985. These also have historic associations with the knowledge, technology and processes involved in growing and processing wool during that period. The Vaitea Shearing Shed Complex has ‘shared’ historical significance with colonial practices, and especially the sheep industry in Australia, and the built forms have ‘shared built heritage’ references to the 19th century Australian colonial era. The Vaitea Complex demonstrates the shared cultural values that arise from a commercial agricultural occupation when cultural practices and built forms from one country are introduced into a host place. The Vaitea Complex shows how the introduction of Australian sheep breeding stock sourced from the Namoi Valley in NSW, and the facilities and infrastructures necessary for sheep husbandry became part of the wider Easter Island cultural landscape. The importation and use of the iconic ‘tin and wood’ architectural form of Australian shearing sheds, together with the sheep dip, have ‘shared’ value. The Vaitea Shearing Shed Complex is the vicinity where the groves of <em>Eucalyptus</em> trees were planted on Easter Island, in part to produce timber for paddock fencing as well as support for early electricity generation. It also demonstrates that horses were introduced onto the Island to herd sheep.</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Historic Associative Significance</td>
<td>The extant Vaitea Farm vernacular structures, and their setting, are significant for their association with the creation of the Island’s cultural landscape of open grasslands. The Complex has historic associations with <em>Compania Explotadora Isla de Pascua</em> and its Australian manager, Mr Percy Edmunds. His legacies include the introduced Australian wool shed form, the <em>Eucalyptus</em> trees, and his role as founder of the Island’s Clan Edmunds. Edmunds is also notable for his early photographic recording of the Island. The sheep operations are associated with establishing key infrastructure on the Island.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aesthetic Significance</td>
<td>The extant Vaitea Shearing Shed is a vernacular farm structure that is representative of shearing sheds found in eastern Australia during the 19th and early 20th century. This is rare in Chile as the only known Australian complex, and the only such structure on Easter Island. The sheep dip and pens are representative of Australian practices, and demonstrate c1900 innovative and new building technology in the use of concrete. The setting of the shed complex within a grove of deliberately introduced <em>Eucalyptus</em> trees has visual and aromatic aesthetic value.</td>
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</table>
The Vaitea Shearing Shed complex is a memorial to the endurance of the Rapa Nui and their ability to rise above adversity. It continues to represent the century long suffering of the Rapa Nui, wherein at one time the entire population was confined to the village, and at another time almost exterminated by slavery and forced migration.

The complex is representative of large-scale sheep farming on the Island that subjugated the lives of the Islanders; and the Rapa Nui people seek to tell to visitors to the Island about this recent history.

The continuing strong attachment of the Rapa Nui people to the free roaming wild horses demonstrates the historic connection that arose from the era of sheep farming on the Island, and of the cultural landscape experience today.

The Vaitea Shearing Shed and related structures are tangible evidence of the link to the origin of the Island’s Clan Edmunds.

The Vaitea Shearing Shed is able to tell about the evolution of the wider rural landscape as experienced today by the Islanders and tourist. This theme adds to the knowledge of the evolution of the Island landscape arising from sheep farming, its impact on the Island’s grasslands and native peoples, and to expand knowledge about the ‘shared built’ heritage that cross national borders and the Pacific Ocean region.

The Vaitea Shearing Shed and related structures are the only examples of this type on Easter Island, and likely to be the only ones of this type in Chile. Together with groves of Eucalyptus trees, these are the only tangible remains of over a century of sheep farming on Easter Island. To date, the Vaitea Shearing Shed is the only known complex that has shared heritage values with the colonial sheep industry.

Heritage Conservation, Threats and Challenges

During the sheep farming era on Easter Island, Vaitea was the centre of farming activities whilst the Mataveri Manager’s House (Figure 4) was the headquarters of the Company’s operations (Fischer 2006). Today, the ruins of Vaitea Shearing Shed, the sheep pens and dip, still surrounded by Eucalyptus trees, are the only surviving tangible evidence of the sheep farming period on the Island. Nothing remains of Mataveri house which was demolished in early 2000 (Van Tilburg 2003, 2009). Historic photographs however indicate it also displayed Australian architectural references.

The Vaitea sheep facilities are protected under law No17.288 of the National Monuments of Chile. The Shed, and its associated structures, were reported in 2017 to be in poor condition, so much so that a warning sign was erected indicting ‘peligro de derrumbe’, that is in danger of collapse. There is no evidence that the Chilean government is making an effort to conserve or restore it. A travel guide recounted that during his 2012 visit to Vaitea he saw the deteriorated condition of the facilities and the tree roots causing more damage to the wool shed and sheep dips. According to him, the facilities were in much better condition during his previous visit to Vaitea in 1992, and he lamented that Rapa Nui and local authorities are neglecting their ‘contemporary history’ (Bernhardson 2012).
The cultural landscape of Easter Island bears exceptional testimony not only to the cultural traditions and the artistic and religious expressions of the ancient Rapa Nui but also embodies the Rapa Nui’s endurance in rising above adversity through the centuries. The Island’s living landscape has slowly and continuously evolved in response to different social and economic dynamics through the years and each significant stage in the Island’s history has left its mark and stories to tell. Some marks are visible impacts, whilst others commemorate the more recent past hardships, slavery and forced migration. Each is a layer representative of the evolution of the Rapa Nui history and lifestyle.

Along with the ‘moai’ and other archaeological remains, the Vaitea farm complex and its historical setting are all vulnerable to global impacts, including climate change, population growth, and the influx of tourism. Practical conservation and management practices and protocols are now in place for the Rapa Nui National Park to manage the World Heritage site. The significance of the sheep farming era to the evolution of the Island’s cultural landscape is yet to be managed or interpreted. This challenge lies with the Ma’u Henua Polynesian Indigenous Community and the Corporacion Nacional Forestal de Chile.

**Using the Past for the Future**

Whilst archaeologists have recorded sheep bones in excavations, to date there is no known study or recording of the cultural landscape that is a legacy of the sheep grazing era on Easter Island. As this is the visual memory tourists photograph today, it is important and should be recognised. Yet the evidence of sheep activities serves as a timely marker and memory of how the era of sheep farming affected the Islanders. This neglected recent history, and its ‘shared heritage’ of how the rural landscape evolved, needs to be further explored.

The economic basis and individual incomes for Easter Islanders today are solely dependent on tourism. Tourists make the expensive and out-of-the-way flights to Easter Island primarily to see the ‘moai’ statutes, and to visit the various archaeological sites. Tourists drive through a grassy landscape created by sheep farming to get to the ‘moai’ locations. The Rapa Nui have expanded tourist activities to include horse riding, walking trails, bird watching, and access to a sandy beach. However, the Islanders are locked out of the surrounding sea and fisheries due to the Chilean Government’s long-term leases to international trawling companies. A goal is to encourage tourists to understand the Island’s recent history. The Vaitea Complex has interpretive potential to communicate a darker side of colonial occupation, forced segregation, and its ‘shared’ associations with ‘namoi’ sheep and its Australian connections. This can also be a place that turns a period of tragedy into a renewed economic source for the Island’s future.

**References**


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