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Art. XLIV.—On the Disappearance of the larger Kinds of Lizard from North Canterbury.

By the Rev. J. W. Stack.

Transactions and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New Zealand 1868-1961 Volume 7, 1874

The absence of living specimens, coupled with the absence of all traces of recent remains, would render the task of proving that the large lizards existed till quite lately in this part of the country very difficult but for the fact that there are many Maoris still living who have not only seen but handled and

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even eaten them. To prevent the knowledge of an interesting zoological fact being lost I have written down the statements of such of the natives whose testimony seemed most worthy of credit. They are persons whose names appear in the earliest records of the colony as leading members of the native community, and therefore from their age may be considered competent to give evidence upon matters of fact which occurred under their observation forty or fifty years ago.

The following is a summary of the statements made by Te Aika, Te Uki, Iwikau, and Te ata o Tu:—

Unu ngarara or ngarara burrows were frequently met with on the plains. They were plentiful in the manuka scrub extending from the banks of the Waimakariri past the present site of Eyreton westwards towards the ranges, and at Waitui, between the Hurunui and Waiau rivers. The ngarara was darker in colour than the ruatarā. They varied in size from two to three feet in length, and ten to twenty inches in girth; along the back from the nape of the neck to the tail was a serrated crest. The mouth was full of teeth, some grew large and caused the upper lip to project. These when taken from the jaw were three or four inches long, and half an inch at the base; when split in two and polished they were prized as mat pins.

A ngarara known as Te iha was kept a long time at Kaiapoi. It was fed on small birds and prepared fern-root. It was very gentle and liked being stroked, uttering at the time a guttural sound expressive of pleasure. When it made this noise at any other time it was an indication that it wanted food or water.

Besides the kind frequenting the manuka scrub there was a smaller ngarara, about eighteen inches long, found in the streams. Horomona Iwikau was eeling some time before the fall of Kaiapoi at Orawhata, a stream which rises near Riccarton and falls into the Waimakariri. After having caught a great many eels, which he killed with a billet of wood, he was terrified by the cries of one he was in the act of killing; though very frightened, he continued to strike till the sound ceased. On examination he found it was a ngarara; becoming emboldened he lit a fire, and cooked and ate it. The natives attribute the disappearance of the large ngarara to the introduction of cats and to frequent fires. The Norwegian rat has probably a hand too in the extinction of these reptiles.

While upon the subject of lizards I may add the following anecdote which tends to throw light upon a question that seems likely to be disputed, namely, whether Maoris ate lizards in former times. (Vide Major Mair's paper, Trans. N. Z. Inst., Vol., V., Art. XVIII).

Hakopa te Ata o Tu, a well-known Kaiapoi chief, who was taken prisoner by Te Rauparaha and spared on account of his great valour, while in captivity

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at Otaki, was invited one day by his master to share the afternoon meal. When seated by the basket containing the food his master asked him whether he would have some fish. Yes, he replied, but where did you obtain it? Ask no questions, was the answer, taste and see how you like it. He did taste and found it very good. When the meal was over his master told him he had eaten the flesh of a lizard, but warned him never to call it anything but fish, otherwise it would be impossible for him to overcome his natural repugnance to it. During his residence at Otaki, Hakopa often joined in ngarara hunts, when as many as forty were caught and eaten. It would appear from his account, and from what other natives say, that the large lizard was formerly eaten, but not as a common article of diet, only by those who had cultivated a taste for what was generally regarded with abhorrence. By rising superior to popular prejudice in this matter individuals obtained a certain notoriety in the tribe, which they turned to their own advantage in other ways.