

Monsters We Met. Man's prehistoric battle for the planet. By Ted Oakes with Amanda Kear, Annie Bates and Kathryn Holmes. Published 2003 to accompany the television series *Monsters We Met*, by BBC Worldwide Limited, London. 208 pp. \$69.95.

When surfing TV channels recently, we chanced on an episode of the BBC serial *Monsters We Met*, that dealt exclusively with New Zealand. Scenes such as Maori maidens running screaming from an attack by a reconstructed *Harpagornis* seemed a little over the top; nevertheless the information conveyed was surprisingly accurate and up to date. Also by chance, I found a copy of the book written to accompany the TV serial in the Christchurch Public Library, and on reading it at leisure, found that it was an excellent example of popular science; readable, up to date, accurate and informative. The primary topic is the progressive extinction of 'megafauna' as *Homo sapiens* progressively colonized the continent but an underlying theme is the spread of humans away from their African origins, first as evolutionary blind alleys such as *Homo erectus* over a million years ago, and then finally as our own species some 200 000 years ago. The final stage of the diaspora before modern times was that of the Polynesians, who reached New Zealand 800 years ago.

What, you may ask, has this to do with botany. Actually, a lot. The extinction of moa and other birds, the introduction of rats and dogs, Maori agriculture and the onset of fire as a frequent event rather than a rare event initiated by lightning or volcanic eruption brought about vast changes in the distribution of vegetation and of plant species; we know the broad facts and can speculate about others. Interestingly, the authors accept the hypothesis that our divaricating plants evolved as protection against browsing by moa – not all local scientists would agree!

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