



Rapa Nui and the value in its land

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Report 1

Living in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the Rapa Nui people have faced many challenges. One of the most important ones is soil, which in a remote island is a scarce commodity. But limited terrain is not the only issue with it. Its volcanic origin gives it many favorable features, but also poses many obstacles towards a better agriculture. Nevertheless, when the Rapa Nui people arrived centuries ago, they were seeking a place where they could establish themselves, and that of course meant a place that provided sustenance. However, when they arrived in the island it probably did not look as hospitable as it does today. We do not know for sure about the ecosystem found by the first settlers, but it was certainly challenging due to the little water and intense sun among other factors. Nevertheless, the Rapa Nui people found a way to grow the crops they brought with them. These were mainly staple crops found in other islands of Polynesia, but they also brought some medicinal and ritual plants. None of them were initially adapted to thrive in their new environment.

With time an agricultural system was developed. At first it incorporated the volcanic rock that is so abundant throughout the island, and in this way stone gardens were born. These stone gardens were orchards where crops were planted, and then covered by a single layer of rocks. This was a very clever way to make use of their resources, since rocks provided shade which retained water and kept the ground at a lower temperature. This allowed the introduced species to adapt, and with this the Rapa Nui had their sustenance. Generation after generation used this technique to plant, and eventually from the stone gardens came the Mana Vai.

These were a more elaborate version of the stone gardens. They consisted of stone circles, made up of slightly bigger rocks, about 2 or 3 meters in diameter and 1 meter in height. This technique did not cover the ground with rocks completely, but the walls of the Mana Vai provided a microclimate more hospitable than the rough conditions outside. This was a more efficient way to plant, since these stone structures did not have to be disassembled between crops. Also, nutrients were retained better inside of them, and crops were cycled so that soil would not be depleted. Because of these Mana Vai held crops for hundreds of years.



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