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Molluscs and Echinoderms from the Emily Bay Settlement Site, Norfolk Island

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ABSTRACT. The Emily Bay archaeological molluscan fauna as an ensemble is almost entirely intertidal
in its natural occurrence, with seven species preferring sand or mud substrates and 13 species preferring
hard substrates. The only exceptions are the pelagic cephalopods Nautilus and Spirula. The gastropod
species Nerita atramentosa is dominant in both numbers and by weight.

The rocky intertidal platform was the focus of mollusc collecting. The four most common species
derive from this zone and habitually cluster in colonies, which would have made them a preferred prey.

Among the many factors that may have contributed to eventual abandonment of Norfolk Island, a
scarcity of easily harvestable coastal marine resources would probably have been significant.

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It is assumed that those food resources on Norfolk Island
that could be collected by people immediately on arrival
would have been of great importance to Polynesian settlers.
The availability and ease of collection of shellfish would
have been an important factor, therefore, in the initial
viability of settlement on Norfolk Island.

The molluscs that appear in the archaeological material
reflect the natural environment of Norfolk Island, which
is notable for its restricted range of suitable molluscan habitats
(Anderson and White, Approaching the Prehistory…., this
vol.). The greatest density of species occurs in the intertidal
zone, but on Norfolk Island soft shore intertidal areas are
restricted largely to the Kingston lagoon and only rocky
shores are extensive.

Shellfish collection

The year-round abundance of mollusc resources is their
greatest asset for people, and in times of scarcity of other
resources they assume a greater significance in the diet
(Higham, 1996; Meehan, 1982; Meighan, 1969; Swadling
and Chowning, 1981). Shellfish therefore represent a
stabilising factor in food procurement. In addition to their
food value, mollusc shells can be raw material for artefacts.