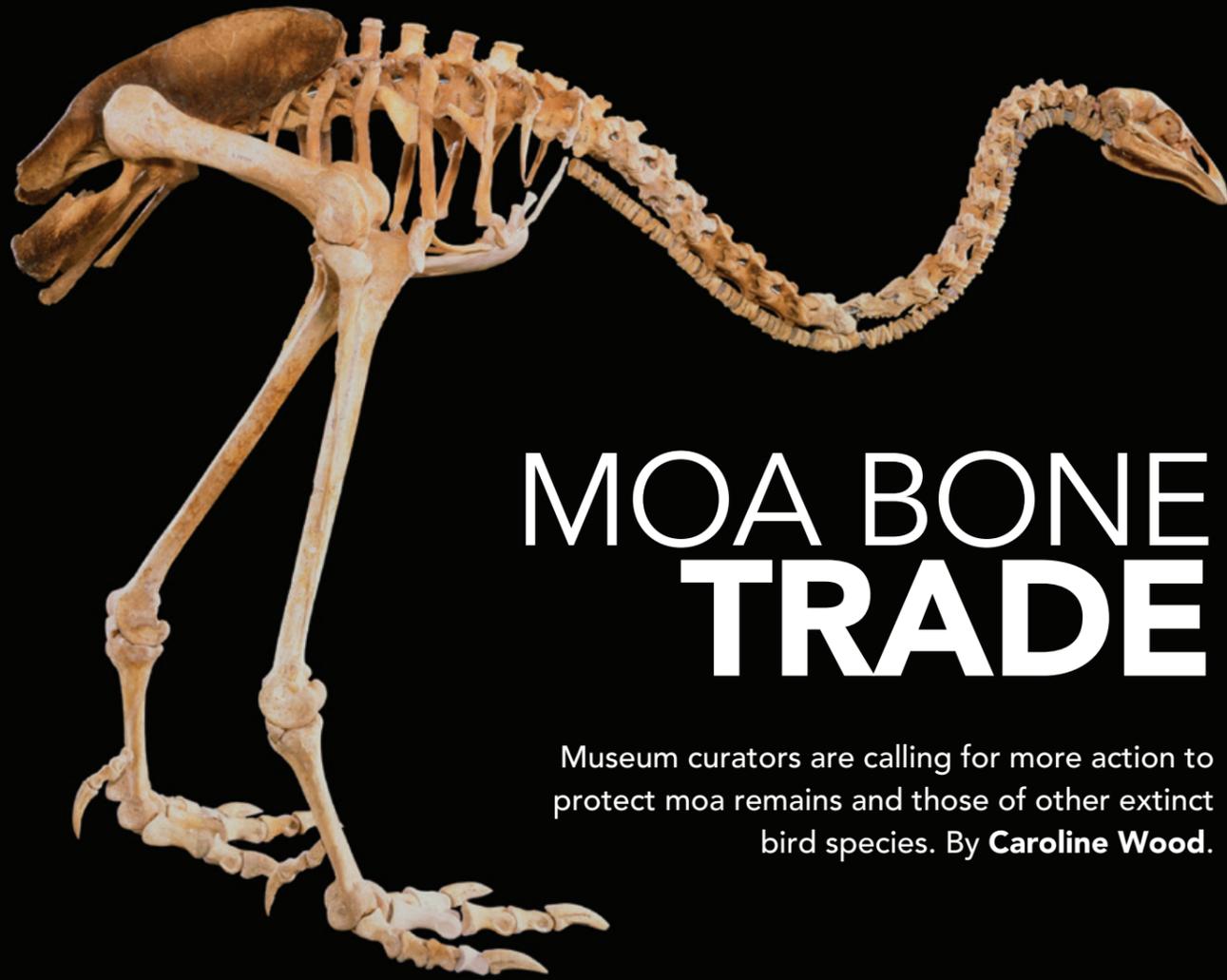


Upland moa, *Megalapteryx didinus*, collected Mar 1987, Honeycomb Hill, Enduro Passage. Image courtesy Te Papa



MOA BONE TRADE

Museum curators are calling for more action to protect moa remains and those of other extinct bird species. By **Caroline Wood**.

The last of New Zealand's nine species of giant moa died out 500 years ago but this iconic bird still captures the imagination of every Kiwi child and is an important part of our natural heritage. Moa remains have the potential to unlock new discoveries about bird biology and extinction in general. But they are not being adequately protected, says a group of museum curators and moa experts.

For some years now there has been a thriving trade in moa remains, some of it legal, some illegal. It is causing experts to worry about the number of skeletons, bones, eggs and feathers being dug up, removed from the site they were found and sold off to the highest bidder.

Concerns have been raised about the unrestricted online trade but little has been done to stop it.

The trouble is that some of the online trade is not technically illegal. A loophole in the Wildlife Act 1953 means the remains of extinct birds, such as moa and the Haast's eagle, can be bought, sold and owned by anyone but only if they were collected on private land.

It is already illegal to sell the remains of extinct birds found on archaeological sites, or on DOC land, or public

land. But often the provenance cannot be proven one way or another.

"So you can trade moa bones, huia feathers, or any extinct bird remains if you say they were found on private land. It's a kind of loophole that people have been able to exploit," says Mike Dickison, Curator of Natural History at Whanganui Regional Museum.

"For example one Trade Me user had dozens of lots of moa bones 'found on a beach' and local iwi were unhappy because they thought someone was probably digging them up on their land. Heritage NZ investigated and the trade ceased.

"Most traders are not so silly as to show where they got the bones from. Most most up stories. For example, they've been 'in the family for many years' but in fact they've been freshly picked up."

A moa bone skull was posted on Trade Me last year and sold for \$500. The skull was said to have come from a 'very reliable person in the South Island who got this from some old guy who found it in a cave.' In another recent example, leg and toe bones – said to have been found in a Southland peat bog – were listed for a starting price of \$1,000.

Mike Dickison is concerned that future scientific breakthroughs are being lost because of the unregulated trade.

"What happens is people break up whole skeletons to enhance the sale value. Then they remove them from the place they were found. It destroys the scientific context. Skeletons, even partial ones, are of enormous value to science. They provide information about the actual bird in an actual place. That information is always lost when these traders move the bones.

"It's a real concern. Cavers are now reporting that moa bones deliberately left in caves for preservation are disappearing. We also don't know how much is being smuggled overseas.

"This is part of the natural heritage of New Zealand. I'm sure many Forest & Bird members will feel strongly about this. We're never going to get any more moa. That's it, the bones are all that we have left, the only evidence that they ever existed."

Moa experts from New Zealand and Australia were so concerned about the issue a delegation visited the Trade Me head office in January 2015. They asked Trade Me to stop the online trade in moa bones but the company declined.

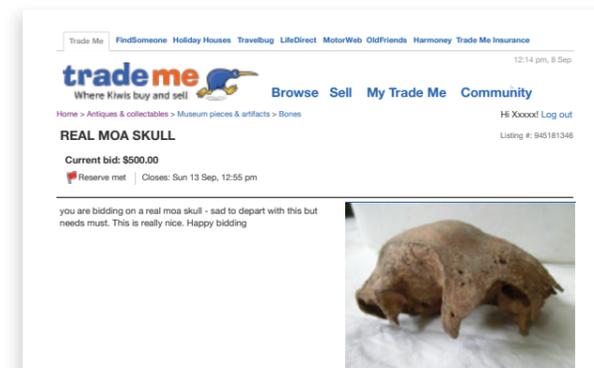
We're never going to get any more moa. That's it, the bones are all we have left, the only evidence they ever existed. Mike Dickison

We asked Trade Me what it was doing to help. A Trade Me spokesman said it had set up a special section for animal bones, including moa, and was keeping an eye on trades, especially around prolific sellers.

"We kicked off the initiative to proactively check for sellers who start multiple listings for moa bones on Trade Me. To date, no member has tripped the volume threshold and only one-off sales are occurring."

Mike Dickison says he is disappointed Trade Me hasn't acted to stop the trade all together. His group is considering its next steps and would like to see the Government take action by amending the Wildlife Act to cover moa remains and those of other extinct birds.

Meanwhile the trade continues. In January 2016, a collection of 100 moa bones was posted on Trade Me with a starting price of \$500.



Trade me sellers don't have to prove the origin or authenticity of the moa artifact they are selling.



Model of a coastal moa, *Euryapteryx curtus*. Purchased 2006. CC BY-NC-ND licence. Te Papa (S.044281)

NO PROTECTION FOR EXTINCT SPECIES

The Wildlife Act 1953 gives automatic, absolute protection to wildlife in New Zealand and its surrounding marine Exclusive Economic Zone. This means no-one may kill, or have in their possession, any living or dead wildlife, unless they have an appropriate authority. 'Wildlife' means any animal that is living in a wild state, and includes eggs or offspring held, hatched or born in captivity.

The Act only applies to living species – not those that are extinct. So the bones, eggs and feathers of extinct birds are currently unprotected by New Zealand law. They include moa, the flightless native goose, New Zealand quail, adzebill, and the giant Haast's eagle.

Celina Yapp, Director of the Waitomo Caves Museum, has been monitoring moa bone Trade Me transactions over the past five years. She has logged more than 320 trades in that time, comprising about 5,400 pieces of bone bringing in over \$30,000 to the sellers.

She said: "From a scientist's point of view these bones are irreplaceable and therefore priceless. There have only ever been a handful of intact moa eggs found. It seems strange to me that if you find a moa egg shell on private land you could put it on your garden for fertiliser without breaking the law but you can't do that with much of the wildlife that you still see around today."