The early Maori that colonised New Zealand found easy dinner in the Moa, the easy access to this tasty sustenance made the Moa the prime food of choice for Maori. With the seemly vast supply of at every turn Maori did little to conserve meat resulting in huge wastages where it is estimated that 9000 Moa were killed and almost 2400 eggs destroyed. This quickly resulted in the extinction of the Moa only 400 years after Maori’s arrival. The extinction of Moa impacted heavily on the diets of Maori forcing them to find other sources of food. By 1600AD all colonies of fur seals on the North Island and parts of the south island were made extinct forcing them again onto alternate diets of shell fish and other marine life. This shows the huge impact Maori had the wildlife of New Zealand and the carelessness that lead to the extinction of Moa and many other animals they sourced as food.

“The Maori practice of setting forest fires lead to catastrophic soil erosion and biological impoverishment”. Native vegetation, animal and soil were deeply scarred by these fires and struggled to recover. Sediment records show a huge increase in charcoal and bracken spores around the 13th and 14th centuries. At the same time, there was a massive decline in pollen from forest trees, marking a striking and devastating change: up to 40% of the forest was burnt within 200 years of Māori settling in New Zealand.

The Maori also introduced the rat and dog. The Kiore(rat) had a big impact on tuatara, lizards, frogs and invertebrates (animals without backbones). Soon the South Island snipe, the stout-legged wren, Hodgen’s rail, the New Zealand owlet-nightjar and the greater short-tailed bat were all brought to rapid extinction.

Early Māori settlers brought tropical crop plants from their Polynesian homelands. While many species did not survive because of the cooler climate, others were grown successfully, providing carbohydrate or useful resources. They probably include kūmara (sweet potato, Ipomoea batatas), yams (Dioscorea species), taro (Colocasia antiquorum), gourd (Lagenaria siceraria), paper mulberry (Broussonetia papyrifera) and perhaps the Pacific Island cabbage tree (Cordyline fruticosa).

As Māori grew crops, they changed the landscape by altering soils and wetlands, and by reducing forest areas.When the settlers cleared the bush for farming, they removed tree stumps and the protective cover of ferns and scrub – unlike the 13th-century deforestation, which left these in place. The loose soils in hilly areas became very vulnerable to erosion, especially during heavy rain. This can trigger massive slips, and the runoff to rivers carries high sediment loads. Over time, river mouths and estuarine systems have become silted up, and mangroves have spread extensively in some silted areas of northern New Zealand.