

Nīkau

Rhopalostylis sapida

Nīkau trees grow in coastal forests in the lower North Island and upper South Island. It is New Zealand's only palm tree. It grows up to 10m high and 25 cm in diameter. Its trunk is stripy—each ring is an old scar left behind when the leaf and seed heads break off the trunk. It takes about 10 years before the first stripe appears. The leaves are up to 3m long. Nīkau flowers in summer and fruits from late summer to early autumn. The berries, each containing one large seed, are eaten and spread throughout the forest by kererū and kākā. Kiwi occasionally use nīkau seeds as gizzard stones to help them to grind up the food in their stomachs.

Māori used nearly every part of the nīkau. The young leaves and heart (koata) were eaten but, because this killed the tree, it was not common. The older leaves were stripped and used for making baskets. The palm fronds were used for thatching walls and roofs of their buildings. The heel of the leaves were used for making water carrying vessels. The pith and roots were used for medicinal purposes. The root (rito) was also eaten.

On Kapiti you can see a lot of young and old nīkau but very few that are 20 to 40 years old. This is because in the 1970s and '80s there was very little regeneration of nīkau because the possum fed on the nīkau flower and the Norway rat fed on any surviving seed. After possums and rats were eradicated, nīkau was then able to regenerate.

Other resources

New Zealand Geographic magazine #65
September–October Nīkau the Kiwi Palm (Secondary kit only)

www.nzgeographic.co.nz > issue 65 > nīkau





Photo: Jeremy Rolfe.