

Captain Cook statues defaced in NZ amid calls for Maori chiefs to take his place

Social media posts describe explorer as a 'murderer' and 'crooked Cook' as 250-year anniversary of his landing in New Zealand approaches



Captain Cook's statue in the New Zealand city of Gisborne has been vandalised with red paint. Another has had a white bikini painted on it as local people call for greater recognition of Maori leaders. Photograph: Gisborne City Council

Eleanor Ainge Roy in Dunedin

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Statues depicting Captain Cook which are being repeatedly defaced in the New Zealand city of Gisborne have sparked a heated debate about the portrayal of the town's complex colonial history.

Over a three week period a statue depicting Captain James Cook, gifted to the city in 1969 by a brewery company has been smeared in paint and had a bikini and sandals depicted on.

Two other statues of Captain Cook in the city have also been vandalised with red paint smeared on their face and pockets.

With the 250th anniversary of Cook's landing in New Zealand only three years away tensions are high in the city, 350km south east of Auckland. Many residents have taken to social media to express their opinions in which Cook is described as a "murderer" and "crooked Cook". Other posts call for one of the statues to be pulled down, saying it is insulting to local Maori.

Cook and the crew of the Endeavour landed in Gisborne's Poverty Bay in 1769 and the first significant meetings of Europeans and Maori took place nearby.

Nick Tupara, spokesman for the Ngati Oneone tribe, said, according to historical records, Cook's crew shot nine Maori men of his tribe, including Tupara's ancestors. Six of the men are believed to have died.

Even though there is some contention as to whether the first statue is an accurate representation of Cook, Tupara says the English explorer is a undeniable part of Gisborne's "story". He has urged the community to embark on a calm and measured discussion of their history, instead of carrying out "wasteful" acts of vandalism.

One statue of Cook in Gisborne had a white bikini painted on it. Photograph: Josh Wharehinga

"We are part of Cook's lineage, that is a fact, and defacing our city is a poor method of showing dissension with our past." he said.

Tupara said Cook and the Endeavour's legacy were evident all over Gisborne, with street names, parks and public places named after the man and his ship. However public references or memorials to historical Maori leaders were lacking, and Tupara said this inequality should be addressed: "It is clear from the recent vandalism and heated social media discussion that historical wounds run deep and there is more healing that needs to happen – and I do think there should be more balance in the portrayal of our history."

One suggestion which appears to have strong support is to replace the statue of Cook with the Maori leader of Ngati Oneone from the time of Cook's landing – Rakaiatane. Another suggestion is to have the two statues placed side-by-side.

Gisborne mayor, Meng Foon, said they had no leads on who was responsible for the vandalism, but the council would be meeting with Ngati Oneone to discuss the growing tension.

“Emotions are running pretty high about Cook at the moment, especially for local Maori who lost ancestors,” said Foon.

“The process of reconciliation between the crown and local Iwi is still a work-in-progress, and I think the recent vandalism has shown how much work there is still to be done.”

“But it is important to acknowledge all aspects of our history, good and bad. If Ngati Oneone decide they would like a statue of Rakaiatane erected, I think that would be welcomed.”