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The documentary crew, from left, Briar March, Lyn Collie and Zane Holmes, are heading to Takuu to make a film before it sinks.
Photo: Brendon O'Hagan.

Kiwis document island with that sinking feeling

By GREG MEYLAN

NEW ZEALAND film makers are to document the last days of the tiny Polynesian island of Takuu before it slips beneath the waves.

The island, 250km off Papua New Guinea, is home to 500 people and a unique culture - but its highest point is just 1m above sea level.

Tectonic activity at the junction of the Pacific and Australian continental plates means the island is sinking 20cm a year. Its disappearance is being viewed as a dummy run for other low-lying Pacific islands, as sea levels rise due to global warming.

Documentary director Briar March and cameraman Zane Holmes will accompany Auckland University anthropologist Dr Richard Moyle to the island next month.

Producer Lyn Collie, whose tiny budget is not large enough to pay any wages, will stay in Auckland and update a weblog from information sent via the film makers' satellite phone.

March said the island, only 300m², was the last place where traditional

Polynesian religion was practised, although some younger islanders schooled in Papua New Guinea had converted to Christianity.

Traditional musical performances, using a style of singing that sounds like speech played backwards, take up to 30 hours of the community's week.

A 40-year ban on Christian missionaries was only recently lifted and now the ariki, or chief, has invited the New Zealanders to film the island's final days above the waterline.

"This potentially could be what all the Pacific island atolls have to do in the future," March said.

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Moyle is one of a handful of researchers allowed to visit the island and has recorded 1000 songs, written a bilingual book of fables and almost completed a dictionary of the language.

Last year a king tide, which occurs biannually and can reach 1.5m, almost washed over the island. Already, rising sea levels mean soil is too salty



to grow taro, and within two years safe anchorage for the community's vital fishing canoes is expected to be lost.

The community has no firm plans for when or where they will relocate, but Bougainville is already home to a number of expats.

Moyle predicted the island will be uninhabitable within two years.

The film crew, which will spend two months on Takuu, will fly to Papua New Guinea early next month with a solar panel, small petrol generator and tinned food to supplement the staple diet of rice and boiled fish.

The island has no electricity, no toilets and the traditional thatched houses are built so close that their eaves touch.

From Bougainville, March and Holmes will take the four-day sea voyage on a boat that makes a trip to Takuu just four times a year.

In 2004 Moyle was left on Takuu for five months after the boat, the only one that services the island, broke down.

■ The documentary's progress can be followed on www.takuufilm.blogspot.com.

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