

Aoraki Cluster

Aoraki is a space habitat in a solar orbit resonant with Mercury, known for its distinctly New Zealand culture, energy production and uplift facilities.

The habitat was originally built 53 BF by Fixari Engineering, a New Zealand habitat construction company that was also heavily involved in the sea and land bases in the Ross Dependency. It was located in a high Mercury orbit. The main purpose of the habitat was to act as an outpost for Mercury mining and energy exploitation, as well as a research station for space energy, solar physics and vulcanoid geology. In the early days of Mercury colonization it had an important role as a refueling and restocking stop for hypercorp teams, but as they began to develop their claims on the surface business dwindled. Supply shipments dropped off, maintenance budgets were slashed and Fixari increasingly looked for a buyer.

In 38 BF conflicts between the owners and the inhabitants came to a boiling point. Inspired by other claims of independence Aoraki petitioned the New Zealand government to become a regional council. The government refused, but was clearly too busy dealing with the emerging Pacific War to matter. Worried about Fixari trying something aggressive the Aoraki Station Council made deals with the Belt independence movement. In a dramatic standoff against the former owners Aoraki was resupplied with Belt ice despite a blockade and left Mercury orbit, an event that was symbolically important for the Argonaut cause and damaged the credibility of Fixari. Aoraki has remained aligned with the Argonauts ever since.

In 33 BF it gained council status, but given the many troubles on Earth the links to the New Zealand government remained weak. Instead work on uplift for various biotechnology companies became a major funding source, enabling the habitat to expand and attract a small but highly regarded research community. Over time it became particularly known for its work on the behavioral psychology of uplifts in a 'normal' setting: uplifts were reared as adopted family members by the inhabitants. This 'humanistic' approach was lauded by the Argonauts and various uplift rights groups; while expensive and slow, the rate of psychopathology among the uplifts was very low.

By the time of the Fall Aoraki was de facto independent, but heavily influenced by Maori culture. Two decades earlier one of the recurrent revivals of Maori culture on Earth had led to serious conflicts, and a large number of culturally Maori people migrated into space rather than face the repression at home. Many ended up at Aoraki. During the Fall the already weak separation between Pakeha and Maori fell away; today Aoraki regards itself as one iwi (tribe) (including its uplift members). It remains the only Maori (or New Zealand) society in the solar system.

Aoraki Cluster today

The habitat is a sprawling conical cluster construction built behind a large mirror shield. Water tanks placed close to the shield have been extended into underwater habitats for cetaceans. Extending outside the shield are large solar collector fields.

The central modules contain key engineering as well as the communal Marae used for meetings and ceremonies. They are surrounded by the biospheres and habitat cylinders, which are in turn surrounded by the more utilitarian additions for other functions.

The local research community is mainly directed towards uplift, solar research and energy technology. The local “university” of Argonaut researchers network with Terragenesis, Ukko-Jylinä and Gerlach Argonauts. Much of the industry is focused on solar farming, producing high energy compounds, fuel, small amounts of antimatter, and microwave beams for certain propulsion systems. The station is also used as a way station for ships transporting equipment to the coronal habitats: it is reloaded onto craft that are better adapted to the environment and gravity well (very little is transported out of the gravity well – it is usually cheaper to just make it anew).

The total population is about 30,000 transhumans. Most regard themselves as culturally New Zealand in one way or another, but the degree to which they take it seriously varies. Some of the marae elders take it tremendously seriously, while many youngsters find it merely an amusing tradition. The uplifts are equally variable; while the neo-gorillas take pride in being able to make the most intimidating hakas in the solar system, many prefer to work on their Ph.D. in emergent social psychology. Traditionally inspired tattoos or body modifications are common, even among cetacean uplifts.

While the habitat does pride itself on being a peaceful and upstanding member of the Argonaut family, it does have some dark sides. The money received for some of the early uplift research was tainted, and there were some incidents in the early days of research that few want to remember. There have been a few notable defections of uplifts against the Argonauts; “youthful rebelliousness” has been claimed as a cause, although the number and fierceness seem unusual.