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Kaitiakitanga – guardianship and conservation

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Traditionally, Māori believe there is a deep kinship between humans and the natural world. This connection is expressed through kaitiakitanga – a way of managing the environment. Today there is growing interest in kaitiakitanga as iwi restore their environment and their culture.

Understanding kaitiakitanga

Kaitiakitanga means guardianship, protection, preservation or sheltering. It is a way of managing the environment, based on the traditional Māori world view.

Māori world view

Traditionally, Māori believe there is a deep kinship between humans and the natural world. All life is connected. People are not superior to the natural order; they are part of it. Like some other indigenous cultures, Māori see humans as part of the web or fabric of life. To understand the world, one must understand the relationships between different parts of the web.

Kaitiakitanga is a vehicle for rediscovering and applying these ideas.

Kaitiaki – guardians

A kaitiaki is a person or group that is recognised as a guardian by the tangata whenua (tribal group with authority in a particular area). For instance, a hapū (sub-tribe) may be the kaitiaki for a lake or a forest.

Interest in kaitiakitanga is growing today. Tribal groups are working to respond to environmental problems, and to renew their own knowledge, culture and experience.

Environmental impact

All human societies, including Māori, affect the environment they live in. Before Europeans arrived, Māori hunted the moa (giant flightless bird) to extinction, and burnt large areas of forest. They had a negative impact on the environment in other ways too.

However, Europeans also had a serious impact on native plants, animals, land and sea after they settled in New Zealand. For example, large areas of forest were felled to make way for farming.

Becoming endangered

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Māori communities and cultures were also colonised and endangered. Many Māori likened themselves to native plants and animals on the brink of extinction. For example, the people of the Ngāti Huia tribe saw the extinction of the huia as calamitous. The bird was central to their identity and mana (status).

Guardianship of objects

Kaitiakitanga can also apply to valued items. These include family heirlooms such as korowai (cloaks), mere pounamu (jade clubs) and books about whakapapa (genealogy). An item that belongs to a person later becomes the property of all their descendants. It is cared for by an individual kaitiaki on behalf of the group. The kaitiaki is responsible for bringing the object to important occasions such as funerals, and for holding information about it.

Kaitiakitanga today

Kaitiakitanga today expresses traditional ideas in a time of cultural and environmental renewal. Iwi (tribes) are seeking to restore ecosystems and culture at the same time. Kaitiakitanga theory and practice responds to a number of current issues and challenges.

Connected to nature

In Māori culture, humans are seen as deeply connected to the land and to the natural world. Kaitiakitanga grows out of this connection and expresses it in a modern context.

Tangata whenua

Tangata whenua – literally, people of the land – are a group who have authority in a particular place, because of their ancestors' relationship to it. Humans and the land are seen as one, and people are not superior to nature. The natural world is able to 'speak' to humans and give them knowledge and understanding. Human life is about aligning oneself with the natural world.

Mystical relationship

In some tribal traditions, humans changed into birds, fish and other creatures. There are also many examples where people identified the human body with features of the

landscape. All of these traditions show an intimate experience of nature. Anthropologists have described it as a mystical involvement with the natural world.

Landscape and body: taunaha whenua

Taunaha whenua is a custom where a chief claims land by naming it after a part of his body. When Tamatekapua, captain of the *Te Arawa* canoe from Polynesia, saw Maketū peninsula he said, 'Te kūrae rā mō āku whakatipuranga. Ko te kūreitanga o taku ihu!' (The land that we see ahead I shall claim for my descendants. I shall name it the bridge of my nose!) [1]

The chief Tia, who had also arrived on the canoe, looked toward Rangiuru and said, 'Te toropuke i runga rā, ahu mai ki ngā maunga nei, ko te takapū o Tapuika!' (That small hill away to the south, and the land between it and the mountain yonder, shall be called the belly of Tapuika!) [2]

Sacred land

The Ngāti Tūwharetoa chief Mananui Te Heuheu asserted authority over the tribe's lands, and made them sacred, by equating them with his body. His grandson, Tūreiti Te Heuheu, explains:

> [H]e manipulated his body so it spread over a vast distance. One of his thighs was upon Tītī-o-kura, another on Ōtāiri. One of his shoulders was upon Paretetaitonga, another on Tūhua. His head was on Tongariro and his body lay upon Taupō. This was done to render the land sacred and as a domain for his spiritual authority... [3]

Footnotes

1. John Te H. Grace, *Tuwharetoa: a history of the Maori people of the Taupo district*. Tāmaki-makau-rau: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1992, wh. 52. › Back
2. *Tuwharetoa*, wh. 52. › Back
3. Tureiti Te Heuheu, kōrerotia ki a Elsdon Best, 26 Mei 1913. MS Papers 72, folder 36, Alexander Turnbull Library, Te Whanganui-a-Tara. › Back

Traditional kaitiakitanga

People and environment

Traditionally, there was an intimate relationship between people and their environment. The health of a community was reflected in its environment and vice versa. For example,

if waterways were unclear or polluted, something was amiss with the local people. Kaitiakitanga was based on this relationship.

Keeping the balance

Customary practices maintained the balance between communities and nature. For activities such as hunting birds, gardening and fishing, this ensured that resources were managed sustainably. Practices included:

1. setting temporary rāhui on certain areas
2. using the maramataka (lunar calendar) to guide planting and harvesting
3. banning recreational fishing and birding
4. using appropriate baskets for different types of food
5. harvesting only what was needed
6. laying mauri stones in gardens. A tohunga would say a karakia over the stone, which was believed to protect resources
7. using bird snares at the right time – for instance, not during the breeding season
8. limits on fishing – for instance, tribes sometimes fished with a huge net strung between two canoes, but they only did so once a year.

Customary conservation

In a letter in 1895, Tāmati Ranapiri of the Ngāti Raukawa tribe explains customs that limited the taking of kahitua, a small mollusc found on the beaches from Paekākāriki to Taranaki.

> Menstruating women were not allowed to gather seafood … and baskets of cooked food were prohibited. If a menstruating woman gathered molluscs, they would only be successful on the day that the molluscs were first seen. At dawn the next day, no molluscs would be seen on that beach and they would have moved to the beach of another sub-tribe. [1]

Footnotes

1. Tāmati Ranapiri, Reta ki a Elsdon Best, 14 Hānuere 1895. MS Papers 1187-127, Alexander Turnbull Library, Te Whanganui-a-Tara. › Back

Kaitiaki – guardians

Tiaki

The word tiaki is the basis of the longer word kaitiakitanga. Tiaki means to guard. It also means to preserve, foster, protect and shelter. So, notions of care and protection are at the heart of kaitiakitanga, and give it its conservation ethic.

Role of kaitiaki

The prefix kai means someone who carries out an action. A kaitiaki is a person, group or being that acts as a carer, guardian, protector and conserver. The gods of the natural world were considered to be the original kaitiaki – for instance, Tāne, god of the forest, was the kaitiaki of the forest. All other kaitiaki emulate those original ones.

Many hapū (sub-tribes) and whānau (families) care for a place such as a lake or forest. They work to conserve the natural heritage, address environmental problems and reclaim traditional knowledge.

Te hunga tiaki

The Te Arawa tribes use the term ‘te hunga tiaki’ instead of kaitiaki, explains Huhana Mihinui.

> The prefix ‘hunga’ is more common than ‘kai’ amongst Te Arawa, hence te hunga tiaki rather than kaitiaki. The essence of hunga is a group with common purpose. Hunga may also link with the sense of communal responsibilities. The same meaning is not conveyed with ‘kai’ … te hunga tiaki likewise invokes ideas of obligations to offer hospitality, but also to manage and protect, with the implicit recognition of the group’s mana whenua [customary authority over a traditional territory] role in this respect. [1]

Other kaitiaki

Animals and other beings can also take the role of kaitiaki. The Ngāti Raukawa elder Tāmati Ranapiri explains:

> Manu taupunga is a name for the bird that stands guard while others are eating from a tree. It is also called the ‘sentry bird’. This bird would guard the tree, and when other birds came to eat the fruit, it fended off the intruders, ensuring their departure. [2]

Footnotes

1. Huhana Mihinui, ‘Hutia te rito o te harakeke: a flaxroots understanding of resource management.’ Kei *Whenua: managing our resources*, ētita Merata Kāwharu. Tāmaki-makau-rau: Reed, 2002, wh. 22–23. › Back
2. Tāmati Ranapiri, Reta ki a Elsdon Best, 15 Hānuere 1895. MS Papers 1187-271, Alexander Turnbull Library, Te Whanganui-a-Tara. › Back

Key concepts

Mana, tapu and mauri are concepts that underpin the traditional Māori world view and kaitiakitanga.

Mana: spiritual power

The mana (power) of a forest, for example, is expressed in its birds, trees and other natural features. Abundant blossoms and fruit, and birds arriving to feed, show the forest's mana. Terms such as matomato (growing vigorously) and māpua (prolific) describe this abundance.

Tapu: spiritual restriction

For mana to come forth in the forest, some restrictions have to be put in place. Tapu (spiritual restriction) gives rise to the practice of rāhui (restrictions).

Mauri: life force

The forest must also possess mauri, an elemental life force. This allows fruit to grow, birds to arrive and so on. In traditional kaitiakitanga, forests were strictly managed. Tohunga (priests) carried out rituals such as karakia (charm) over a mauri stone (a stone believed to preserve the life force). They protected the mauri of the forest so its mana could flow.

Ngāti Raukawa elder Tāmati Ranapiri explains:

> The mauri is a divine authority by which food may come forth or be preserved in a certain area so that it does not go to another. There is mauri in the land and mauri in waterways such as rivers and lakes. If there is a mountain or a forest without birds, perhaps a river without food … then one installs a mauri [stone] … [1]

Footnotes

1. Tāmati Ranapiri, Reta ki a Elsdon Best, 14 Hānuere 1895. MS Papers 1187-127, Alexander Turnbull Library, Te Whanganui-a-Tara. › Back

Rāhui – prohibitions

Protecting through prohibition

Rāhui is a restriction that sets aside an area and bans the harvesting of resources. For example, a lake or a forest might be temporarily off-limits so the fish, birds or plants can be restored. Hirini Moko Mead explains:

> The conservation rāhui was used to protect the products of the land and water … [the] chief Tukuha … set up a rāhui post at Te Rautāwhiri. The post remained in the same position, but whenever the chief wanted to rāhui the eels of his part of the Rangitāiki River, he would 'hang one of his old garments' on it. That would signal a complete ban on that one resource, eels. In this instance, the name of the place, Te Rautāwhiri (the leaves twisted on) indicates that it was used by custom as a place to signal a rāhui. [1]

In the Southland region, the Ngāi Tahu tribe preserved resources through a number of restrictions:

> A traditional Ngāi Tahu example is the wakawaka (boundaries defined between hapū or fishing grounds) … An example of the natural rāhui is the bird called *hākuai* … the hākuai is considered by some as the guardian of the Tītī (muttonbird) and when the people hear the hākuai call in the night, it foretells the end of the season for taking Tītī. The rāhui then remains until the following year. [2]

In the 1980s, the tribe placed limits on seafood gathering:

> [T]he rāhui [was] placed around the Ngāi Tahu rohe pōtae (region) by Rakiihia Tau … This rāhui was determined at a meeting held at Rāpaki in 1986. This rāhui placed management responsibilities to the taking of sea food. It provided for the Ngāi Tahu representatives from the Ngāi Tahu marae, the right to approve the taking of shell fish by their people by complying with Ngāi Tahu resource management practices. [3]

Footnotes

1. Hirini Moko Mead, *Tikanga Māori: living by Māori values*. Te Whanganui-a-Tara: Huia, 2003, wh. 197. › Back
2. Peter Garven, Marty Nepia rātou ko Harold Ashwell, *Te whakatau kaupapa o Murihiku: Ngai Tahu resource management strategy of the Southland region*. Te Whanganui-a-Tara: Aoraki Press, 1997, wh. 29. › Back
3. *Te whakatau kaupapa o Murihiku*, wh. 29. › Back

Kaitiakitanga today

Rediscovery

Kaitiakitanga today is being rediscovered and explored. Māori communities are reconstructing and expressing traditional knowledge in their tribal areas. They are restoring both environmental areas and tribal knowledge of those places.

Kaitiakitanga in action

There are many examples of contemporary kaitiakitanga.

1. The Ngāi Tahu tribe are kaitiaki of the pounamu (greenstone) resource in the South Island.
2. In 1981, a claim was taken to the Waitangi Tribunal on behalf of Te Āti Awa ki Taranaki, about sewage and industrial waste polluting tribal fishing areas.
3. At Pukerua Bay, north of Wellington, the Ngāti Toa tribe worked with the residents' association to place a rāhui (restriction) on taking seafood, so the local fishery could be replenished.
4. Four tribes (Ngāti Kahungunu, Rangitāne, Muaūpoko and Ngāti Raukawa) have come together to address pollution of the Manawatū River.
5. The Te Rarawa people are working to protect the kūkupa (New Zealand pigeon).

Challenges

There are some challenges in applying kaitiakitanga today. Practitioners need to understand traditional concepts such as mana (status), tapu (spiritual restriction) and mauri (the life principle), and relate them to the modern setting.

There are also challenges as non-Māori engage with kaitiakitanga. Forest or waterway management involves parties such as land-owners and regional authorities, who may have different world views and values.

Legislation

Kaitiakitanga has been included in some legislation. The Resource Management Act 1991 aims to enable sustainable management of environmental resources. It states that people managing resources under the act must take kaitiakitanga into account.

The act defines kaitiakitanga as 'the exercise of guardianship by the tangata whenua of an area in accordance with tikanga Māori in relation to natural and physical resources; and includes the ethic of stewardship'.

Kaitiakitanga was also included in the Foreshore and Seabed Act 2004, where it has the same meaning.

Negotiations

As kaitiakitanga has been included in law, interest has grown considerably. Iwi (tribes) have seen these provisions as a chance to further kaitiakitanga in their traditional areas. In bringing kaitiakitanga into law, the government has put tribal interests and hopes within a wider community context. Tribal groups often negotiate with other groups such as local authorities. This has led to ongoing debate about kaitiakitanga and how to provide for it in New Zealand's environmental management regime.

Māori and non-Māori

Kaitiakitanga allows Māori today to feel they are meeting the responsibilities and hopes of their ancestors. It also allows non-Māori to reflect on the notion of kinship with nature, and how this idea might be useful in an environmentally threatened world.

External links and sources

1. Garven, Peter, Marty Nepia, and Harold Ashwell. *Te whakatau kaupapa o Murihiku: Ngai Tahu resource management strategy for the Southland region*. Wellington: Aoraki Press, 1997.
2. Grace, John Te H. *Tuwharetoa: a history of the Maori people of the Taupo district*. Auckland: Reed, 1992 (originally published 1959).
3. Kāwharu, Merata, ed. *Whenua: managing our resources*. Auckland: Reed, 2002.
4. Marsden, Māori, and Te Aroha Henare. 'Kaitiakitanga: a definitive introduction into the holistic worldview of the Māori.' In *The woven universe: selected writings of Rev. Māori Marsden*, edited by Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, 54–72. Ōtaki: Estate of Rev. Māori Marsden, 2003.
5. Mead, Hirini Moko. *Tikanga Māori: living by Māori values*. Wellington: Huia, 2003.
6. Ranapiri, Tāmati. Letters to Elsdon Best. MS papers 1187. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

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