



TANIWHA

by Monique and Pātaka Moore

Taniwha have a special relationship with Māori, who tell many stories about them. Taniwha have different roles – and one of these is as kaitiaki. Many taniwha live in or near lakes, rivers, or the sea and help to protect and keep these places safe.

What are taniwha?

Taniwha can be creatures or objects and can have many different shapes and forms. Some taniwha even change what they look like when it suits them. They might appear as large, giant lizards, as fish such as sharks, as whales, or even as logs of wood. There are also stories of taniwha who look like creatures from another planet!

Māori sometimes leave gifts, such as food, at the homes of taniwha. Taniwha are also celebrated in carvings and buildings, on murals (wall paintings), and in stories.

Some taniwha can change the shape of the land. Awarua was a taniwha who lived in Porirua Harbour. While learning to fly, Awarua crashed into the hills of nearby Mana Island. This made the top of the island flat.



Taniwha as kaitiaki

Māori have worked together with taniwha for hundreds of years and think of them as very special kaitiaki.

There are many stories about taniwha who lived in the sea and guided waka safely to the shores of Aotearoa. Pane-iraira was a taniwha who looked like a whale. Pane-iraira swam with the great Tainui waka and kept those on board safe by calming the waves during storms and rough seas.



Pane-iraira swam with the Tainui waka.

Taniwha also protect the environment and can help us to be better kaitiaki of our lands and seas. If we don't look after these places with care and respect, taniwha can give us a sign that something is wrong. Some people believe that taniwha can get angry and cause problems if their homes are polluted or damaged. If the building of a new road destroys the home of a taniwha, people worry that the workers' trucks and machines might break down.

How can taniwaha help us?

Taniwaha can give us helpful information. Some iwi believe that when certain taniwaha appear, it's a sign that good weather is on its way. Other stories tell of a taniwaha that appears in the sea as a log of wood. This is a sign that crops will grow well or there will be plenty of fish to catch.

How can we help taniwaha?

Like taniwaha, we can be kaitiaki. Think about the rivers or streams near where you live. How can you help taniwaha to keep these places healthy? You could plant trees and shrubs along rivers to help keep the water clean. You could pick up rubbish with your friends at your local beach or lake. And you can be kaitiaki at home by not using too much water when taking a shower, brushing your teeth, and washing the dishes.



Remember that if we keep the homes of taniwaha healthy and safe, we can enjoy playing, swimming, and gathering food from these places too!

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