

Kaitiakitanga

by Susan Paris
and Daniel Hikuroa

Most people think of a kaitiaki as someone who guards or protects the natural world. Maybe they look after a stream or beach, a native species under threat, or a local reserve. The term kaitiakitanga (the act of being a kaitiaki) comes from te ao Māori. It can mean each generation teaches the next about protecting taonga tuku iho – precious resources passed on by the ancestors. These resources include the land, ocean, rivers, lakes, mountains, and forests. Te reo Māori and Māori knowledge are also taonga tuku iho.

In recent years, interest in kaitiakitanga has grown as people work to protect the things that are important to them or are under threat.

Rangi and Papa

Iwi and hapū believe in a deep connection between people and the natural world. This is because Ranginui (the sky father) and Papatūānuku (the earth mother) are the first parents and kaitiaki. Rangi and Papa had many children, each of whom also became kaitiaki. Tāne Mahuta, for example, is the kaitiaki of the forest and all its creatures. Tangaroa is the kaitiaki of the ocean and waterways and all the creatures in these places. As well as the natural world, the children of Rangi and Papa brought humans into being.



Rhiannon Mackie

OUR FUTURE ON THE LINE

When she was eight, Rhiannon Mackie read an article about climate change. It came as a shock that people had changed the environment so drastically, yet Rhiannon had “complete faith” the problem would go away. Four years later, reality hit. Nothing had changed. “I finally understood the **magnitude** of the crisis,” she says. “Our future was on the line, yet I felt completely powerless.”

At first, Rhiannon did nothing. She had no idea where to start. Then she began to hear about young climate activists like Mitzi Jonelle Tan and Greta Thunberg. They became her role models. Rhiannon was soon working with young activists in Aotearoa, and from there, she says, “things just grew”. Now she spends hours every week raising awareness of the climate crisis.

Rhiannon believes young people have a huge amount of influence, and she wants to ensure they have the skills to speak out. “We’re the ones who will live to see the consequences of what happens.” Rhiannon talks about climate change in schools, and she’s helped other young activists meet with world leaders. In June 2022, she attended a United Nations conference in Sweden. The right to a healthy environment was the main issue.

Becoming a climate activist didn’t feel like a choice for Rhiannon. She believes previous generations have done “the bare minimum” to clean up their act; she didn’t want hers to make the same mistake. Rhiannon says there’s a huge disconnect between people and nature. “But in reality, we’re part of the environment. Forgetting this has led to the triple threat we now face: climate change, the loss of **biodiversity**, and pollution.”

Rhiannon often thinks about the people who will come after us. “It’s our responsibility to care for the environment on their behalf. They won’t have the same chance as us; it will be too late. It’s up to my generation to build a better world.”

magnitude: the great size of something

biodiversity: the variety of plant and animal life in the world



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"OUR ANCESTORS GIVE US MANA, BUT WE RETURN THAT MANA BY THE WAY WE LIVE."

Nigel How

WAIROA'S TREASURE CHEST

Few people know more about the history of Wairoa than Nigel How. "Before 1865," he says, "Māori ruled this place. We built our own ships. We sold our wheat and wood in England. There was a lot of wealth here. Life was good."

Nigel is fascinated by the past, especially Wairoa's. "Every nook and cranny in this rohe is rich with kōrero." Nigel first heard some of this kōrero as a boy when his nana took him to hui. She knew he loved listening to family stories, and she wanted him to meet local kaumātua and hear their stories, too. He'll never forget the people he met and the things they told him. Learning about the past gave Nigel a sense of identity – and it made him feel empowered. "Our ancestors give us mana, but we return that mana by the way we live. They're watching us. They sit on our shoulders."

Nigel's whānau wasn't surprised when he became a historian. He now works at the Wairoa Museum, a place he calls the community's treasure chest. It's filled with taonga and stories. Nigel's favourite taonga is a carving named Te Kawiti, the museum's first family member. According to Nigel, Te Kawiti is around 250 years old. He's the oldest living local – and quite a character.

"Te Kawiti likes the staff to say mōrena, otherwise he plays with the lights." To keep Te Kawiti happy, he was moved to a prime spot near the window. From there, he could look out across the river to where he first lived with his people, Ngāti Kurupakiaka.

Local stories are brought to life by tīpuna like Te Kawiti, but Nigel says historians – as the kaitiaki of these stories – also play an important role. "It's our job to help the past feel alive and be truthful and relevant," he says. Respect is also high on his list. "Life was different back then. Our tīpuna had their own values. We don't have to agree with everything they did, but we can't judge. History teaches us about **empathy**, something we all need if we're to get along."

empathy: to be able to understand and share another person's feelings



Ana Krakosky

WITH MY TŪPUNA

Ana Krakosky didn't spend time on marae when she was growing up, and she didn't know much about her iwi, Te Āti Awa. It felt like part of her was missing. Ana's a jeweller now. She likes making things from pounamu. The stone helps her feel close to her ancestors. "Working with pounamu is like working with my tūpuna," she says.

If being a jeweller has connected Ana with her culture, knowing more about te ao Māori also helps with her work. "Sometimes," she says, "a **whakataukī** will start me thinking, and I'll get an idea for a new piece." But like a lot of artists, Ana's ideas come from all over the place: the sight of raindrops on water, the curl of a leaf. Or Ana might look at a stone and "just see a piece forming". She'll do a quick drawing, practise with clay, pick a material, and make a start.

Ana enjoys working with different materials. "I love taking a rock and turning it into something beautiful." Sometimes those rocks are just rocks, but Ana says pounamu is different. Using it comes with responsibilities. "There are many traditions when you work with pounamu. I honour my ancestors by following them. I want to be a good kaitiaki."

As a kaitiaki of pounamu, Ana is careful to source it from the right people, and she wastes nothing. "Pounamu is a treasure, and I treat it that way." Māori carvers believe their wairua becomes part of an artwork when it's made from pounamu. Some also consider themselves in a state of tapu while they carve. Ana follows this tikanga. She avoids her studio if she's upset or angry, and she doesn't eat or drink near her work. She cleanses herself with water at the end of each session to **whakanoa** so she's no longer in a tapu state.

Ana likes learning about who she is. She says everyone needs a sense of belonging. "If I have pride in my whakapapa, I can help other people feel the same. Then the world will be a better place."

whakataukī: a Māori proverb

whakanoa: to free something from being tapu

"POUNAMU IS A TREASURE,
AND I TREAT IT THAT WAY."

Evan Lobb

NATURE, DOING ITS THING

Evan Lobb grew up on a farm near Inglewood. He remembers the mountain, cows, and endless grass. Taranaki is known for its fertile soil and big dairy farms. The dairy factory near Hāwera is one of the largest in the world. But still, Evan wondered if all that grass, without any bush, was a good thing.

After he left school, Evan travelled. He never forgot the landscapes he saw: endless desert in the Middle East; palm-oil trees where Indonesian rainforest had once stood. Back home, with fresh eyes, he saw what New Zealand still had: biodiversity. Inspired by kaitiakitanga, Evan resolved to do his best to help protect that biodiversity.

Evan settled in North Taranaki and became a farmer. He grazes young dairy cows, which still need a lot of grass, but his 400-hectare farm is different from others. There's a forest, a wetland, **regenerating** bush, and dozens of native wildlife species. Because of this, Evan chose to put a **covenant** on a large part of his land. This means it can't be used to graze animals, even if the farm is sold.

Evan says fencing off 280 hectares wasn't a hard choice. Much of it is steep hill country and difficult to farm, and he knew there were pekapeka, kōkopu, kiwi, longfin and shortfin tuna, and kārearea. The forest is special, too, with tawa, miro, rewarewa, enormous rimu, and four different kinds of rātā in danger of becoming extinct. Even the wetland is unique. Protecting this biodiversity gives Evan hope for the future. "Now," he says, "nature can do its thing – forever."

Evan is committed to caring for his land. He spends two days a month on pest control, checking a hundred traps. He's fenced off sand dunes and planted along waterways, and he rounds up cattle on foot. He owns an electric car, and he's just bought an electric quad bike. Evan says people could still "find holes" in his lifestyle, but it makes him feel good to treat the land in a more balanced way. He's seen what happens when we don't. "If you keep pushing at nature, you lose it."

regenerating: growing back

covenant: a set of rules that affects how a landowner can use their property



"IF YOU KEEP PUSHING AT NATURE, YOU LOSE IT."

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