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FEATURE

(RE)CONNECTING COMMUNITY TO THE AWATAHA STREAM

By Laura Donkers and Charmaine Bailie

Our modern ways of living have created an environmental crisis that threatens the very survival of humans and many other species. Yet awareness of this situation, though it may create an urgent sense of responsibility and even guilt, does not necessarily translate into action

to change our ways. A narrative of “ecological disaster” can alert the public to the need for action,^[1] but the scale of the crisis and lack of wisdom to act can be overwhelming.^[2] So how can communities become motivated to respond?



Fig. 1, The Kākā Reserve reflected in the Awataha Stream. Video still from ‘Re-Generation’ 2019. Image courtesy of Laura Donkers.

We need approaches that make these urgent matters more tangible and accessible.[3] We can gain new perspectives when learning about other ways of knowing the world, making sense of the world, and by feeling part of the world. This could lead to us to develop more sustainable lifestyles and end support for ecology-damaging behaviours. This will involve accepting that we are culturally disconnected from the environment; finding ways to resolve the environmental damage; and reconnecting our cultural bonds to nature. One way to succeed in this is to seek guidance from Indigenous peoples who have followed nature's laws for generations and know how to work collaboratively to balance human needs with the wider networks of ecological actors/participants/relations.

In Western thinking, nature is divested of its original functions and status, and is seen as a resource to be subjugated and developed.[4] This anthropocentric perspective has resided in the industrialized exploitation of nature that is now widely acknowledged as having accelerated the contemporary crises of climatic change, species extinction, and environmental pollution.[5] By contrast, Indigenous systems of thought are guided by the values and laws written in nature.[6] Native peoples have known for thousands of years how to align their needs with the plural natures of other beings by valuing and upholding ecology as kin. Over recent decades, observers have drawn attention to widespread ecological damage and the need for redress through regenerative ecology, rewilding, and socio-ecological action as a way to increase biodiversity, restore environments, and mitigate climate change.[7] Reports identify that the more successful of these approaches step outside of Western

scientific frameworks and enter the world of Indigenous peoples.[8] McElwee et al. consider that Indigenous peoples' capacity to comprehend the inextricable links between humanity and ecosystem can help bridge opposing perspectives, re-educate non-Indigenous practitioners, and restore the status of nonhuman actors (such as waterways).[9]

This article and accompanying [video](#) present an approach to Māori and non-Māori collaboration on the restoration of an urban stream in Aotearoa New Zealand.[10] Together they introduce the collaborative approach taken by the Auckland-based Kaipātiki Project,[11] a community regeneration organization which is evolving its members' Western science approach to forest, stream, and estuary restoration by engaging with the principles of *Te Ao Māori* (the Māori world view).[12] *Te Ao Māori* provides an alternative to the Western Enlightenment view of a nature/culture divide[13] by connecting daily living and the need for energy, food, and water supply, with care for the environment. Through its community and ecological work, the Kaipātiki Project is weaving *mātauranga* (traditional knowledge concepts) and *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship practices) into the predominant Western mindset to help transform societal behaviours into more ecologically connected ones. We demonstrate how, with guidance and support, non-Indigenous communities can develop new perspectives on nature and culture, learn to value these more dearly, and begin to help repair some of the ecological damage our ways of living have caused.

View video here: 'RE-GENERATION,' 2019. Laura Donkers.

(Re)connecting community to ecology via the Māori worldview

In *Te Ao Māori*, the Māori worldview perceives the interconnectedness of all things as integral to spiritual, social, and environmental relationships (Fig 2). Māori knowledge, *mātauranga*, is the application of knowledge and understanding based on “evidence, cultural values, and world view.”[14] It follows traditional, place-based knowledges developed in ongoing processes of observation and interpretation, guided by the inherited traditional values established by *mana whenua*—the people with customary authority

in a particular area.[15] Life sustaining practices are guided by *kaitiakitanga* (the management of environmental resources) that include harvesting and fishing protocols, as well as protecting certain areas at different times of the season that may involve banning practices such as recreational fishing and birding.[16]

A *Te Ao Māori* approach is helping to address the declining state of many Aotearoa waterways in projects that focus on remedial practices to



Fig. 2, Traditional Māori blessing of the Kākā Reserve (aka Jessie Tonar Reserve) prior to restoration work beginning. Image courtesy of Eke Panuku.

address pollution and flooding through stream “daylighting.” Stream daylighting is a strategy to uncover restricted watercourses by removing pipes and pavements,[17] thereby enabling the stream to flow in a more “ecologically natural” and healthy state that can support the creation of wildlife corridors.[18] To be effectual, this work also involves remedial horticultural activities that require specialized, technically complex, and labor-intensive work, where stream ecology, and plant/species knowledge and selection are essential components.

One approach that used traditional knowledge concepts to foster a duty of care aligned with Māori beliefs, presented a river-focused perspective that considered what the river would have

Restoring an urban stream

The community-based Kaipātiki Project began in 1998, led by local resident, Jenny Christianson, who worked with other volunteers to redress the invasion of weeds and non-native animal pests that were displacing the native biota. Due to infrastructure development, the tree-felling program had exposed the fragile riparian zone to an influx of exotic species from surrounding gardens, and the resulting dense weed mat inhibited native tree seedlings from germinating naturally. With assistance from Auckland North Shore Council, the volunteers initiated a weeding and planting regime. More than 20 years on, the informal project is now a Trust with its own native species nursery and continues to look after the environment, care for people, and share knowledge.

Under the leadership of Charmaine Bailie (Ngāti Whātua/Te Uri O Hau), Chair of Kaipātiki Project Board of Trustees, this work now extends to teaching regenerative environmental practices. This ethos has moved from a Western science foundation toward *Te Ao Māori* ways of working,

to say about its unhealthy, polluted state. Daniel Hikuroa (Ngāti Manipoto, Waikato-Tainui), Māori scholar and earth systems scientist, was principal investigator on the project *Listening for the Voice of the River*. [19] In this project, he devised a strategy that used *mātauranga* to include the river and all its creatures as stakeholders in a process of thinking with the *personhood of the river* [20] rather than just anthropocentrically. To empower and articulate the voice of the river, the project worked with local *iwi* (Māori communities) to reverse practices that had previously left waterways damaged. Yet water quality affects everyone, so this concern is not exclusively a Māori one: non-Indigenous populations also need to consider their values, regardless of race, indigeneity, or belief.

but the thinking has not always aligned. In recent years though, it has evolved into a stronger collaboration in an ongoing journey of learning alongside *iwi*. By introducing Māori guardianship practices to the non-Indigenous community, the Kaipātiki Project builds understanding that humans are connected—and not superior—to the natural world. This strategy underpins their teaching on ecological restoration and is exemplified in the initiative Te Ara Awataha (the way of Awataha), an Auckland Council urban renewal development [21] currently being co-delivered by the Kaipātiki Project to daylight the Awataha Stream in the Auckland suburb of Northcote.

High monetary value placed on built-upon land reduces capacity for natural floodplains or soakaways to exist. In recent years, the tendency for urban waterways to overflow after heavy rain has frequently resulted in flooded homes and streets that have left Northcote residents occasionally resorting to “kayaking down the road.” [22] Since the 1950s, the Awataha Stream had been channeled through an underground

stormwater pipe, but in 2019 the Te Ara Awataha Project began to uncover the stream to form a “green corridor” for wildlife (Fig 3).

As the headwaters of the Awataha Stream begin at the Kākā Reserve (aka Jessie Tonar Scout Reserve), part of the key restoration activities involved weeding out the exotic species that had come to dominate the area and replacing them

with native trees instead. These plantings aimed to re-establish biodiversity through the regeneration of healthy habitats for fish, birds, and other wildlife. Restorative work also involved trapping activities to remove introduced pests such as rats, possums, and stoats (Eurasian ermine) that have caused the decline of native tree species and destroyed the habitats of native birds and mammals.



Fig. 3, Awataha Greenway Reference Plan ©Isthmus Group. Image courtesy of the Isthmus Group. Available at <https://isthmus.co.nz/project/te-ara-awataha-greenway/>.

Sharing mātauranga wisdom

When *mana whenua kaitiaki* (guardians, trustees) became partners in the urban regeneration project they challenged key stakeholders to engage with *mātauranga* wisdom. The specific *mana whenua kaitiaki* who contributed to the project are: *Ngāi Tai ki Tāmaki, Te Patukirikiri, Ngaati Whanaunga, Ngāti Whātua Rūnanga, Ngāti Maru, Ngā Maunga Whakahī o Kaipara, Ngāti Paoa Trust Board, Te Ākitai Waiohūa.*

They facilitated by engaging their own *Taiao* (environment) specialists to work alongside the design partners Isthmus[23] on behalf of Eke Panuku (the commissioning urban regeneration organization) and Kāinga Ora,[24] Crown agency for homes and communities. Charmaine

Bailie was one of these specialists designing cultural and biodiverse planting, and Richelle Kahui-McConnell designed Take Hono Take Mauri, a “*mauri* (life force) indicator framework” establishing social and environmental baselines to evaluate the condition of the stream and then apply its principles to revitalise both the ecology and the local community. *Mana whenua* then enabled the Kaipātiki Project to utilise the framework to guide the delivery of restoration work on Awataha Stream and use the indicators to track the progress of the project (Fig 4).

The key principles and purpose underpinning this framework are:

Key Principles	Purpose	Indicators
Aho Toi: working collaboratively	The community is empowered through the work	Seeing our faces in our places Community pride and ownership
Aho Tangata: sharing communal space and feeling safe	The work supports a connected, healthy, and inclusive community	<i>Hononga:</i> coming together <i>E Tipu e rea:</i> growing with nature <i>Ara Hikoi:</i> navigating through the land
Aho Taiao: Living with nature	Nature is visible, green, resilient, and ecologically healthy	<i>Kia kōrero te whenua:</i> the land speaks <i>Ngā Karekare o te wai:</i> the water speaks Healthy habitat

Information sourced from “*Awataha Greenway Design Guide,*” 2017. ©Isthmus Group. Available at <https://isthmus.co.nz/project/te-ara-awataha-greenway/>.



Fig. 4, *Mana whenua* visit site using the Take Mauri Take Hono tool to assess progress. Image courtesy of Eke Panuku.



Fig. 5, Kaipātiki Project in action with the community at one of the restoration days. Image courtesy of Eke Panuku.

Much of the physical restoration work has been carried out by volunteers drawn from local communities. Individuals might be attracted to the project for many reasons. They often begin their journey towards stewardship by attending regular Community Restoration Days run by the Kaipātiki Project that are designed to be accessible, productive, and enjoyable.

Te Ao Māori provides a collaborative approach to re-establishing the *mauri* of the stream by

A pedagogical approach

Kaipātiki Project's pedagogical approach to inspiring and educating volunteers is demonstrated in *Re-Generation* (2019). The video tracks the journey of volunteers as they engage with the Kākā Reserve for the first time. Charmaine Bailie undertakes much of the teaching around restoration and regenerative practices.

improving the water quality and its potential as a habitat for particular and more diverse animal and insect species and plant life to flourish. It also reconnects people to water (Fig 5) by developing relationships and understanding around its status at a time when more than 10 km of Tāmaki Makaurau's waterways are being lost annually due to the increase in housebuilding and infrastructure developments.[25]

We first meet her giving a briefing about safely navigating through the reserve so as not to destroy the native seedlings that are present, and that without this presence of mind the volunteers can do more damage than good. She advises a process of stepping through the bush as though wearing ballet shoes to avoid “grinding weeds in



Fig. 6, Charmaine Bailie teaching plant identification. Video still from 'Re-Generation' 2019. Image courtesy of Laura Donkers.

and wiping native plants out” as a form of presence-based action.[26] She then moves onto native plant identification and highlights how their local Māori names might be different or have alternative pronunciations in other locations. Several species are rapidly identified, while others are given more time with references made to their traditional uses. This leads on to the purpose of the day's activities with a discussion around the process of weeding out non-natives in the “exotic-dominated habitat” and the importance of identifying them at all stages—from a fully grown specimen to a seedling of 3–4 centimeters (Fig 6). The manner of removing those exotic species is a process of “pulling up” and “cutting down” rather than the use of chemicals. This approach takes time, but Charmaine believes it to be a preferable one: “You can instantly spray it, kill it, and paint it, or long term reduce it, and some people are in a hurry, but I personally am not.”

From the initial flurry of information overload, the tone of the session then becomes calmer. A plan to identify just one weed type rather than the need to recognize many empowers volunteers with a strategy for weeding that they will be able to manage: “You need to focus on one weed because if you start doing what I just did to you, piling a whole plate at you in one moment, [you will get confused].” The weeding process then

Summary

To begin to address the ecological crises we first must accept that industrialised ways of living have caused many of the problems we associate with climate change and biodiversity loss. We also must accept that culturally we live as though we are separate from nature. We need help to change this perspective, and one way could be with guidance from Indigenous peoples who live in ways that are much more connected and balanced against the needs of nature. To this end, the Kaipātiki Project offers a tangible and accessible route where non-Māori can engage with *Te Ao Māori* in ecological regeneration activities to

begins, and volunteers can be seen working in small groups to clear out patches of exotic species. In the background, a shredding machine can be heard starting up where the woody materials are processed to be returned to the site later as a mulch to suppress weed regrowth. The volunteers move slowly and talk quietly to each other, discussing which tree to cut down or which plant to pull up.

As the video progresses, we start to see more of the reserve and hear birds calling. Charmaine draws attention to its value as a feeding station for different bird groups on their way to other locations. She also highlights the value in taking time to be self-reflective, explaining that working like this supports exercise and rejuvenation but also provides some downtime to attend to one's own emotional and spiritual needs, inviting those who wish to take time for *karakia*[27] or prayer. This pause for reflection coincides with the point in the video where we finally meet the entity at the centre of the restoration work: Awataha Stream (Fig 1). As we view the reserve from its perspective now, through the reflections in the water, we can see that the volunteers' labor is helping to regenerate it and, in their journey to restore nature, they in turn are being (re)connected to the stream.

develop a sense of connectedness to the natural world.

In the video, Charmaine Bailie presents an informed and painstaking method of habitat restoration, encompassing holistic and mindful practices, to guard against creating more ecological damage in the effort to restore environmental balance. Charmaine shares her concept of “mindfulness and ballerina shoes” to promote methods that employ reflective consciousness and presence-based action. This approach helps volunteers to consider the impact of their

presence in the place and connect mindful action with care for the environment. With the support from mana whenua, the Kaipātiki Project has woven traditional Māori concepts and principles into science-based ecological practices “acknowledge[ing] indigenous indicators and understandings alongside western ecology and science.”^[28] By introducing non-Indigenous community members to experience

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ecological restoration from a Māori perspective, they raise awareness of an alternative world view. Additionally, by using guided Māori principles to link collaborative, situated knowledge with beneficial ecological practices and customs, their approach also develops routes for non-Indigenous communities to begin to value and uphold ecology as kin.

guidance and contribution of images; and the Isthmus Group for their image and data contributions. We also thank the anonymous reviewers and editor for their helpful comments in the development of this article.

Footnotes

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[9] Ibid., McElwee et al. (2020).

[10] Aotearoa is the *reo Māori* (Māori language) name for New Zealand, meaning “long white cloud,” said to be named by Kupe, the East Polynesian explorer whose crew were the first to visit the islands. While the Dutch maritime explorer and merchant, Abel Tasman (1603–1659) named the islands as New Zealand, which was an invention drawn from the Dutch name, Zeeland—a coastal region of Holland. The use of the combined name Aotearoa New Zealand is not officially sanctioned but is currently the subject of partisan debate calling for a referendum. See, M. Godfery, “‘A Neat Trick’: Critics aim to shift Aotearoa debate, but historical fidelity no longer matters,” *The Guardian*, August 28, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/29/a-neat-trick-critics-aim-to-shift-aotearoa-debate-but-historical-fidelity-no-longer-matters>.

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[13] “The Enlightenment mindset focused on the power of human intelligence to grasp and explain the natural world and discover natural causes of phenomena previously considered supernatural. Enlightenment science and technology scrutinised and harnessed the power of all aspects of the natural world. Nature was regarded as an object of investigation rather than a force in its own right.” OpenLearn, s.v. “The Enlightenment and Nature,” accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history-art/the-enlightenment/content-section-7>.

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[23] Isthmus is an integrated design studio that seeks to deepen “relationships between land, people and culture,” <https://isthmus.co.nz>.

[24] Kāinga Ora—Homes and Communities – is a new Crown agency with key roles as public housing landlord, and to enable, facilitate, and deliver housing and urban development projects. “Kāinga Ora—Housing Communities,” Te Tūāpapa Kāinga—Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, accessed January 21, 2022, <https://www.hud.govt.nz/urban-development/kainga-ora-homes-and-communities/>.

[25] Ecologist Brett Stanfield speaking in Panuku Development Auckland’s video, *Te Ara Awataha Project 2021*, May 20, 2021, YouTube video, 1:36-4:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YG-bi-cuBdPI&t=178s>.

[26] Presence-based action is the “practice of presence in goal-related activity by increasing present-moment attention and awareness. It consists of a 4-step process—stop, observe, align, allow—to developing new approaches to work, increasing focus and calm, promoting wholeness, and supporting the clarification of values and priorities.” E. M. Topp, “Presence-based Coaching: The Practice of Presence in Relation to Goal-directed Activity,” (Ph.D. dissertation in Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, California, 2006).

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