

TE MANA O TE WAI

Relating to and through the charisma
of water

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Ngā mihi mai māua maunga tapu ki to koutou maunga tapu, ngā mihi mai māua puna tapu ki to koutou puna tapu, ngā mihi mai māua moana ki to koutou moana; ma te whakaranu o tātou wai e hononga ana.

Our mountains greet your mountains, our sacred springs greet your sacred springs, our oceans meet your oceans; by the mingling of our waters, we are connected.

Introduction

In Aotearoa New Zealand² [hereafter Aotearoa], novel governance experiments are transforming public, government, and scientific understandings of water. Initiatives driven by Māori have created spaces for thinking about water differently, bringing lore to bear on law, building upon relational understandings of waters as entities that are more ancient and powerful than people. Te Mana o te Wai—The Charisma of Water is a national korowai (cloak) that frames and informs immediate and future policy development and regional freshwater planning trajectory. It has been part of the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management since 2014. It is a concept that encompasses the integrated and holistic health and wellbeing of waters as a continuum from the mountains to the sea, encoding values and ideals—lore. Fundamentally, it is about a hierarchy of obligations. Te Mana o te Wai ensures that the first right to water *goes* to the water. This chapter will consider this and other novel experiments taking place in Aotearoa through the lens of Māori ontologies and their influence over how we view the Life and Death of rivers.

The translation of Te Mana o te Wai we have used herein—The Charisma of Water—requires a brief explanation. Mana is not easily translated, with some of its various uses aligning with prestige, authority, power, influence, mandate, and of course, charisma. Mana is a source of both personal and collective strength, pride

and identity. The basic Māori word for water is *wai*, but without a suffix it does not have context. Although there are many more, here are a few common Māori words for different states of water:

Waiora—health-bringing water.

Waima—pure water, often used in rituals, including purification and for healing.
Waimāori—suitable for everyday use (*māori* means normal, ordinary).

Waitapu—the word taboo derives from the Polynesian *tapu*, although the contemporary meaning of taboo is not quite aligned with *tapu*. The simplest translation we know for *tapu* is ‘requiring consideration.’ *Tapu* can mean prohibited, and it can mean sacred. *Waitapu* refers to sacred water requiring a level of higher consideration, which is therefore prohibited for profane use.

Waipure—water that is used in ritual.

When we think about where our waters come from, another understanding arises. *Waimāori* can be *waiora* of *Tane*, the deity of the forests, meaning water of life from the forests. *Waitai* is the water of life of *Tangaroa*, the deity of the oceans, meaning water of life from the marine realm. *Waimataitai* is estuarine and lagoonal waters. Hence to truly realise the potential of *Te Mana o te Wai*, we need to draw from the diverse understandings of mana and *wai*. *Te Mana o te Wai* encodes aspects of Māori lore so that they may be considered and applied.

As Māori perspectives conceptualise humans as part of living systems within innate relationships between people and rivers, land, forests, and seas, they offer the prospect to reframe natural resource ownership, governance, and management. What becomes possible if we value rivers as holistic, historical, and cultural entities with lives and rights of their own? What can we learn from viewing water and rivers as the lifeblood of society and the land? Within those relational ways of knowing and being, rivers can simultaneously be an ancient kin, a revered elder, and a living entity.

As authors, we bring complementary ancestral connections and disciplinary backgrounds to these considerations. A Māori earth systems scientist and a Pākehā (non-Māori New Zealander) interdisciplinary scholar, we share a commitment to the *ora* or holistic wellbeing of Aotearoa New Zealand and how this can be informed and enhanced by mātauranga Māori—the knowledge systems, values, and worldview of tangata whenua, the Indigenous people of Aotearoa.

This chapter emerges from its authors’ individual but connected paper presentations at the *H₂O: Life & Death* international conference hosted in 2017 by the JM Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice at the University of Adelaide.³ These were developed through further presentations, sometimes together and sometimes apart, and into a co-authored paper for a special issue of *Environmental Ethics*, Volume 42, Issue 4 (2021): “Settler Colonialism and Environmental Ethics.” We begin our writing together as we would begin if we were speaking to you in person, with introductions that locate us within our relational framings in Aotearoa—including with water.⁴

Our introductions

Ko Waitomo me Waikato ngā awa
Ko Owhawhe me Taupiri ngā maunga
Ko Tokikapu te marae
Ko Ngāti Uekaha te hapū
Ko Ngāti Maniapoto te iwi
Ko Tainui me Te Arawa ngā waka
Ko au he uri o Hoturoa me
Tamatekapua
Ko Dan Hikuroa toku ingoa

Waitomo and Waikato are the rivers
Owhawhe and Taupiri are the mountains

Tokikapu is the marae

Ngāti Uekaha are the people
Ngāti Maniapoto are the nation
Tainui and Te Arawa are the canoes
I am the descendant of Hoturoa and Tamatekapua
My name is Dan Hikuroa

BL: I was born in Auckland, near a drinking spring named *Takapuna* after the people of the *Tainui* waka quenched their thirst there. I was named for my Scottish great-aunt, Billie Burns. I am a first-generation New Zealander on my mother's side, with longer connections to Aotearoa on my father's. As a Pākehā in Aotearoa, the waters I spring from include the wetland marshes of Yorkshire, the River Wear in Durham, the burns of the Scottish Highlands, and the Baltic Sea that linked my Swedish family, living on the island of Gotland, to the port of Stockholm. Many of my family names are topographic. Burns originated as a name for a person who lived by a burn or stream, while my Swedish surname describes the bringing of light to a mountain or stronghold, possibly a beacon or early lighthouse.

I was raised in the old quarry master's house on the highest remaining point of Takararo maunga in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland). Large scoria blocks formed the boundaries of garden beds flanking the steps to the house's front door. The mining of this mountain for roading materials compromised a freshwater spring that had previously brought water to the place in such abundance that it also became the site of a commercial laundry. By the time my family lived there, the spring was buried alive, and the maunga quarried away.

My name is Billie Lythberg

DH: In a Māori worldview, we exist in a whakapapa kinship-based relationship with *Te Taiao*: the Earth, Universe, and everything in it. Within this framing, waterways can be ancestors. The *pepeha* (statement of belonging) I shared earlier does more than identify me; it details my existence and wellbeing as inextricably interlocked with the existence and wellbeing of *Te Taiao*—the

environment. Waitomo and Waikato are the rivers—I am the rivers, and the rivers are me; Owhawhe and Taupiri are the mountains—I am the mountains, and the mountains are me; and so on.

Notably, although I have agency, as an individual I am the least important of all the entities I listed. Waitomo, Waikato, Owhawhe, Taupiri, Tokikapu, Ngāti Uekaha, Ngāti Maniapoto, Tainui waka, Te Arawa waka, Hoturoa, and Tamatekapua are all more important than I. There is a whakataukī, or proverb, “Toitu te whenua, whatungarongaro he tangata”—literally, the land endures, and people are fleeting. It means that I only exist because all of these other things existed before me, and they will exist beyond me. The iwi and hapū will endure, Owhawhe and Taupiri will endure, Waitomo and Waikato will endure.

Pepeha and whakapapa

Pepeha statements of belonging establish Māori whakapapa connections to and with rivers, mountains, carved houses, ancestors, and other entities. Pepeha are both personal and genealogically shared; they can be mobilised to permit and deny genealogical connections between people and thus to think through and navigate difference and sameness. Pepeha are small fragments of the whakapapa of an individual, part of the generative network of whakapapa of all that has existed.

In Aotearoa, it was, and still is, considered to be bad manners when meeting someone for the first time to ask them **who** they are directly, or indeed even their name. In the relational schema, the usual question is: Nō hea koe—**where** are you from? Another approach is to ask Nō wai koe—from **which** waters are you? Perhaps the question that sits closest to the whakapapa framing is—Nā wai koe?—from **whose** waters are you?

This approach relates to the philosophy behind the pepeha offered by Hikuroa in the introduction—identity stems from belonging. Furthermore, it is also practical. The chances of someone knowing about your river, lake, or ocean, or where you are from, are much greater than their knowing you as an individual. It is also in keeping with humility, a trait much revered in Māoridom. In contrast, by asking someone their name, you assume that you might know them, and furthermore, you see them as an individual first—you are not being respectful to their ancestors, rivers, and mountains, of which they are the ‘living face.’

In 1975, Robert Te Kotahi Mahuta, Waikato-Tainui iwi (tribe) leader, offered this view of what it means to take the responsibility of being the living face of ancestors, including rivers, seriously.

Noo taatou te awa. Noo te awa taatou
E kore e taea te wehe te iwi o Waikato me te awa.
He taonga tuku iho naa ngaa tuupuna,
e whakapono ana maatou ko taa maatou,
he tiaki i taua taonga moo ngaa uri whakatupu.

Robert Te Kotahi Mahuta

We are the river. The river is us.

The people of Waikato and the river are inseparable.

A treasured gift handed down by our ancestors, we believe it's our job to protect that heritage for future generations.

[Translation by Dan Hikuroa]

This statement appears in the Preamble to the Waikato-Tainui Raupatu Claims (Waikato River) Settlement Act 2010, describing the relationship of Waikato-Tainui with the Waikato River. It exemplifies the connection Māori have with water, springs, streams, wetlands, rivers, and lakes—that they are connected as kin; that they are inseparable; that as ancestral gifts, they are to be treasured; that people have a responsibility to protect them for future generations. In a parliamentary speech given in June 2016, Māori MP Metiria Turei explained,

I am the river and the river is me, speaks of the awa, the river, as an indivisible and living whole from the mountains to the sea, its tributaries and all its physical and spiritual elements. It speaks of the indivisible connection that we have as people, all people, to the life that comes from water.

Approaching kinship as philosophy, empirical analysis, and political action—as practical ontology—allows us to explore how rivers, mountains, the ocean, and other more-than-human actors play increasingly prominent roles in intellectual and political projects and environmental negotiations. Everything seen and unseen can be found in the whakapapa, and everything is interconnected, as it has a whakapapa.

Kinship connection with water has been significantly disrupted, if not extinguished altogether, by ongoing processes of colonisation. These were first formalised in Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Māori language version, the version Māori leaders debated and signed) and the Treaty of Waitangi (English-language translation). Drafted and signed at Waitangi (which incidentally translates as “weeping waters”) in 1840, Te Tiriti o Waitangi is considered the founding constitutional document of New Zealand. Although there are some critical differences between the two versions, especially in the terminology of the first and second of its three articles, the meaning of the following aspect of article two is more or less the same in both languages, guaranteeing Māori:

te tino rangatiratanga o o ratou wenua o ratou kainga me o ratou taonga katoa.

unqualified exercise of their chieftainship over their lands, villages and all their treasures.

However, Te Tiriti was not honoured almost from the outset, and that guarantee was not upheld. From being revered as ancestral, as treasured kin to which we hold reciprocal responsibilities as taonga, streams, and rivers have suffered heavily from the effects of colonisation. As the European settlement of Aotearoa increased after

the signing of Te Tiriti, the Crown took control over navigable bodies of water, lakes, and rivers alike to manage drainage, supply water to towns, and control areas prone to flooding (Salmond 306). Though the Crown continues to take the position that water cannot be owned (in part to counter Māori claims to freshwater), water is now treated as a commodity; and many water bodies have become drains and sewers, buried alive in service of the separation and maintenance of ‘three waters’—drinking, waste, and storm water. Before acknowledging the changes underway to address this, it is instructive to consider the first water lore and law of Aotearoa.

Water lore and law in Aotearoa

“He ao! He ao! He aotea! He aotearoa”
“A cloud, a cloud, a white cloud, a long white cloud”

These are the words Kuramārōtini (also known as Hine-te-aparangi⁵) cried out when those aboard the Matawhaorua/Matahorua, the double-hulled waka-hourua, ocean-going canoe captained by her hoa rangatira (husband) Kupe, first saw the lands we now call Aotearoa New Zealand while chasing the octopus Muturangi from the ancestral homeland of Hawaiki. The first laws of Aotearoa arrived with Kuramorotini and Kupe, and other early explorers; law and lore brought from their tropical homelands in Te Moananui a Kiwa—the great sea of the explorer Kiwa—known now as the Pacific Ocean.

The Waitangi Tribunal, established to consider breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi and make recommendations to the New Zealand Government, described the system of custom that Kupe brought with him in these terms:

Its defining principle, and its lifeblood, was kinship—the value through which the Hawaikians expressed relationships with the elements of the physical world, the spiritual world, and each other. The sea was not an impersonal thing, but an ancestor deity. The dots of land on which the people lived were a manifestation of the constant tension between the deities, or, to some, deities in their own right. Kinship was the revolving door between the human, physical, and spiritual realms. This culture had its own creation theories, its own science and technology, its own bodies of sacred and profane knowledge. These people had their own ways of producing and distributing wealth, and of maintaining social order. They emphasised individual responsibility to the collective at the expense of individual rights, yet they greatly valued individual reputation and standing. They enabled human exploitation of the environment, but through the kinship value (known in te ao Māori as whanaungatanga) they also emphasised human responsibility to nurture and care for it (known in te ao Māori as kaitiakitanga).

(5)

The Honourable Justice Joseph Williams, the first Māori appointment to the Supreme Court of New Zealand, further explains this ‘first law’ of Aotearoa in reference to the previous quote:

Of course, in the beginning things were a little more complicated than that. A score of ocean-going waka followed Kupe from both his island and different islands and villages throughout eastern Polynesia. So the detailed systems of tikanga they brought with them varied between waka. And those variations remained with the descendants. As [anthropologist Te Rangihīroa/Sir Peter Buck] Buck said many years ago, iwi are, in heart and mind, a series of islands connected by land. But the underlying values of these old island cultures were, and remain, universal and simply stated. They melded, adapted and changed in important ways after arrival, in response to the very different environment of these temperate islands located at the hinge of the southern hemisphere’s weather systems. In that sense Māori culture and Māori law is, in its distinctive aspects, entirely a product of the interaction between those old Hawaikians and this place.

(2)

Other oral histories locate first acts and laws (understood as ways of acting in the service of wellbeing) in the whakapapa of water itself. At first, Ranginui the sky father and Papatūānuku the earth mother were one being, locked together, and as their children were born, they lay cramped between them, living in darkness. Frustrated and constricted, they decided to separate their parents, and one after another, they tried until, at last, Tāne, the ancestor of forests, lay on his back and pushed them apart. As Rangi wept for his wife, Papatūānuku sent up mists to greet him, and Rangi’s tears became rivers and lakes, bringing life to the land.

In this cosmological account, water is a source of ora (wellbeing and abundance). The water cycle is placed at the heart of the relationship between sky father and earth mother, who eternally exchange mist and rain, giving life to their children and mokopuna.

As it is said:

He wai tapu, he wai tipua, he wai atua, he taonga tuku iho. These are the sacred waters of our ancestors and atua, our spiritual wellbeing, we must look after these treasures—the health of our waters—through time, forever.

This whakatauki, or proverbial saying, shows that water is sacred, supernatural, and ancestral, a taonga or treasure handed down from the ancestors.

Taonga, water, and law

Taonga is a Māori concept often translated as a treasure or something treasured. While this translation is not incorrect, it does not fully encompass the word’s

meaning, missing the relational component. Taonga emerge within specific relational perspectives, which they also help to constitute. Taonga may be tangible or intangible, material or spiritual, something held in hand or vast as the ocean. A generative understanding of the concept connotes action—‘to be treasured’—or invites recourse to relationality—‘what do you treasure?’

For Māori, beyond the reciprocal relationship between people and the environment, the health and wellbeing of people depend on the health and wellbeing of taonga, for which they have a responsibility of protection. Relating to and viewing ‘water as taonga’ brings together the ancestral whakapapa of water and reflects the importance of water in daily life as the source of ‘ora’ or wellbeing.

Although acknowledging ‘water as taonga’ is an aspect of Te Mana o te Wai, this way of thinking is not new, and adopting a ‘water as taonga’ approach is not unique to Te Mana o te Wai. In the following are some examples where ‘water as taonga’ already exists in law.

- 1 Te Tiriti o Waitangi guaranteed in the Māori text “te tino rangatiratanga o ratou wenua o ratou kainga me o ratou taonga katoa,” as previously introduced. As many Waitangi Tribunal Claims have shown, taonga include water.
- 2 The WAI 8 Manukau Report (the eighth claim heard by the Waitangi Tribunal) determined that taonga means “more than objects of tangible value.” A river may be a taonga as a valuable resource. Its ‘mauri,’ or ‘life-force,’ is another taonga.
- 3 In the Resource Management Act 1991, there is a reference to “the relationship of Māori and their culture and traditions with their ancestral lands, water, sites, waahi tapu, and other taonga”; thus, water is considered taonga.
- 4 In the Waikato River Act 2010, the relationship of Waikato-Tainui with the Waikato River is expressed in the quote by Robert Te Kotahi Mahuta cited and translated earlier in this chapter:

Noo taatou te awa. Noo te awa taatou. E kore e taea te wehe te iwi o Waikato me te awa. He taonga tuku iho naa ngaa tuupuna. E whakapono ana maatou ko taa maatou, he tiaki i taua taonga moo ngaa uri whakatupu.

- 5 In Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017, the Crown acknowledges that the relationship of Whanganui Iwi and Te Awa Tupua (the Whanganui River) is a taonga of Whanganui Iwi. This bridges from the physical entity, water as a taonga, to also conceptualise the relationship between people and water as a taonga.
- 6 Te Mana o te Wai states “the significance of water as a taonga for the nation.” Te Mana o te Wai encodes a hierarchy of obligations, beginning with the first right to the water *going* to the water:
 - i the first obligation is to protect the health and mauri of the water;
 - ii the second obligation is to provide for essential human health needs, such as drinking water;

- iii the third obligation is to enable other consumptive use, provided that such use does not adversely impact the mauri of freshwater.

In some of these legal frameworks, the language of the law so closely replicates lore it is almost poetic. With a bit of adjustment on the page, for example, Te Awa Tupua describes:

*an indivisible and living
whole
[comprising]
the Whanganui River from the mountains
to the sea
incorporating
all
its physical
and
metaphysical
elements*

When law reads as lore, becoming liquid on the page, might it better convey the charisma of water?

We must not be seduced by such poetic legislation into believing we are in utopia, however. With safe drinking water not guaranteed, rivers being poisoned or choked with sediment, no longer safe for fishing and swimming, New Zealanders are seriously concerned about declining river health and drinking water safety. And those are not even the rivers and streams subjected to the abject humiliation of being buried alive in pipes, nor those that only flow sporadically, if at all, their waters over-allocated for irrigation or other purposes. Hundreds of kilometres of streams have been buried alive, and waterways in Aotearoa are in a perilous state. Data show an overwhelming trend of degraded water quality, lost wetlands, exhausted or polluted aquifers, and catchment land modification. Burying streams and rivers alive remains civil engineering best practice. The anthropocentrically framed ‘bottom line’ and ‘humans first’ regulatory approach to freshwater led to this situation.

The laws and governance systems allowing this justify their acts based upon Judeo-Christian ideals of dominion over all things, a Cartesian dualism of a nature and culture split, and entrench the illusion of separation and independence. Thomas Berry, in a foreword to Cormac Cullinan’s brilliant book *Wild Law*, explains:

This mechanistic view of the world as controlled by humans, for human advantage, sees the world as a vast assembly of natural resources put there for human use. With the vast extent of our knowledge and the power of our technologies came an arrogant assurance that we could manage any difficulty associated with our actions.

It is hard to believe that our species has been able and willing to wreak such wanton destruction and havoc in just a few centuries. Worse still, many people are now bored or dulled by the increasingly frequent news of environmental destruction, climate change and its impacts, and impending ecological disasters. The details of the harm we are doing to Earth are complex. Moreover, some facts are controversial or just being ignored. However, it is evident that we are behaving in a manner that is destroying the world, water included.

When decision-makers argue about ‘ppm’⁶ this and ‘dissolved oxygen trend’ that, they miss the point entirely. No matter which techno-scientific terms and rationalisations are being used to make decisions, rivers are dying or being buried alive, and water security and safety are being compromised. A reliance on legislation such as the Resource Management Act 1991 has failed to protect water and waterways. An assertion that the ‘market’ would drive positive change was at best misguided, and faith that technology would provide solutions has yet to deliver. The laws, drivers, and rationales of decision-makers have been based upon flawed understandings, whereby humans are independent of nature. We are not. To expand upon the relationship already described in this chapter:

Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au
Kei te mate te awa, kei te mate ahuau

*I am the river, the river is me
If the river is dying, so am I*
Whanganui elder

The critical importance of water to the health and wellbeing of people, combined with the recognition that Māori mātauranga (knowledge), culture, worldview, values, epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies have a valuable contribution to make, led to the creation of Te Mana o te Wai.

Te Mana o te Wai is an aspect of the National Policy on Freshwater Management that encodes lore towards the integrated and holistic wellbeing of freshwater and comprises a set of hierarchies. The health and wellbeing of water *as water* come first; the health needs of people (such as drinking water) are second; and the third priority is the ability of people and communities to provide for their social, economic, and cultural wellbeing.

By recognising Te Mana o te Wai as an integral part of the freshwater management framework, it is intended that the health and wellbeing of freshwater bodies are at the forefront of all discussions and decisions about freshwater. These include the identification of freshwater values and objectives, the setting of limits, and the development of policies and rules. Consideration of and for Te Mana o te Wai is intended to ensure that water is available for the use and enjoyment of all New Zealanders, including tangata whenua, now and for future generations.

How might the application of Te Mana o te Wai look?

In practice, Te Mana o te Wai requires regional councils to develop a long-term vision for the wellbeing of the ‘charisma of water’ through discussion with

communities and tangata whenua (local Māori). It is among a small but increasing group of initiatives in Aotearoa, including the Urewera Act (2014) and the Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River) Act (2017), in which legal relationships between people, land, and waterways are radically reframed in Aotearoa. Rather than ‘ownership’ and property rights, such world-leading legislation has expressed relationships in terms of whakapapa—ancestral ties between people, land, and waterways. Rivers and land alike are recognised as older and more powerful than people, and relationships with these places as existential interlocks in which the ora (health, prosperity, wellbeing) of land, waterways, plants, animals, and people are mutually implicated.

These legal innovations have attracted much global attention, with international and local scholars recognising their promise for new ways of understanding and tackling complex socio-ecological challenges (see Clark et al.; O’Donnell and Talbot-Jones; Pingram et al.). Furthermore, in Aotearoa, the search for ora (wellbeing) is influencing other areas of life, for instance, healthcare (Whai Ora), social welfare (Whānau Ora), economic activity (the country’s Wellbeing Budget), and industries such as tourism (the “Tiaki Promise”—taking care of people and land (Insch)).

In all of these experiments and legal innovations across epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies, spaces open up for research and dialogue across disciplines and knowledge traditions, exploring complex exchanges between land, the ocean, the atmosphere, waterways, plants, animals, and people. Such relational, outcome-focused experiments have the potential to transcend modernist divisions between theory and practice, people and the environment, culture and nature, and to revitalise overlooked genealogies that link different knowledge systems, as well as the arts, humanities, technology, and natural and social sciences.

One such project, in service of the aims of Te Mana o te Wai, was “Te Awaroa: Restoring Rivers across Aotearoa New Zealand,”⁷ led by Hikuroa and Dame Anne Salmond. It engaged with international and local colleagues, students, and local communities to explore new ways of thinking about waterways as living systems (Salmond et al.). The process brought together insights from mātauranga (Māori ancestral knowledge) with ecology, geology, river science, geomorphology, Māori and settler histories, and legal research, helping to inspire collaborative initiatives in river restoration.

The authors of this chapter have embarked upon a new project that builds on this promising beginning with a deeper, more ambitious inquiry into the life and future of a particular waterway, the Waimatā River in Gisborne.⁸ This river is historically significant as a major voyaging site, a landing place for the *Tākitimu* and *Horouta* waka (canoes), and the *Endeavour*, which landed the first Europeans ashore in Aotearoa; and as an inland highway from Tūranganui (Gisborne) to Te Tairāwhiti (East Coast).

From its headwaters in steep hillside forests and farms, the Waimatā runs through lifestyle blocks, horticultural properties, and suburbs into the centre of Gisborne city, the port, and the harbour. The river’s lower reaches are heavily used by waka ama (outrigger canoe) paddlers, kayakers, rowers, fishers, and swimmers, but are

choked with sediment and polluted by sewage. In its history and current state, the Waimatā River exemplifies many of the challenges waterways face across Aotearoa and around the world.

With Te Mana o te Wai as a guide, we are working with Gisborne Regional Council towards the wellbeing of the Waimatā through discussion with communities and tangata whenua (local Māori). We are bringing together iwi researchers and mātauranga experts, scholars, and students from an array of disciplines (including earth system science, geomorphology, microbiology and infectious diseases, forest ecology, anthropology, creative practice, and business studies) to investigate the life of the Waimatā River community, weaving together insights across multiple dimensions.

An emerging approach to the conduct and generation of a “river ethnography” will explore broader philosophical and practical questions about waterways through an in-depth examination of the life of a particular river community, past and present, with its landscapes, plants, animals, viruses, bacteria, and people. We will also create a ‘digital river,’ using new technologies to reveal and test the dynamics of the river through time, scoping new forms of representation to communicate prospects for more integrative and inclusive approaches to river management and restoration.

Given the gravity and urgency of current environmental challenges, we need ambitious ‘blue skies’ approaches such as Te Mana o te Wai that explore new ways of thinking and acting to bring the hope of positive socio-ecological change. In Aotearoa, new legislation is bringing urgency to restoring waterways. Yet, old habits of mind continue to split people from the environment and the disciplines from each other, fostering extractive, fragmented approaches in both knowledge generation and its application. The application of Te Mana o te Wai demands that insights from mātauranga are brought together with a wide range of disciplines to produce innovative and engaged understandings of ki uta ki tai—the operation of rivers and their ecosystems from the mountains to the sea.

Conclusion

In Te Ao Māori, rivers are relational knots/nodes/strands in a meshwork of whakapapa that arises from exchanges between earth and sky, land and sea. In seeking to understand and prioritise the life of water, this chapter has described its emergence in whakapapa to the arrival of the first people from island Polynesia with their first water lore and law, and later arrivals and influences from Europe and elsewhere. This understanding, grounded in the generative concepts of whakapapa systems, taonga, and te mana o te wai—the charisma of water, acknowledges the relations between the atmosphere, surface water and groundwater, vegetation cover, land use, water quality and quantity, the sea, plants, animals, micro-organisms, and people. By putting water first, Te Mana o te Wai is underpinning new ways of working with rivers in a revitalising ethos, interweaving different perspectives and lines of

evidence in ways that might allow a river system to ‘speak for itself,’ maximising possibilities for rivers to self-heal.

Such thinking is radically local, linking particular groups of people with particular mountains, rivers, and the ocean. It is fundamentally holistic, working across different knowledge systems to understand the full complexity of water in relationship with and to people (and other communities and taonga) over time. At the same time, it is hopeful, providing a relational framework for actions that support the wellbeing of water, people, and other life forms. It is also timely. In a world where many are calling for a fundamental reframing of human relations with other life forms and living systems, Aotearoa, with its diverse landscapes, unique indigenous biota, and rich if recent human history provides an exceptional opportunity for philosophical and practical socio-ecological experiments. Inspired by Māori ways of thinking, Te Mana o te Wai is one of the experiments transforming public, government, and scientific understandings of water.

Notes

- 1 Dan and Billie’s current projects include *Let the River Speak*, funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden Fund, through which this co-authored paper took shape.
- 2 Aotearoa is a Māori name for New Zealand’s North Island and in contemporary use as a name for the entire country.
- 3 Our fellow presenters included the late Dr Mānuka Hēnare, a generous, encouraging, and formidable Māori scholar to whom we dedicate this chapter.
- 4 The personal introductions that follow also begin our paper in *Environmental Ethics: “How Can We Know Wai-Horotiu—A Buried River? Cross-cultural Ethics and Civic Art”* (2021). We are grateful to also share them here, along with other foundational paragraphs and ideas first published in this paper.
- 5 One of the great aspects of indigenous knowledge is the acceptance of many versions of the truth.
- 6 This is an abbreviation for “**parts per million**,” and it also can be expressed as milligrams per litre (mg/L). This measurement is the mass of a chemical or contaminant per unit volume of water.
- 7 The Te Awaroa trial project was supported by the Tindall Foundation, the NEXT Foundation, seed funding from the University of Auckland Strategic Research Innovation Fund and Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga.
- 8 “Let the River Speak” is funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden Fund. The core team led by Hikuroa and Dame Anne Salmond includes Lythberg, Dr Gary Brierley, Dr Siouxsie Wiles, and Walton Walker.

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