

Celebrating our cultural richness

The area of Matatā has a rich history. Through kaitiakitanga practises, the iwi of Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Rangitahi, and Tūwharetoa ki Kawerau have had a long-standing connection with the Tarawera Awa, their ancestral lands, wāhi tapu (sacred areas), and locations of cultural and spiritual importance.

According to Ngāti Awa traditional histories, Tarawera's tears formed the Tarawera River. When Putauaki left Tarawera for the island of Whakaari, she longed for him. Ancestors of Ngāti Awa such as Te Tini o Toi, Te Tini o Awa, and Te Tini o Kawerau once lived on the banks of the Tarawera River before the advent of the waka Mataatua.

The river's resources were used by hapū like Ngai Te Rangihouhiri II, Ngāti Hikakino and Te Tawera in more recent times, but this was well before the advent of European settlers. The Tarawera Awa is the Waikamihī's parent river because the Te Tawera (as well as Ngai Te Rangihouhiri II and Ngāti Hikakino) have a spiritual connection with the river through Te Waikamihī. Te Tawera, Ngāti Hikakino and Ngai Te Rangihouhiri II used to catch fish, eels, and white bait at the intersection of Te Waikamihī and Tarawera (Hughes, 2013).

For Ngāti Rangitahi, they have been residing at Te Awa o Te Atua, Matatā, as mana whenua for centuries. A series of intertwined whakapapa that represent continuous occupation at Te Awa o Te Atua from Ngatoroirangi to the present day can be used to illustrate Ngāti Rangitahi's occupation of the land previous to this period. Due to the Tarawera River's cleanliness and purity, Ngatoroirangi gave it the moniker Te Awa o Te Atua, or the river of the Gods, when the Te Arawa waka arrived there. He offered special prayers before moving south. Following the Tarawera river upstream, he named landmarks and made claims to various pieces of land there.



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Other descendants of the high priest Ngatoroirangi, who arrived in Aotearoa on the Te Arawa canoe, are the iwi of Tūwharetoa ki Kawerau. Tūwharetoa-i-te-aupouri is the direct descendant of Ngatoroirangi. In the sixteenth century, he and his people resided in the Kawerau region where they intermarried with the local iwi, Te Tini-a-Kawerau. His mother belonged to the latter and had ties to Ngāti Awa. From Otamarākau, the location of Tūwharetoa's birth, his people migrated north to Kawerau and along the coast to Matatā. Over time, he gathered his supporters in Waitahanui, not far from modern-day Kawerau. Tūwharetoa passed away and was interred there. Later, his remains were moved to Te Anakari hou o Tūwharetoa, a new name for the old Te Atua Reretahi burial cave close to Maungawhakangama.

Undoubtedly, these iwi have protected, preserved and conserved wāhi tapu, cultural sites of significance and the natural resources of the whenua (land) and wai (water). Their long-standing uninterrupted link with both the whenua and wai have been there for centuries. Central to the kaitiaki role held by the iwi has been the protection of the mauri (life force) of the people and the environment through kaitiakitanga. It has allowed the iwi to develop reciprocity and responsibility with the whenua through protecting culturally significant food gathering sites. It has enabled food to be available as the whenua and wai are the 'kai cupboard' for iwi. This in turn has helped the physical and spiritual well-being of the iwi to be maintained. If the mauri of the iwi was degraded through the contamination of the food and water sources, it led to the inability of iwi to manaaki (provide and care for) manuhiri (visitors). It would also create whakamā (collective embarrassment) amongst iwi that could be long lasting.

Therefore, today, any temporary or permanent changes to the land and water in Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Rangitihi, and Tūwharetoa ki Kawerau land and waterways needs to involve mandated iwi members to advise how to make changes without the environmental degradation and declination in land and water quality.

References

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