

## **ENVIRONMENTAL GUARDIANSHIP IN A CHANGING WORLD: CASE STUDIES FROM THE BAY OF PLENTY REGION, NEW ZEALAND**

**By Adam Kotin**

AFTER A TIME, the great mountain Putauaki had grown weary of his wife. Tarawera, who lay beside him day by day, had become increasingly irritable over the years, and her temper flared and raged with a regularity that soon became unnerving. The couple's many years of happiness now seemed a forgotten tale on the horizon of time.

Seeking an escape from this abuse, Putauaki fell into the habit of looking off into the distance at the many other mountains he could see across the landscape. One sight in particular caught his eye more than the others—the fair young maiden Whakaari. From her post far out at sea, she would unleash brilliant clouds of white smoke into the air, which teasingly billowed up her slopes and out over the wide blue ocean.

Of course, all this beguiled Putauaki to no end. No doubt a life at sea would treat him well, and a life with Whakaari would be absolute bliss. But he preferred to avoid the shame of deserting his wife and son, and so stayed put—trapped between the numbing tempers of his wife and the enticing signals of that forbidden vixen in the distance.

Eventually it became too much to bear, and Putauaki resolved to answer his desires. One night, after Tarawera had subsided for the day and lay in a deep sleep beside him, he saw his chance. The great mountain lifted himself up and began to creep toward Whakaari, whose silhouetted form now stood regally amidst the dancing streaks of moonlight on the water. As he stole away in the night, his rocky body carved out the earth beneath him, creating a massive valley that sloped towards the sea.

Putauaki's son awakened and followed his father. Even when his embarrassed father directed him to return home, the youngster refused, and his company slowed Putauaki's escape a great deal. In fact, they travelled so slowly that when the sun rose the next morning, father and son had not yet reached the sea, and Putauaki stood—paralyzed by the dawn—as his wife arose to notice his absence.

Tarawera was distraught. She ranted and raved, stormed and screamed, before descending into a fit of tears. So great was her anguish that her tears formed a lake at her base. Soon, the lake brimmed over and her tears cut a mighty river down through the valley that her unfaithful husband had carved in his hasty escape.

Seeing this, Putauaki knew he could never return home to his betrayed wife. Nor could he continue on to Whakaari; in the light of day everyone would see, and great would be his shame. And so it came to be that Putauaki stayed where the rising sun had exposed his flight to the world, his child at his feet, and a torrent of his wife's tears continually rushing by him as an everlasting reminder of what he had done.<sup>1</sup>

IF YOU TRAVEL to the North Island of New Zealand and drive on State Highway 30 to State Highway 34 out of Rotorua, you can see all of the signs of Putauaki's guilt, carved definitively into the landscape. His mourning wife still stands strong, her majestic peak often shrouded in a veil of clouds.

---

<sup>1</sup> This story is just one variation on the legends surrounding Putauaki, Tarawera, and the creation of the Tarawera River, as told by the Maori people of New Zealand. This version is attributed to the Ngati Tuwharetoa iwi (tribe), whose ancestral home is in the region.

Her tears, pooled as Lake Tarawera at her base, constantly replenish the Tarawera River, whose meandering course still leads down past Putauaki himself—now known to some as Mt. Edgecumbe—and onto the massive Rangitaiki Plains. From here they mingle with the water that will eventually swirl at the base of Whakaari herself—also known as White Island—as she spews volumes of sulphurous smoke from her station fifty kilometres out at sea.

But this is not to say that things now are as they have always been. On the contrary—the landscape immortalised in the story of Putauaki is tremendously changeable, and the changes that have occurred here tell countless stories with invaluable morals. Some people know these stories; others work diligently to uncover and retell them. The rest do not know the tales of the place where they live, but nonetheless live with the consequences of these changes day by day.

You wouldn't know it to stand on them, but the Rangitaiki Plains are undergoing massive changes all the time. The Whakatane Graben, a lowered block of the earth's crust that contains the plains, is in the process of both expanding and falling. If you had set up a time-lapse camera to film the region at an arbitrary date in the past—say, six thousand years ago—and then sped the film and watched its recording through to the present day, these shifts in the morphology of the region would be made immediately apparent.

For the first five thousand nine hundred years' worth of film, you would see the hills around the graben slowly rise upwards as the plains grew outwards and sank lower into the earth. The coastline would extend further and further out into the sea, stretching a total of nine kilometres at some points. Several large eruptive events would, each in their turn, blanket the landscape with volcanic lava and debris, occasionally clouding the lens of the camera with thick smoke. Two major floods would cause the Tarawera River to undergo great changes during these eruptive periods, but for the most part, it would just leisurely drift in its course, deftly negotiating blockages and etching out new pathways to the ocean.

The last few seconds of film, signifying the last hundred years or so, would bring the thrilling conclusion. Whereas before, the river had slowly changed its channel over time, now it would snap into new paths at several points along its route. The vast swampland at the river's end would magically dry up in a flash, replaced by enormous green rectangles of farmland dotted with ruminating livestock. A new shade of green would invade the flatlands around Tarawera, as well—a massive new forest of foreign pine trees.

And then, at the very last moment, just before the credits rolled, a new type of smoke would fog the lens, coming in a steady stream from an industrial complex at the foot of Putauaki. The Tarawera River would vanish into the smoke and its waters would emerge sporting a brand new black colour.

But unless you popped into the nearest cinema and watched this film, you probably wouldn't even know about these changes to the Bay of Plenty environment. These final shifts, which provide such a jarring finale to the film, seem the natural state of things to those who have settled here in the past few decades. These newcomers read the landscape as everyone does—as “nature”, that powerful, peaceful behemoth whose habits we trust until they obstruct our desires.

Change is ever-present in this environment, spurred on by man and nature alike. In the Bay of Plenty region and around the world, drastic transformations of the landscape that occurred only in the recent past go unnoticed today by far too many people. The present has the power to erase the past, and important lessons learnt can be all too easily forgotten. By placing ourselves in perspective, as the time-

lapse film intends to do, perhaps we can clear the smoke from the lens and see things with the clarity of focus required to know our place as both takers from and givers to the earth.

But defining the ‘natural environment’ in the face of both human and natural impacts can be a difficult task. How do we assign value to something that is constantly changing? Is *more* human-induced change the best way to ‘fix’ changes made in the past? Who gets to determine the ‘right’ way to use the earth’s resources? And why do these people care so much?

What follows is the story of the Tarawera River and its environs as they are today. But more importantly, it is the story of the people who live by and care for the river and its domain, who depend upon it for their spiritual and physical nourishment. They are as much a part of the river as the water that shapes its banks. They are its *kaitiaki*—its guardians—through the many struggles that the modern world throws at this magnificent trail of tears. Keeping up with the steady march of change is no simple task, and for them the ‘right thing’ to do is never a clear or easy choice to make. Nevertheless, I hope that these stories will help to reveal what drives these guardians onwards, illuminating their successes and their failures alike. In so doing, I seek to uncover what is needed to create human behaviour reflecting a knowledge that whether we like it or not, we are all *kaitiaki* of this changing world, and must determine how to act accordingly.



A CURIOUS THING happens just a few kilometres downstream from the Lake Tarawera outlet. Most of the river goes underground. Up and vanishes beneath your feet. You can see where it goes just below the trail there: the ground simply opens up, and the water follows. What little remains of the bellowing torrent just metres upstream now wanders like a lost child through the native bush, half the noise and half the size.

It’s not the sort of thing you can fully envision, having been told in advance that the river ‘goes underground’. I certainly didn’t. But once you actually see the thing happen, it brings that understanding: ‘Oh, it just flows into a big hole! Makes perfect sense now.’ And you march on down the trail, accepting this feat of nature as the way things should be.

When that water finally emerges from its subterranean refuge, it surges out halfway up a sheer rock face and crashes down sixty-five metres below. Unlike your conventional waterfall, this one leaps *from* the cliff, not over it. A painted tile sign at the trail’s lookout spot explains how lava flows from eruptions of nearby volcanoes over 10,000 years ago created ‘tubes’ that carry the river water underground to the Tarawera Falls. The water that flows down and around the jagged rocks is some of the purest I have ever seen or tasted. Knowing what happens to the river downstream lends the lookout spot a kind of melancholia. These magnificent falls are the great river’s last hurrah.

Getting to the Lake Tarawera outlet requires driving through an interesting bit of terrain—the Kaingaroa Forest, formerly the Kaingaroa Plains. What was “a desert sparsely covered in tussock” eighty-five years ago is today a 260,000 acre timber forest—the largest plantation in the whole of the Southern Hemisphere<sup>2</sup>. The story goes that one William Adamson, a visitor from England, suggested in 1925 that the expansive pumiceous plains area would make one hell of a timber forest. Given the troubling economic conditions of the time (the country was sliding towards its Great Depression), the

---

<sup>2</sup> E. Schwimmer, ‘The Story of Kawerau’, *Te Ao Hou*, No. 10, April 1955.

idea was rapidly developed and planting of pine trees began in 1927. This was a major step in the creation of New Zealand's natural resource industries, and a crucial one in the establishment of the nation as a player in the world economy.

From the ground, though, the whole complex is even more startling. Rough gravel logging roads cut through row after row of identically-sized and trimmed trees, creating a perversely alien sense of 'nature'. These are trees—healthy, green trees—yet they feel terribly out of place here. Pine trees were never meant to grow in New Zealand. Species of Monterey pine, Douglas fir, and others were brought down from the Northern Hemisphere for use in the logging industry, quickly germinated outside their plantation confines, and can now be found hogging space and resources in even the thickest native bush. This external effect of the plantation will not be easily eradicated, and its modification of the natural environment is perceptible.

But through the exotic plantation forests the river flows, dropping along a steep grade until it reaches the township of Kawerau, with a population of around 7,000 people. This is where Tomairangi Fox lives. He has since he was a child. He's one of the few who remembers how things used to be in Kawerau.

Tomai is a member of the Ngati Tuwharetoa *iwi*. They have a long history in this region, ever since their ancestors arrived aboard the Te Arawa canoe from their homeland of Hawaiiiki. Today, around 36,000 individuals in New Zealand identify themselves as members of Ngati Tuwharetoa, though only a fraction of these live in the Kawerau area.

When Tomai speaks, there is no question that he means what he says. He has spent too much of his life defending himself to dance around his true intentions. Even in anger, the volume of his voice does not rise above a low rumble. It doesn't need to. His passion strikes you more than the fancy rhetoric of any politician's speech could.

Tomai stands as the heir to a long battle that has raged for many decades now, during which time his side has always been the underdog. Progress has been made, but not much. And yet Tomai carries on in his struggle, seemingly tireless against the challenges facing him from all around.

"Even my cousins have turned against us," he told me. Not that this has fazed him at all.

The battle Tomai fights is one of national, if not global, significance. It relates directly to the pine forest mentioned previously. Once the marathon tree-planting sessions of the late twenties and early thirties had ceased, and the whole plains area had become forest, there remained the task of processing all that wood. So they built a mill.

"This year the world will be watching with much interest the opening at Kawerau of New Zealand's greatest industrial enterprise," begins a 1955 article<sup>3</sup>. "In a small valley near the Tarawera river mouth some £15 million have been spent in building a giant pulp and paper mill, as well as the country's largest sawmill. Even greater has been the country's effort in growing the 260,000 acres of forest that supply the mill, building railroads, houses and a harbour, establishing a power and geothermal steam supply and other facilities."

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

Even The New York Times caught on to the story of the project. One article, which inadvertently highlights the insignificance of New Zealand in the American consciousness at the time, features a map of Australia's bulbous West Coast intruding on the frame, with a tiny New Zealand roughly sketched a little to the left. A giant arrow points to a little black dot on the North Island, denoting the location of the Kaingaroa Forest.<sup>4</sup>

A brief Associated Press blurb in June of 1954 featured the headline, "New Zealand to Make Tissues". It even mentioned Kawerau by name.<sup>5</sup>

With such an enormous industrial project in their sights, New Zealand's Ministers of Parliament were all abuzz, excited by the boost that housing the fourth largest plant in the world would provide for their country<sup>6</sup>. To ensure the investment's success, they created the Tasman Pulp and Paper Company Enabling Act in 1954. This piece of legislation essentially allowed Tasman, the company running the mill, to violate most national pollution measures and avoid prosecution. The industrializing attitude of a post-World War II New Zealand sanctioned the destruction that was to occur, valuing economic development and prosperity over the environmental values its existing pollution laws sought to enforce.

When considering the situation at Kawerau today, it is crucial to consider the mill's origins. This may help to avoid some of the finger-pointing, name-calling, and demonizing that characterizes much contemporary environmental debate, instead allowing for reasonable debate and progress. Knowing that the Tasman enterprise came about in a time of widespread government acquiescence to industrial needs, for example, helps frame any debate surrounding the 'morality' of those characters responsible for the damages dealt in the process. The fact was, the awareness and sometimes the knowledge required to be a 'good environmental citizen' were not solidly in place at the time among government and business types, and the global environmental movement had not yet begun. (I do not make this point to excuse their actions in any way, just to point out once again the importance of understanding the past when examining the present.)

Quite understandably, there were those who came to see the country's new mill in a different light. After all, the (largely Maori) residents of the Putauaki/Edgecumbe area were the ones who had to deal with its pollution on a daily basis. They knew what the environment was like before it came, and they lived with what it was like after.

Tomai remembers swimming in the Tarawera River as a child, diving into the black water downstream of the mill and emerging with bits of foam and pulp all over his body. Others recall the smell of the chemicals used at the plant staying in their nostrils long after going for a dip.<sup>7</sup> To them, this was the legacy left by New Zealand's Great Industrialising Project—the destruction of their river.

The Kawerau site had, of course, been chosen specifically because of its proximity to flowing water, which is a valuable resource in most industrial processes. In those initial years, the mill was utterly dependent upon the river to flush away its waste products. At one time, close to ten percent of the river's total volume was made up of mill debris.<sup>8</sup> Large quantities of leftover wood fibres and chemical wastes were simply dumped into the river to decay and be swept out to sea.

---

<sup>4</sup> J.R. Ryan, 'Work Under Way in New Zealand on Timber and Newsprint Project,' *The New York Times*, Sep. 27, 1953.

<sup>5</sup> 'New Zealand To Make Tissues', *Associated Press (NY Times)*, Jun. 24, 1954.

<sup>6</sup> L. Mackintosh, 'The Challenge of the Tarawera River 1954-1991,' Masters Thesis, Auckland 1994, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Taken from accounts in Greenpeace NZ's 2001 'Face of Dioxins' exhibition, <http://www.greenpeace.org.nz/exhibitions>

<sup>8</sup> L. Mackintosh, p. 16.

Decaying organic material uses oxygen in the breakdown process, and too much decay removes too much oxygen from water. When this happened to the Tarawera River, it happened fast. By the end of 1955, the year the mill first began operating, there were no more trout below Kawerau. In the 1960s and '70s, massive eel kills occurred on occasion.<sup>9</sup> Plants and animals were choked to death and poisoned by the waste spewed into the river.

Once the mill had begun operation, however, there was no turning back. Despite firsthand evidence of the havoc caused by Tasman's pollution, the company continued to get away with continuous violations of pollution standards for the next decade. Economic growth and development were still the main goals of the government, and small groups of local people were the only ones to speak out against the river's pollution.

The government's favourable treatment of Tasman can today be considered an entirely unsustainable choice. It allowed purely economic, modernising interests of the time to dominate discussion and cheapen the value of environmental and cultural assets. Instead of 'playing by the rules' and making Tasman conform to the standards of the time, MPs made the choice to gamble away the future for the benefit of the present. Had the whole project been *founded* with an acceptance that more foresight and investment would prevent future problems, things might look differently than they do today. These sorts of considerations meant very little to lawmakers of the time, however.

And to be fair, MPs *did* at least achieve their goal—a 2004 study found that the mill contributes a stunning 0.7 percent of the *country's* Gross Domestic Product<sup>10</sup>. But at what cost? Aside from the spiritual and environmental damage to the river and mill sites, in the past five and a half decades millions of dollars and thousands of hours have been spent trying to fix the complex series of problems caused by those initial decisions. In some cases, solutions have led to more problems, with each new effort trying to make up for the lack of foresight of the previous one.

This disconcerting trend first began in 1964, when the Pollution Advisory Council finally changed the conditions for dumping into the river, forcing Tasman to take action. Construction began on a primary treatment process, designed to remove floating solids from the waste stream. While this was overall a positive step towards ending the pollution of the river, it was to have devastating consequences elsewhere.

Once solids were removed from the effluent stream, they needed to be deposited somewhere, so in 1964 the blocks of Maori land around Lake Rotoitipaku were chosen for conversion into a landfill site. Negotiations began in 1967 to lease the land. Tasman was told that one particular block of land, however, would not be leased by its owners. Its owners were John and Isobel Fox, Tomai's parents. Mr. Fox, fulfilling his role as a *kaitiaki*, objected strongly to Tasman's selection of the Lake Rotoitipaku area for sludge disposal, as it contained many important historical and spiritual sites. Around the same time, and in what can hardly be considered a coincidence, John was fired from his job with Tasman for opposing the company's actions on a different dispute involving the extension of a road.

---

<sup>9</sup> L. Mackintosh, p. 27; Bioreserches, Ltd., 'Ecology of the Tarawera River,' report for Bay of Plenty Catchment Commission, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> Norske Skog Tasman, 'Sustainability Report 2005'.

Six days before Christmas, 1967, Maori landowners met with Tasman representatives for the first time. The minutes from that meeting clearly show a desire on the part of Tasman to begin the river cleanup process. However, in setting this as their goal, Tasman's representatives also imposed their own set of values on the landowners. The argument was logical but self-serving.

“We would like to commence our negotiations with those affected owners from the standpoint of a common desire to clean up the river,” stated one of the representatives, “and in this regard Tasman will be spending over a period of time an estimated sum of one million dollars, none of which gives any economic return.”<sup>11</sup>

No one seems to have pointed out that the company had been *saving* millions of dollars over the years by using the public's river as its own private dumping ground.

Later in negotiations, the claim would be further justified by diverting responsibility for the project.

“We have to put the solids on your land or put them into the river and the ‘Powers that Be’ have decided that they should not be put into the river.”

Unsubtle hints were made that should the owners object, the ‘Pollution People’ would step in and ensure that Tasman had the right to dump on their land. All throughout the process, it was made clear that a landfill would help the river, the people, and the country, implying that any resistance to it would be selfish and wrong. More expensive yet less destructive options for waste removal were not discussed, as this knowledge would have provided a legitimate reason for protest. (It later came to light that the dumping scheme had been recommended in a February 1967 Tasman report as the ‘most economic’ option. Other schemes, such as incinerating the sludge or using it as hog fuel, would have cost the company five to ten times as much to implement.)

Reluctantly, and convinced by Tasman that the improvement in the Tarawera River's ecology would make the damage to their land worthwhile, all landowners except the Foxes agreed to the lease terms. The Fox-owned block, assigned the designation ‘A8’, was left out of the dumping plan.

Over the next few years, Lake Rotoitipaku began to go underground—forced there not by a unique geological phenomenon, but by the encroaching sludge. What had once been prime hunting and fishing grounds with magnificent geothermal features to boot were now buried under tonnes upon tonnes of mill waste. The entire site began its gradual transformation into its current state—a vast wasteland of grey fibrous material, dotted by stagnant, heavily polluted water bodies. Despite the Fox Family land being excluded from the lease agreement, one of these unnatural water bodies is on their A8 block.

Soon after Tasman began dumping on the leased land, its owners began to protest that they had not been properly informed of the consequences. They had expected the river's improvement to provide food lost when Rotoitipaku was destroyed. This was not the case. A number of other complaints were made against Tasman, all involving problems which the Fox family had hoped to avoid by rejecting the lease. But, inevitably, these problems had come to afflict the Foxes, as well.

---

<sup>11</sup> Minutes quoted from a document assembled by Tohia-o-te-Rangi *marae*, regarding the Rotoitipaku site and issues related to its *wahi tapu* (sacred sites) and the Tasman Mill.

FROM THE SIDE OF A HILL on the A8 block gushes Te Wai u o Tuwharetoa, a sacred spring of the Tuwharetoa people. Put your hands in the water and it's warmer than you'd expect—heated by the geothermal activity of the area. As it flows out from beneath a light canopy of native bush, several other small streams join it, augmenting its volume.

Tuwharetoa, a powerful 16<sup>th</sup> century chief, was raised in the Kawerau area. Once, when he was a child, he cried and wailed inconsolably. His grandfather took his *taiaha* (a stick weapon) and struck a rock, releasing the spring. Its water was taken to the infant, whose crying quickly ceased. Given the name 'the life-giving water of Tuwharetoa', the spring became an important spiritual landmark and a vital resource for the local people.

When Tasman began to dump material on the neighbouring A9 block, a massive embankment was constructed from the waste. It consisted of all manner of materials, including barrels of toxic wastes and the remains of demolished structures. This embankment halted Te Wai u o Tuwharetoa's flow, causing the creation of a vast, shallow, polluted pond.

The first time I met Tomai, we were standing on that waste embankment, looking out over the A8 pond. I remember being surprised by the intensity in his voice as he briefly outlined the aforementioned stories of its creation, what his parents had done, and what he was doing with regards to the site. I admit that I was somewhat unconvinced at first that Tasman's actions were *quite* as atrocious as Tomai's anger made them out to be. While I could see the damage done to the landscape, I also recognised the value of the mill, both in terms of product and the jobs it brought to the region.

Without knowledge of the past, however, I only had the incomplete image of a swath of land destroyed to support a massively valuable economic asset for the region. I had no story like that of Putauaki and Tarawera to explain to me what I was looking at, to tell me of the great tragedies that had occurred here, and the injustices that continued to occur. What I lacked was what Tomai had—a detailed knowledge of the land that once was, an involvement in its past, and a stake in its future.

The site of Lake Rotoitipaku now lies behind a large iron gate. You require special permission from Norske Skog, the company that now owns the mill, in order to pass through. Whenever you are on site, you need to leave a slip with your name and information by the gate so that in case of a massive emergency at the mill you will be accounted for. So, understandably, not many people actually get to see the spot where the lake used to sit. I doubt that all that many people outside of the immediate community even know that the site exists. Many people do know, however, that the *mill* exists, and they know of the jobs and money that it provides for the Bay of Plenty region. These circumstances have made it difficult for the *kaitiaki* of Rotoitipaku to convince others that what they are doing is worthwhile. Tomai told me over and over again of the difficulty in making others stand up against the destruction of the lake. When he was younger, the debate around his parents' guardianship would spill over into his social life.

"The others, even other families around, they felt sorry for us, but they didn't want to get involved....I would come to school and they would say, 'Hey, what are your parents doing?' You know, even from the kids, they'd say, 'You're trying to close the mill down! What's that *solving*, eh?'"

"I even used to go to them myself: 'Don't do it, Mum. Don't do it, Dad.' It's because we're getting all that from the public, aye, even from our own people. Even from our cousins there. And then I realised I needed to just be with them. And now: OK, no matter what happens, I'll support them. And that's how it's been ever since. And *kaitiakitanga*—that's how I've understood what that really means."

For Tomai, it was the process of defending the land that taught him what *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship) really was, not the other way around. While his traditional responsibility is what made him a guardian of his land, his own personal valuing of the land and his memories of it are what made that responsibility all the more real to him.

“When you see sludge being spewed out of a black pipe, and to them it wasn’t a problem, they just spewed it, right on that spot there, right on the *nawha* (geothermal hotspots) and you think, ‘How can you do that? *How* can you do that?’...And you know it’s really quite sad, eh? And it’s quite sad how they’ve done it and they didn’t worry about it.

“You see, nobody else but ourselves have seen that lake and the *nawha*, only ourselves know those memories. And you can’t—it’s hard to explain how it looked like in those days....That’s what it’s all about, the *kaitiakitanga* way. Looking after your *taonga* (treasures) because that’s the *taonga* there. It means a hell of a lot.”

The trouble is in getting others, particularly non-Maori, to understand how much of a hell of a lot *kaitiakitanga* actually means. The views of Maori, along with many other indigenous views, are often not taken seriously in industrialised societies. How can the *mauri* of the land, its spiritual life force, be properly valued by those who see the land as capable of producing money instead? Modern resource management is all about finding the best way to use the land, weighing all costs and benefits, and hopefully, this process creates a strategic compromise in which resources are used sustainably and to their maximum benefit. Problems and misunderstandings arise when the ‘spiritual’ benefits of indigenous peoples must be factored into the equation.

ANTHONY OLSEN KNOWS all about the differences between Maori and Pakeha ways of seeing things. He’s one of the few Maori who has worked and studied extensively around the world while still keeping his Maori roots and beliefs intact. In recent years, he has turned his attention toward helping his people collaborate with non-Maori through his work as a geographer. He points out that Maori concepts are not *just* spiritual in nature, but that they come about as a result of experience and through the processes of history.

“My father said, ‘Don’t mysticize Maoridom. It’s common sense belief—it’s an application, not a theory.’”

Anthony’s interest has led him to seek out the reasons for Maori stories and beliefs, in the hopes of rationalizing them to both himself and others.

“You ask the questions, you’re a kid. I’m very childlike in how I look at things. And I try to say, you know, ‘That’s very interesting, but why?’ ‘Oh, that’s just a history that’s been passed down.’ Well, sorry, I don’t think like that. I think that’s a really cool history and I love the story, but equally as much, I’m really intrigued by *why*. And so I’m gonna go and have a look. And I want to dredge through every skerret of story that I can to try and find whether there might be an indication. So I’ve done as much as I can that way, so now I start to look for the physical environment. And I start to say, ‘Okay, I’ve gone through those stories....Now let’s start to look at the physical environment and see if there are any stories there.’”

He likens his role to a sort of detective work. He listens to stories of the past and tries to reconcile them with what he uncovers in the present. The stories he hears from his people are rooted in the moments of their creation, so when the physical landscape has changed, it can sometimes be tricky to make sense of what the stories actually refer to.

“What happens is I’m being told a story here and I’m looking at this environment and I’m going, ‘Well, actually, that’s not possible because there’s a big river going through there. So there can’t have been anything there...So where could it have been? Are you sure that’s the spot? What indicators did you have that that’s the spot?’ ‘Well, it was a hill on the side of the river. This is the side of the river, and here’s a hill.’ ‘Well, actually, no. Actually, the river was over there. It must have been that bit, then.’ ‘Oh, well, actually that makes sense.’ See what I mean? It’s really like mapping those threads of knowledge and trying to make sense of them. So when you hunt through and you look for those stories then the first place you go is trying to actually net those histories into the physical environment.”

In doing so, Anthony serves a vital purpose. He bridges the gap between the Maori and non-Maori knowledge bases, helping each side to better understand where the other is coming from. In modern times, this is as important a *kaitiaki* role as any. By showing the similarities between how Maori and non-Maori perceive their environments, he allows for a shared knowledge to develop that has been stifled by close to 170 years of colonial rule. For Maori, environmental guardianship is carried out through the responsibilities of being a *kaitiaki*, but the knowledge required to carry out *kaitiakitanga* needs to complement that feeling of responsibility for it to work. So to Anthony, the dual powers of obligation and information are part of what make *kaitiakitanga* so powerful.

“You can’t give effect to your *kaitiakitanga* unless you understand the protocols of what that is, and then you can’t manifest that unless you know the place and the history of it. And that’s locked into your *mana whenua*—your ability to walk your land and name your places. So here we have what are seemingly discrete parts of our beliefs and our protocols but you can’t have just one! You need to have the lot! And this is the key—we have people in our tribe that are really skilled in bits of it, but no one’s ever sat down and put it all together with them.”

The value and understanding of place forms a crucial part of guardianship. Tomai’s passion for his work as a trustee of the land at Kawerau is driven by his memories of how that place once was. So how do you make someone else share that seemingly intangible value? How do you spread that different way of understanding the land, especially if you do not even share the same belief system?

One way is through education, the spreading of knowledge. In the struggle for justice at Rotoitipaku, one of the greatest obstacles is the relative lack of unbiased information getting out to the public. Finding a way to tell people about the fifty-plus year struggle of the Fox Family and help them understand the beauty of the land that used to be there would at least let them weigh the possibilities and implications for its restoration themselves. There is no doubt that restoring Rotoitipaku would be a controversial issue—so why not open it to widespread debate? Spreading a sense of ‘ownership’ of Rotoitipaku into the public domain would foster an interest and a responsibility for it. It would shift the focus away from the perceived damages that a restoration project could cause (i.e. cost to the mill) and point out the benefits of a restored lake. Such a plan is complicated, however, by the fact that the lake site is both on private land and, as discussed earlier, access is severely restricted. However, the ability of the general public to act as *kaitiaki* of Rotoitipaku in its own way should not be underestimated. After all, public environmental action has been cited as a prime cause for the rescue of the river in the first place, and many other environmentally-conscious actions throughout the mill’s and the government’s history have been tied to actions of the public.

Anthony has another way of passing his knowledge on to others. He runs an ecotourism business in the nearby coastal township of Matata, where the Tarawera River flows out to the sea. For NZ\$175 a day, you can spend a day with Anthony or one of his guides learning about the beautiful Matata environment. Their tours link the bountiful natural environment with the area's rich cultural heritage. By providing access to the treasures of the Matata area, the ecotourism business places a monetary value on the *preservation* of its natural resources, which extends its value beyond just the aesthetic or spiritual realms. More importantly, however, the tours have the potential to illustrate for others the meanings of Maori stories and beliefs while showing them how, why and where they developed.

*Kaitiakitanga* is about guardianship of more than just the land, though—it's about preserving and restoring Maori culture, as well. Anthony voiced to me his concerns about the future of Maori culture in an increasingly "homogenised" New Zealand. This concern has inspired him to dedicate much of his time to working with the *iwi* in addition to his day job, sometimes leading to twelve- to fourteen-hour work days. It troubles him how many of the Maori traditions and stories have been lost due to the widespread death and repression since the Europeans arrived.

"The whole colonization process has just ripped the guts out of this culture and the best we can do is try, in a very simplistic kind of way, try and claw back as well as we can."

Through the ecotourism business, he hopes to pass down to the next generations the information that he was fortunate enough to be taught by his father when he was a child. Even though traditional models of knowledge transfer are not commonly practiced as they once were in the past, Anthony has found a way to achieve the same goals within modern social structures. It's a very common-sense approach to cultural management, which is the key to its success.

"Hopefully, if I do my job well, I've got some young guys that get to learn the history, they get an income along the way, but at least you know that the history is going to survive. You've got to manage that."

While staying at the *marae* (tribal home) of Anthony's *whanau* (extended family), I met a Maori woman named Mamaera, with whom I spoke at some length about the concept of *kaitiakitanga* as she practiced it in her life. Mamaera's inherited role in Maoridom is as a type of healer. When she was young, her family told her that she could only take on her role when she had experienced true human pain. Only then would she be truly qualified to heal others. Although sparse on details, she indicated that it had taken her a long time before she knew she was ready to take on such a role. She had recently received her *moko*, a type of tattoo designating her Maori status and identity, after what she told me was many years of spiritual preparation. Traditional application of *ta moko* involves the permanent chiselling of pigments into the skin; in Mamaera's case the *moko* was engraved into her face.

As we spoke, she urged me to hear other peoples' stories, as well, not just her own. Again and again she reminded me how important it was to hear what everyone had to say. To Mamaera, *kaitiakitanga* has been a process of restoration. She explained to me that her *whanau*'s land was taken away as a consequence of European settlement. Maori identity is closely linked to the land, so this action was devastating to the identity and well-being of her people. Trying to regain the land that was lost has only been part of her struggle. She also strives to heal the displacement, both physical and spiritual, that has occurred as a result of the land confiscation. When I asked her how she would know that complete healing had occurred, she replied only that it is a lifelong process.

Mamaera's concept of guardianship allows her to work as a *kaitiaki* in her everyday life, continually seeking new ways to regain what has been lost. Restoration of culture and restoration of land are woven together. But each process in itself also involves sifting through the new elements that have been laid over the old to discover the next 'common sense' solution where great change has occurred. Restoration, particularly in environmental terms, does not have to involve creating a carbon-copy of the original, as this will often be impossible. Environmental and cultural guardianship as restoration might be better framed as 'renewal' rather than 'repair'. Both culture and the natural world are constantly changing, so to keep up, restoration can instead be seen as an evolving process that makes compromises and discovers new solutions in the pursuit of what once was. Memories and stories from the past are crucial to informing and motivating actions in the present, but current conditions must still be taken into account. It just may not be practical at Rotoitipaku, for example, to completely re-create the old landscape.

The experience of loss is a large motivator for guardianship. According to archaeologists and theorists on Maori history, many Maori concepts related to environmental management seem to have come about as a result of loss caused by improper resource use. After undergoing a period of rapid growth and resource exploitation, pre-European Maori suddenly found themselves with dwindling food supplies. An era of intense intertribal warfare began, each group vying for the land that would enable the survival of its bloodlines. It is believed that during this period many of the spiritual concepts related to sustainability and *kaitiakitanga* were created as a form of resource management. In as short a span as a century, quality of life and food supplies had greatly improved as a result.

Of course, this trend is disconcerting. If resource exploitation and near environmental collapse are what inspire guardianship, how do we learn to manage the natural environment before destroying it? Are there any mechanisms that would have the equivalent effect on non-Maori that spiritual restrictions have on the Maori? Perhaps there is no real way to theorise solutions to such problems. Individuals will act as they please; human behaviour can be unpredictable, irrational, and inspired by an infinity of motives. Just as there is no one 'right thing' to do, there are no all-inclusive models for effecting change on people.

But it is still frightening to wonder: what amount of environmental degradation and loss will it take before the global community adopts a holistic guardianship concept of its own? What is it that makes non-Maori or non-indigenous individuals form their own sense of *kaitiakitanga*?

"STAND BY THAT ROAD BETWEEN 5:30 AND 7:30 IN THE MORNING," Tomai told me one night as we ate dinner at the *marae*. "Go out there and count all the cars that go by. Then you'll see exactly why people don't understand where I'm coming from."

He was referring to State Highway 2, one of New Zealand's eight national highways, which runs directly through Matata. Having been awakened by the roar of engines at around 6 a.m. that very same day, I knew exactly what he meant. SH 2 is the road to Kawerau, and the number of people that commute to the mill every morning is—well, enough to rouse a very deep sleeper from his rest. Tomai's point was that none of these commuters, who reside in the nearby towns of Matata and Whakatane, have ever had to live with the effects of the mill and thus do not understand his plight.

The next day, as I spoke with Matata homeowner Neville Harris about a completely different issue, he inadvertently validated Tomai's claim.

“All of the other folks that used to be here—cause I’m the only one of the original owners left—all those folks were pensioners and it’s now all guys that work at the mill. And of course at the mill they get between seventy and eighty grand a year. So they can afford to stay. I can’t. Not when the rate’s heading up two or three grand a year.”

He was referring to his neighbours, all of whom live in homes much larger than his own. Every morning they drive the thirty kilometres to work at the mill in Kawerau, where they earn enough money to pay the rising property taxes on their sections of land. Due to his retired status and medical problems, Neville mostly stays at home, putting his efforts towards correcting what he sees as bureaucratic injustices. He’s set up a makeshift office space in the shed behind his house in order to do so.

Neville, a Pakeha, has lived in Matata for twenty-six years. He was the first to build a residential home in the westernmost area of town, the same structure in which he still lives. But he fears he may have to move out soon if he loses his current battle. My conversation with this man-on-the-edge was alternately hilarious and terrifying. That’s because if there’s one thing to be said about Neville, it’s that he is entirely unafraid of expressing his views. On just about anything. And with some of the more creatively foul language I’ve ever heard.

The present issue inspiring Neville’s unabashed rage (I’m told there have been many causes for emotional conflagration in the past) relates to the aftermath of a devastating natural disaster that occurred on the 18th of May, 2005. That’s when an enormous band of rain swept through the region, triggering massive debris flows and floods that inundated several areas of Matata. Chunks of the surrounding hills were picked up like crumpled balls of paper and jettisoned down a steep grade to the coastline. The next day, this sleepy little town resembled a warzone. Homes had been reduced to rubble. Massive mounds of wood and boulders lay scattered across the landscape. Automobiles were smashed and filled with silt, some carried as far as a kilometre away from their carports of origin.

According to Neville, the whole incident had begun and ended in about twenty minutes. And he should know—while others hid in their homes or fled to safer ground, he sat on his balcony and watched the whole thing happen. His house sits at the terminus of the Awatarariki Stream Valley, from whence came a torrent of silty water, rocks, and organic debris. Nowadays, the stream that trickles by his property provides a calming soundtrack as it flows past. But that night it was anything but. When he looked out into the darkness and heard the boulders rush by, some of them seven metres across, he thought he was going to die. Given how close the stream comes to Neville’s property, it’s amazing his whole house wasn’t swept out to sea. He credits this to a lucky decision he made when building it over twenty years ago.

“The angle it’s set at is just absolutely perfect to take the loading. But I didn’t think about that at the time. I was more interested in looking at the view. Lined it up to look out at the sea. I never considered that. I’d considered a flood, but I thought, you know, half a metre of flood coming over the bank, so I’ve got room for it to flow under there. Not two metres of shit coming through, with big lumps in it. Not in a million years did I think of that.”

Neville maintains that no one ever warned him of the history of massive debris flows across his property and the adjacent areas. However, a report released soon after the 2005 event indicates that the Matata area has been hit by one debris flow after another for the last seven thousand years. In fact, the very landscape upon which the township is built has been carried down from the mountains in successive large flood events. Historical evidence shows that there have been at least four debris flows

since 1860, including one that destroyed a flour mill not far from the spot where Neville's house now stands.<sup>12</sup> Other clues to the region's past can be seen in a brief stroll down the streets across from Neville's own. Many of the houses here have enormous boulders in their front yards, which are used in the landscaping. These boulders are so huge it seems foolish for anyone to have paid to place them there as decoration. In fact, they were all carried down from the stream valley in a past debris flow. But the people living in those houses probably never even thought about that prior to May 18, 2005.

Neville blames the district council for not having warned potential landowners of the area's propensity to be buried in debris. He's using the law to try and place responsibility for development that occurred on land that probably never should have been developed in the first place. He doesn't think that he and his neighbours should be punished for the mistakes a group of council members made thirty years ago.

"But I think in those days the guys who were in charge of the council there wouldn't have cared anyway," he claimed. "They just wanted people to pull rents out of them. So we're still looking into whether technically they are liable for dumping us here. Whether they knew or not, that's going to be the argument. We're including it in our annual plan, because they are wanting to screw us megabucks for the mitigation works.

"This subdivision is actually *promoted* by the Whakatane District Council. They put us here and then they said, 'Oh, you gotta pay nearly fifteen hundred bucks a year out of this mitigation for the protection work.' And I say, 'Well, that's tough. You put us here, you signed us the land. I think you've got a bit of fronting up to do yet.'"

While the number is constantly changing, the 'megabucks' in increased property taxes (as result of the flood clean up and mitigation costs) have, Neville claims, always been enough to drive him and some of his neighbours off of their land. He believes that the Government should be responsible for the costs of installing a system that would lessen future flood damage, not the rate-paying landowners. After all, natural processes only become 'hazards' when people get in the way, and the council is responsible for putting people in the debris flow path. His main fight with the district council is over these monetary issues, and he assured me he's making quite a show of it.

"Because it's just one person and not a mob, they think they can just, 'Piss off, buddy.' Well, I don't piss off that easily. I might get pissed off, but I won't fuckin' let them get away with it. I'm like a bulldog: once I latch my teeth in there, I'm gonna fuckin' rip their head off before I let go.

"I have crossed swords before with the council," he admitted, with some measure of pride. "Sometimes I've lost, sometimes I've won. Comes out about even."

Given that this particular swordfight is going to cost him and four other allied Matata residents about NZ\$20,000 in lawyers' fees, he's sure hoping he wins this one. Even in victory, however, he knows he won't recoup the money spent on lawyers. He expects that not having to pay the increased annual rates on his property will eventually make it all worth the effort, financially-speaking. Besides, he doesn't have much of a choice either way. He has to try to keep his home—neither his finances nor his pride will let him go down without a fight.

---

<sup>12</sup> M.J. McSaveney et. al., 'The 18 May 2005 debris flow disaster at Matata: Causes and mitigation suggestions,' Institute of Geological & Nuclear Sciences, Ltd., Jun. 2005, p. 32.

“I’m staying put. I’m not gonna fuckin’ walk away from it,” he proclaimed, “I might get driven away from it. And no one’s gonna pay me what it’s worth at the moment. So, yeah, I’ve *gotta* fight for it.”

Then, a mutter, almost an afterthought:

“I fuckin’ built the bastard, too.”

Since the flood event, Neville has become something of a local historian, rooting through District Council minutes, collecting old town plans, and reading up on the science of debris flows. Both his shed and his house are full to the brim with piles and piles of various papers. During my conversation with him, he would periodically disappear behind a massive mound of documents before emerging moments later with one in hand to show me. There is no doubt that his knowledge of the area and his sense of place have expanded exponentially since 2005. Before, he “never even knew [the debris flow risk] existed” and had not considered the possibility. Now, he spouts out names and dates (coupled with his own vehement opinions) as if they were common knowledge he’d held all along. The situation has inspired in him a hunt for knowledge—the crucial element in assuming any kind of guardianship role in the community.

APRIL 1864. Armed members of the Ngati Awa *iwi* move up the coastline towards Matata to prevent further land confiscation by the Pakeha government. Soldiers of Te Arawa, whom the Crown Government has acquired to aid in the fighting, see the approach and attack in force. With the aid of firearms and the solid backing of British soldiers, Te Arawa has the definite advantage. Nevertheless, the fighting lasts all day long. The bloody skirmish leaves hundreds dead, including several chiefs.

In the coming years, this will come to be known as The Battle of Kaokaoroa, one of the last incidences of war between two Maori tribes. The men who died will be buried where they fell, just metres from the wide, pulsing sea.

Flash forward to May 2005: an excavation is being carried out below the Awatarariki Stream Valley to uncover the human remains left there after the battle fought 141 years before. A group of developers wish to go ahead with building on the block of land, but a group of Maori whose ancestors were involved in the battle strongly oppose the development, due to the sacred nature of the area. To prove that the site is, in fact, a burial ground, a team of archaeologists lead a detailed search for remains. Since the 1980s, development on the block has been halted several times due to the protests of local Maori. Some have issued warnings that when you disturb *waahi tapu* (sacred sites), “it’s going to be paid for”.<sup>13</sup> On this, the first day of the dig, tensions are high. Heavy rain provides an appropriately sombre pall as both sides stand by to witness the excavation process.

Two weeks later, the whole area is covered in two metres of wet debris, and the value of the development project has plummeted to rock bottom.

As Matata began the recovery process after the debris flows, more and more information came to light about how many warning signs had been ignored. Several editorials were published in the local papers, linking the flow event with the historical and spiritual significance of the site. Some local Maori viewed this as a form of ‘divine intervention’. One claimed that it was the ancestors’ “way of halting

---

<sup>13</sup> K. Brown, ‘Traditional environmental knowledge in Aotearoa: A qualitative enquiry into the connection and significance of waahi tapu and the Matata flood,’ Directed Study project, University of Auckland, p. 21.

further violation”.<sup>14</sup> This reasoning for the flow’s occurrence can be seen to complement the geologic and other scientific reasons that were also disseminated around this time.

The fact that Maori opinions on the development at Kaokaoroa were continually ignored and pushed aside again highlights the disconnect between Maori and non-Maori ways of seeing things. But the connections that *could* have been made had the proper ‘warning signs’ been heeded are worth noting. Evidence existed in both Maori and non-Maori knowledge bases to indicate that building at the base of the stream valley would be a risky action. While their stated reasonings were different, both sides drew upon the history of the area to justify these claims. What the situation lacked prior to May 2005 was the realisation that both knowledge bases would have come to the same conclusion had each examined its own evidence properly. This is not to lay blame on one side or claim that either side was more ‘right’, however; there were Maori who approved of the development (the Ngati Hinerangi Trust owned the land) and there were non-Maori who advised against it. The questions that must instead be asked are, ‘Why weren’t the warning signs enough? Why were those who knew the most about the land ignored?’

Neville blames greed. He rails against all the bureaucrats involved in the matter before and since the flow event, most of whom he suspects of having made decisions based on the money involved. But instead of focusing on *why* things happened, he has set about trying to make things right again by flexing his political muscle. Neville is the perfect example of how different peoples’ connections to the land can produce different forms of ‘guardian’-like action. This creates a difficulty in defining what guardianship actually is, and can complicate matters when it comes to making crucial decisions.

At issue is the Matata Lagoon, which was filled with a combination of natural debris and flood-swept materials from homes during the May 2005 event. It remains infilled, and very little life persists under the present conditions. In my discussion with him, Neville cited a proposal to ‘restore’ the lagoon as a prime example of how the town was going about things “arse backwards” (a favourite phrase of his).

“There are still always going to be those who will say, ‘I bought this place so I could look at that patch of water and the ducks shitting on it. I want that back.’ And they just cannot comprehend that it will never be back as it was, it’s only going to be a fraction of it, and it’s going to cost them an arm and a leg for the rest of their lives to keep digging the silt out. As far as I’m concerned, it’s not sustainable. It’s not realistic.”

Money and effort that would be spent on restoring the lagoon should instead be put toward an effective flood mitigation plan, he says, arguing that the infilling of the lagoon was a natural event and its current status does not threaten any human well-being (as the flood risk does). Environmental guardianship does not just mean caring for the environment, but also caring for the needs of the people who live within it and whose actions affect it. However, while Neville’s opinions may seem logical, practical, and justified, they are certainly not the consensus. Some agree with Neville and wish to ‘let nature be’. But many in town see the lagoon as an important cultural icon of Matata, and its restoration as an important step toward recovery. Others worry that the chemicals swept from peoples’ homes into the lagoon during the flood may spread and affect other wildlife.

The Maori *kaitiaki* perspective also advocates restoration. Known as ‘Te Awa o te Atua’ (River of the Gods), the lagoon is a remnant piece of the Tarawera River’s old course, which used to flow through Matata until it was diverted to its present outlet just east of town during drainage works in 1917. This river, and subsequently the lagoon, are of great importance to the historical and cultural identities of

---

<sup>14</sup> R. Veroe, ‘Matata: Our tipuna have spoken’, Whakatane Beacon, May 24, 2005, quoted in K. Brown, p. 26.

Maori in the region. Its current state thus causes ‘a sense of uneasiness’ among many of them and restoration is seen as a priority worth paying for<sup>15</sup>.

So how does a community band together in recovery when not everyone agrees? Politics, finances, and personal preferences are all complicating factors that must be considered in modern debate, but when they differ amongst individuals, how do we determine the right step forward? One positive element of Matata’s recovery has been the relative transparency of the process. The Matata Regeneration Project aims to keep residents updated on progress that has been made while including them in the decision-making process. Regular meetings are held in which the options at hand are plainly laid out. Vital information is disseminated through a newsletter, and the Project’s website features a great deal of relevant information. Despite this, discord amongst residents still exists, but perhaps this is a good thing. It shows that people (such as Neville) are informed enough to make decisions and contribute their own unique skill sets, observations, and experience.

For example, Neville disagrees with the engineers working on the mitigation works, and was able to put his experience to use by voicing his opinions. His previous career in opencast mining, coupled with his observations of the actual event, enabled him to give informed advice, even to the ‘experts’.

“...So I had some sort of experience with volumes and such, and just...doing things practically. And I saw the things that these guys were coming up with and I thought, well—it was just pure fucking garbage. The guys from Swap [Contractors], they gave me a ‘QBE’. A ‘Qualified By Experience’. Because I’ve lived through it. None of these other turkeys have even seen [a debris flow]. And I think that does give you a better understanding of what they’re fuckin’ like than anything you’re gonna read in the book.”

Wielding his ‘QBE’ like a diploma, Neville has taken it upon himself to re-evaluate many of the volumes and figures that have been put forth by the engineers. He believes very strongly in the power of his local and experiential knowledge, and uses it to check the ‘experts’ brought in from afar to evaluate the issues. The ultimate goal is not to prove everyone wrong (though he would certainly revel in such a victory), but to ensure that local needs are properly met.

“At the end of the day, [the experts] have their say and then they piss off home. We *live* with it. And that’s the difference. They can be as right or as wrong as they like, it doesn’t affect their life or their property. You know, they come back two years later, ‘Shit, we got that wrong. Oh well, there’s only ten dead. Better luck next time.’”

Given that his own safety is on the line, his views on the mitigation project are understandably quite strong. The Debris Dam option that has been considered to stop any future debris flows is apparently “a fuckin’ speed bump”, and he vows to “start fuckin’ shooting bastards that step up there to work on it”. He has even gone so far as to draft plans for his own mitigation option—what is essentially a large open channel to the sea. His experience on May 18, 2005, taught him one thing about flows from the Awatarariki Valley that he feels the engineers just don’t get:

“Try and guide it. You’ll never bloody stop it...You don’t know what’s going to come down. What happened last time—it could be quite different. It could be twice as much. We just have no idea.”

---

<sup>15</sup> K. Brown, p. 23.

At Matata, nature's unpredictability has made it difficult to know the best way to proceed. With an uncertain future the wise remember the past, but in a changing world so much is still left to chance. For Neville, taking precautions—above and beyond what even the 'experts' suggest—is the only way to brace for the possibilities. Even though he may not be there the next time Awatarariki lets free its load, he knows how important it is to the future that he act with what he has in the present.



It is not an easy task to define what environmental guardianship entails, or even how such a thing comes about. Guardianship of any sort consists of individual choices and individual actions that, when carried out in a community setting, take on the weight of that multitude of individuals. In today's world it is the people of the land that decide its fate, for though we humans cannot completely control nature, virtually everything we do has a bearing upon it. Each of us may only be a speck on the earth's vast timeline, but what we do stays on to the benefit or chagrin of future generations.

A *kaitiaki* realises this, and acts accordingly. Taking unique individual action inspires others to do the same; whether in agreement with or in opposition to the acts of those before, all accomplishment furthers the notion. Embedding this cycle as a form of tradition (as Maori have) ensures that times of plenty do not make us complacent, and that rough times can still be filled with hope. A *kaitiaki* learns to serve in this role *always*, not just when the going gets tough.

The people of the Bay of Plenty have more than their fair share of environment-related difficulties to deal with—I have only barely scratched the surface. And change, both natural and human-induced, is ever-present, though reminders of this may only be intermittent. In a changing world, *kaitiakitanga* and other forms of environmental guardianship do not have to be about *solving* problems. They can be about contributing to the search for answers, while also working to prevent the problems of the future, today.

The people profiled here are not world-savers or superheroes. Nor do they even know the answers to the questions they pose. What would make things 'right' at Rotoitipaku? How to balance risk with 'home' in Matata? The individuals mentioned herein realise and accept that there may be no perfect solutions, but only noble, informed, and passionate suggestions. And doing just that much—just enough to keep people united, engaged and aware amidst the challenges of the changing world around them—can form a sufficient ladder for future generations to stand upon as they work to solve the problems of their time.