

The Te Awaroa Project: Enhancing the ora of New Zealand rivers

Le Projet Te Awaroa : améliorer l'ora des rivières de Nouvelle-Zélande

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RÉSUMÉ

Plusieurs appels à l'action afin d'améliorer la qualité de l'eau ont été initiés à la suite d'inquiétudes concernant la santé des rivières de Nouvelle-Zélande. Il est largement reconnu que ceci relève d'une responsabilité collective, et que des réponses tangibles ne peuvent être véritablement établies que grâce à un véritable engagement de la communauté. S'appuyant sur la pensée Maorie relationnelle, le projet Te Awaroa s'efforce d'améliorer l'ora (bien-être) de 1000 rivières en Nouvelle-Zélande d'ici à 2030. Notre papier présente le cadre conceptuel et éthique à la base du projet Te Awaroa. Ce cadre éthique souligne les préoccupations pour les systèmes vivants complexes façonnés par la coévolution et l'interdépendance de composants biotiques, abiotiques et sociaux imbriqués. Le projet tente de répondre à la question : «quels sont les droits de la rivière?» Il s'efforce de «parler pour la rivière», permettant à la rivière de «parler pour elle-même». Une prémisse simple mais difficile est à la base de Te Awaroa, à savoir la recherche de rivières en bonne santé, tout en ayant des communautés et des entreprises qui se développent en harmonie. Ces questions sont traitées dans le contexte d'un aperçu historique général des relations sociétales envers les rivières en Nouvelle-Zélande.

ABSTRACT

Concerns for river health in New Zealand have brought about many calls for action in efforts to improve river condition. It is widely recognized that river health is a collective responsibility, and meaningful responses can only be truly established through genuine community engagement. Building upon Maori relational thinking, the Te Awaroa project strives to enhance the *ora* (wellbeing) of 1000 rivers in New Zealand by 2030. This paper outlines the conceptual framework and ethical base that underpins Te Awaroa. This ethical framing emphasizes concerns for complex living systems that are fashioned by the coevolution and interdependence of interwoven biotic, abiotic and social components. The project questions 'what are the rights of the river'? It strives to 'speak for the river', allowing the river to 'speak for itself'. A simply yet challenging premise underlies Te Awaroa, namely the quest for healthy rivers, communities and businesses that flourish together. In this paper, these issues are contextualized through a broadly framed historical overview of societal relationships to rivers in New Zealand.

KEYWORDS

Community engagement, Maori relational thinking, Respect for the river, River health, River rights

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If I am the river and the river is me – then emphatically I am dying

A Maori elder lamenting at the Waitangi hearings for the Whanganui River

What does a healthy river look like? What are our responsibilities towards rivers? What are the 'rights' of the river itself? Who speaks for those rights? Here we report on a bold New Zealand initiative to address these questions.

We think it is fair to say that 'we do things differently in New Zealand'. For example, a settlement between the Whanganui River hapu and iwi and the national government in August 2014 recognised the status of the Whanganui River as a legal entity in its own right. Without wanting to appear overly optimistic, we may be on the cusp of a different set of relationships in how we are knowing and living with our rivers. The Te Awaroa Project endeavours to capture this prospect, striving to grow a national movement of New Zealanders taking action to care for their rivers, aiming to enhance the *ora* (wellbeing) of 1000 rivers by 2030 (Salmond et al., 2014). A simple yet challenging premise underlies Te Awaroa, namely the quest for healthy rivers, communities and businesses that flourish together. This sees river regeneration as much more than a matter for science, politics and governance to sort out. It entails facilitating and supporting communities and stakeholders to appreciate their rivers each and every day.

New Zealand has a distinctive biophysical and socio-cultural history. It has a remarkably diverse array of rivers for a landmass of its size. The long thin landmass stretches 1500 km (29-53°S, 165-176°E). Volcanic landscapes of the North Island contrast starkly with mountainous, glaciated landscapes of the South Island. Over 80 million years of evolution as a separate land mass, the island biogeography has fashioned a distinctive suite of endemic animals, fungi and plants that either evolved from Gondwanan origins or were conveyed across oceans. Although much of the country has a temperate maritime climate, some regions have alpine, semi-arid and subtropical conditions. It is one of the last settled areas on Earth. Before the arrival of humans, around 80% of New Zealand was covered by forest, with only high alpine, wet, infertile and volcanic areas without trees.

Since their settlement of New Zealand around 1320AD, Maori adaptations from origins in tropical lands entailed rapid emergence of cosmology, language, food, architecture and lifestyles. Although rivers were used extensively for water and food production, as well as providing resources for clothing and homes, engagement with landscapes and ecosystems extended well beyond concerns for provision of resources. With no distinction between nature and culture, Maori embodied landscapes with ancestral powers, recognising the interdependence of human and natural systems. Indeed, individual identity is defined as much by relationships to the land (my river, my mountain, my sea) as by relationships to human family and ancestors. Despite these connections, Maori made extensive use of fire to clear around half the forest cover of New Zealand prior to European settlement.

The colonial period since 1769 has also been characterized by remarkable adaptation. Many early settlers engaged substantively with Maori. The Treaty of Waitangi (1840) recognized Maori rights as traditional owners, with particular emphasis upon protection of land and sea resources. As time went by, however, there was a marked transition in societal relationships to land and river systems. As evidenced across much of the planet, a command and control ethos prevailed, viewing human activities separately from 'natural' river functions. Much of the remaining forest was cleared, leaving forests over around 23% of the land today. Agriculture has been the mainstay of the economy – initially through sheep, and subsequently through dairy production. Hydropower development, flow regulation schemes, agricultural intensification and stopbank construction became *de rigeur* for most large rivers. Many rivers have been transformed, impacting markedly upon their health.

Awareness and concern for water quality, erosion and sedimentation, loss of places to swim and fish, and compromised biodiversity values have engendered a courageous suite of conservation and rehabilitation interventions in recent decades. Despite these initiatives, many New Zealanders remain gravely concerned for prevailing river values and trajectories of river health, seriously questioning the contention of tourism campaigns that market *100% Pure* or *Clean and Green* New Zealand. Viewing river health as a 'canary in the cage' (a measure of our relations to the land in which we dwell) highlights the imperative to engender new relationships to our rivers.

Foundation principles incorporated within the Te Awaroa project build upon Maori relationships to river systems. These framings recognize river systems as complex and emergent networks that extend

beyond nature-culture divides. Rivers are viewed as living systems, fashioned by the coevolution and interdependence of interwoven biotic, abiotic and social components (*te awa tupua*). As complex networks that are in a constant state of negotiation, river systems are vulnerable to loss or destruction if the relations among them falter or fail – a state known as *mate* (ill health, dysfunction). Its contrary, *ora*, is a state of peace, prosperity and well-being – this can apply to individuals or families or ecosystems or rivers.

Building upon Maori thinking and practices, what can we give back to the river? The river is much more than simply a resource to be used – it is a force to be lived with and respected. We need to listen to it and respond to it. Rivers nurture us, so we have a responsibility to nurture them. *Ora* is not simply a biophysical or even socio-ecological concept; it has ontological dimensions. What constitutes a state of *ora* varies from river to river. Identification of chokepoints (threats, limiting factors, thresholds of potential concern) provides critical guidance into which issues create a state of *mate*. Chokepoints can include land and water uses, legal, economic and political (policy) constraints, social attitudes, biophysical issues, etc. System-specific understandings is required to effectively and economically promote shifts to a state of *ora*. River ethnographies provide a mechanism to allow rivers to tell their own stories. In a sense, this can be viewed as a form of ‘space to move’ or ‘freedom space’ initiative. Underlying values and ethical framings of the Te Awaroa project are outlined below.

<i>Te Awaroa is/does ...</i>	<i>Te Awaroa is/does NOT</i>
Inclusive: A safe place for people to interact, share, collaborate, learn, listen.	Dominated by scientists, government, business. A place for competition, power, one-upmanship
Bottom-up: Community led and controlled, incorporating local knowledge and histories.	Tell local people what to do.
Place-based, framed in relation to Maori values, connections and understandings: Cognisant of differing local needs and circumstances.	An imported approach to river analysis and management, using virtual, standardised models that do not fit local circumstances and needs.
Brave yet humble: Not afraid to challenge the status quo. A place that demands risk, emotion, trust, passion.	Think it knows all the answers and apply conformist, lowest common denominator principles to achieve ‘motherhood and apple pie’ outcomes.
Emergent: Works with change, evolving as a flexible, opportunistic framing.	Promote static, single-perspective solutions.
Accountable: Rationales and decisions are contestable, supported by transparent narratives.	Authoritarian, dogmatic, inflexible.
Purposeful and action-focussed: Emphasizes tangible, practical outcomes and actions.	A ‘talk-fest’ – moves beyond planning frameworks.
Works with nature: Recognizes the ‘rights of the river’, and consequent responsibilities of those using river resources.	Seek to command and control nature, engendering rivers that are fixed in place and/or frozen in time.
An adaptive, ongoing commitment: Promotes local ownership to support ongoing stewardship; learns effectively. Applies flexible, open-ended thinking.	Not narrowly focussed and prescriptive offering short-term solutions.

Te Awaroa has an underlying core of respect and responsibility – to the river and to each other. It recognizes that open-ended, non-prescriptive thinking is required to engender resilience and cope with uncertainties. Inherent dangers are faced in presupposing that even if we feel we have sufficient knowledge of the ‘values’ we seek to maintain for any given watercourse that we can simply design strategies to meet (or optimize) those values. Maori relationships and the underlying mindset of Te Awaroa extend well beyond such mechanistic framings. A deep and embodied connection between people and rivers engenders a mutual duty of care. As noted by Paul Verhaege (2014): “If we are to change, it won’t be through rational knowledge, but through emotionally charged values ... We must also have the courage to push communal values back to the forefront – values from which the individual benefits too.” Structural and institutional changes are required to accommodate such thinking.

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