

# Aoraki

Tupuna, Maunga, Symbol

by Melanie Nelson

Aoraki Mount Cook is many things to many people – our highest mountain, an ancestor, a force of nature, a mountaineering challenge and a symbol of tribal and national identity. The 1998 Ngāi Tahu Settlement recognised and confirmed the relationship between the iwi and Aoraki. The rūnanga of Waihao, Arowhenua and Moeraki are known as the three Aoraki rūnanga. I spoke with Te Wera King, Upoko of Te Rūnanga o Arowhenua, who shared his perspective on Aoraki with me. 'We don't see him as a maunga, I don't see him as an atua or god, I see him as a tupuna, as a force of nature.'

Dawn on Aoraki and the Ball Glacier from near Ball Pass, Aoraki-Mt Cook National Park, Canterbury. Photo: Shaun Barnett/Black Robin Photography



There are different accounts within Ngāi Tahu about the origins of Aoraki. Te Wera imparted the Ārai te Uru kōrero which tells of Aoraki coming on the waka Ārai te Uru which brought kūmara, calabashes and taro to these shores, and also brought the mountains. Aoraki was a child on that waka. After coming ashore, they explored inland, but had to be back on the coast by sunrise. Aoraki was carried by his grandfather, but unfortunately the morning light hit them and they became solidified as the mountain.

According to Te Wera, as tribal development has evolved in the last 60 to 100 years, Aoraki has become more important as a landmark of tribal identity. Every rūnanga within Ngāi Tahu has their own maunga. For example, Arowhenua acknowledge Tarahao

An telephoto aerial of Aoraki showing a less-seen perspective: the Sheila Glacier (centre and lower), Earle Ridge (centre) and the North Ridge (left hand skyline). Middle Peak just shows on the top right. Photo: Shaun Barnett/Black Robin Photography



or Mt Peel; Kaikōura would say Te Tapuae-o-Uenuku. Te Wera says it's important to remember that although Aoraki is there, and is a national and tribal treasure, each marae in the South Island also has their own maunga, and uri need to go and find out who those particular maunga are before they go to see Aoraki; they need to reconnect with their own marae areas. And for those who acknowledge Aoraki, they need to go and see him.

Te Wera has observed Aoraki increasingly become the national maunga over the last 30 years or so. 'Now that it is a national treasure, how would you want the country to treat it? It's pretty much as simple and as complicated as that at the same time.'

At the time leading up to the Ngāi Tahu Settlement in the 1990s, FMC dug their crampons into the status quo and strongly opposed the potential co-management or return of Aoraki to Ngāi Tahu. As the nation develops, the sun is setting on that dichotomy – as it rises on the near horizon things look quite different. The ground has moved over the last 30 years. Aoraki's tip has fallen off. FMC's *Backcountry* magazine now features te reo on the cover and publishes stories honouring iwi connections to places.

Te Wera says this change aligns with where New Zealand as a whole is going. 'The evolution of the way the country seems to see the mountain itself, reflects an evolution of how we're developing as a country and what is important to us. For some reason Aoraki Mount Cook is one of those symbols.'

As we feel our way through the swirling clouds of intermingling cultures, opportunities can masquerade as restrictions. For Ngāi Tahu, climbers standing upon the very top of Aoraki, the head of the ancestral tupuna, denigrates its tapu. The Ngāi Tahu Settlement Act placed Tōpuni status on Aoraki Mount Cook, ensuring that Ngāi Tahu values are recognised and provided for. This concept derived from the traditional Ngāi Tahu tikanga of persons of chiefly status

extending their mana and protection over a person or area by placing their cloak over them or it.

Historically and culturally, standing on the summit is highly significant to mountaineers. When our own outdoor cultural traditions inspire us to climb Aoraki, how can we respect the values of those whose ancestors first set eyes on his gleaming head?

A growing number of outdoor adventurers are integrating a more expansive approach. Increasingly we are recognising that although Māori values may not be ours, they matter to us as well. Respecting those principles can enhance our own experience and understanding. Like New Zealander Norman Hardie remaining a respectful few metres back from the summit of Kangchenjunga on the first ascent in 1955, in deference to the Sikkim locals who held the mountain as sacred, today's climbers can similarly leave the final few metres of Aoraki's summit inviolate.

Te Wera explained that the three Aoraki rūnanga are currently working with DOC to develop the new Aoraki National Park Management Plan, which will soon be available for consultation. He said the crux of the matter is weaving together the different strands: people want to be near and on the maunga, so the village and the national park itself need to be made accessible and usable for everyone, while also ensuring that the values of both Ngāi Tahu and those of wider New Zealand are recognised.

Te Wera says, 'Treat it with the respect that it needs to be treated with and it will treat you back with respect. Behave how you would behave if you were in your own home, and let's hope you don't treat your own home like a pigsty. Mountaineers know that they have to take all their waste with them, and are good at looking after the environment. Basically keep the place safe, clean, and you shouldn't really go wrong.'



Te Wera King Photo: Krista Rossow, courtesy of Te Rūnanga o Arowhenua

Aoraki is much to many. The perspective gained from (just below) his peak is surely vast enough to hold it all. He will continue to preside above us for many generations to come. Te Wera said that they are watching with interest the developments in other parts of the country of ways to recognise the mana of places and care for them. With significantly increased tourism, accessibility, safety and protection are all important.

'Most days we're really glad to see him (Aoraki); other days I think, it's what's going on down here that makes him want to have a look at what we're up to. It's not unusual for us to not see him for days on end because of weather, he's covered in cloud, but we know he's still there. All I know is that he's there, his brothers are there and his family is all there. Aoraki has been here way before we were here and will be here long after we'll be gone. So let's make the footprint on that maunga something that's valuable to the maunga, not just us.'



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