

CROSSING THE DIVIDE

Tramper Melanie Nelson contemplates how an understanding of te ao Māori has shaped her sense of belonging as a Pākehā



Sunrise from Tū Ao Wharepapa/Mt Arthur Photo: Tiffany Larson



A cup of tea and a gingernut as I snuggle in my sleeping bag in a tramping hut, resting my weary body after the day's mission. Maybe the sound of rain or a river running by, a *Backcountry* magazine on the shelf to peruse, and that distinctive smell of woodsmoke intermingled with damp socks. This experience, with all its sensations, epitomises my culture to me. In few other situations do I feel quite as content, as at home.

As Pākehā we often find it hard to articulate what our culture is. It just is. Or perhaps we don't have one. Maybe we think that only Māori have a culture and we're a tad envious. Starting to learn about te ao Māori can be disconcerting for Pākehā, who didn't even realise they existed within a culture. Encountering a distinctive 'other' can conjure up feelings of dislocation and not-quite-belonging, in the only place we have ever belonged.

A tarn-like mirror

I will be first to say that Pākehā shouldn't appropriate Māori concepts and redefine them to be things that they aren't. I do believe, however, that te ao Māori offers an opportunity for Pākehā to learn about our own culture. Understanding the perceptions and experiences of others helps us to gain insights for ourselves.

It is much easier to see your own culture when you contrast it against another. New Zealanders often experience this when travelling overseas. And for Pākehā New Zealanders who brave the divide to travel cross-culturally within Aotearoa, this mirror is te ao Māori.

Navigating through this space can lead to discomfort. However, those who explore that discomfort can gain a heightened understanding of themselves and their own unique connection to this land.

When I started learning te reo Māori at high school, something that captured me – as an already obsessed trumper – was the



intricate union between the language and this land. Given that te reo Māori evolved in this landscape from the Pacific language that Māori ancestors brought with them, this probably shouldn't have surprised me. It was shaped by the very things we see every day when we are in wild places. I was enchanted by the vast diversity of words to describe landforms, trees and plants, as well as their relationships to each other and people. And not just words, but concepts too. Te reo provided a different way of framing the world and my place in it.

After nearly 25 years of learning, te reo Māori has undoubtedly shaped how I experience the world. I have become acquainted with myself in ways that I might otherwise have missed. I am now informed about the considerably longer connections Māori have with some of my favourite backcountry places. And I know more about how some of these places became public conservation land. This shapes the lens through which I view the world.

Concepts, such as whakapapa, which are integral to a Māori way of perceiving the world, have challenged me to ask what my own ancestral and personal layers of connection are to Aotearoa. How I can walk upright here, in my own way – acknowledging the history, the diverse connections and ways of relating to this land.

Whakapapa has been described as the glue that holds the Māori world together, identifying the nature of relationships between all things, and to the atua.¹ It literally means to create layers. Māori layers of connection with the land intensified in a myriad of ways, through generations of consuming local food, water and medicine – the molecules of the land assimilating to the body; traversing their territories by foot and waka, and the subsequent detailed observation; and returning their deceased to the land. When Māori introduce themselves and their connection to their mountains,

rivers and lakes, those words evoke threads of belonging and memory that go back many centuries. It's something I don't have.

As a younger person walking between worlds, I felt some sadness that I couldn't describe my relationship to the land in those ways. I didn't have a map to help me navigate through that confusion. But I've always had a good sense of direction in the bush, and this has proven its worth in that untracked internal terrain. I've realised what I do have. It's different, but it's my own truth.

Growing threads of connection

I have a strong sense of connection to place – to Te Wai Pounamu/the South Island, and more specifically to Te Tau Ihu o te Waka a Māui (top of the South Island). As a child I gazed daily at the local mountain, Tū Ao Wharepapa/Mt Arthur and regularly pestered mum to take us up on another trip. From a young age, that mountain was where I felt most at peace and fulfilled, and still is. As a teenager it was both a destination and a stepping stone for adventures with friends and family, and eventually a place to introduce lovers and overseas visitors to provide more insight into who I am.

My ever-growing connection with place is different to whakapapa, but has some related threads. Te Tau Ihu is increasingly becoming part of me as I eat locally grown food; as I explore my region by foot and kayak, relishing the quiet time of observation and reflection or the uplifting warmth of companions; or witness the ashes of loved ones scattered to become part of the earth. The mountains and coasts give me spiritual replenishment and fulfilment. I visit these places for connection – to myself, to friends and family, or to find solitude, insight and perspective.

All this helps me feel intertwined with this part of the world. Even when living away, I've always returned to tramp or soak



in that sense of being at home. Glimpsing the western ranges and the glassy waters of Te Tai o Aorere/Tasman Bay immediately makes me feel grounded. My family has been here for only two generations. So it's mind-blowing to imagine that feeling of connection multiplied exponentially for those with dozens of generations stretching out behind them in Aotearoa.

When I have lived away, the yearning for the mountains of Te Wai Pounamu is almost physical pain. In my first year of university, I remember being taught a Tūhoe word, 'matemateāone' by Pou Tēmara. That year, I often biked down to the South Coast of Wellington to gaze longingly at the Kaikōura mountains. Matemateāone encapsulates the deep sense of longing and belonging Ngāi Tūhoe feel for Te Urewera, the love between people and land that is so strong it can result in pain and illness when separated, and a willingness to fight to retain that connection.² While a Tūhoe word, the concept and experience exists throughout te ao Māori.

Learning that helped me validate my need to regularly don a pack and head for the hills. Tramping and climbing mean many different things to different people. Adventure, physical exertion, challenge, community, tradition, chocolate, getting away from the grind, back to basics, the jelly-bean bird, exploring, learning, appreciating the small things, marvelling at the big things. Things less often spoken about. For many, it's about reconnecting more deeply to ourselves, to the land and gaining spiritual sustenance and strength.

The whakataukī, 'Hokia ki ō maunga kia purea koe e ngā hau a Tāwhirimātea' translates as, 'Return to your ancestral mountains and be cleansed by the winds of Tāwhirimātea'. I have been taught that this refers to knowing where you are from, and returning to your points of connection to be nourished and supported by them as you traverse the ebbs and flows of life. It is about

spiritual strength. I take literal mountain meaning from this metaphorical mountain – it's a reminder to regularly return to Te Tau Ihu, to Tū Ao Wharepapa and to the mountains of the South Island, not just to contemplate their shape on the skyline but to feel their winds on my skin.

The potency of a name

Place names are another powerful portal. They are signposts of the multiple layers of connections, events and histories of an area. Most place names on our tramping maps speak of the colonial overlay of such things, providing fascinating insight into the early beginnings of our culture of modern outdoor recreation. However, they have often displaced the original Māori names. Even when the Māori name is printed, it's often abridged.

In many parts of the backcountry, colonial names continue to have a profound impact by obscuring the Māori connections, events and histories. The importance of names for understanding a place, and for recognising and allowing a people's relationship with it, should not be underestimated. Deleting a name erases associations of that place from general awareness. A few dual place-names are now appearing on our maps, but most Māori names reside predominantly in the minds and conversations of Māori people.

For example, when we go to Mount Ruapehu, tītī is probably not on the top of our minds. However, many place names in the vicinity demonstrate that tītī once flourished there, and were of significance to the local people. Why aren't they there anymore? What clues lurk in names to guide ecological restoration?

Using a nickname also obscures the true meaning of a name, and is another way we can inadvertently trample on the identity of a place, when our intention was simply to tread on the earth. 'Going to knock off Tappy' is quite a different thing to paying your respects to Tapuae-o-Uenuku. Who is

Uenuku? What a striking footprint he left! Our footfalls follow his, and those of many centuries of earlier inhabitants. We are good at advocating for protection of the tangible aspects of our land – we could do better at limiting the impact our footfalls have on the intangible qualities.

For many years, Browning Pass displaced the pre-existing name, Nōti Raureka. It was re-named after surveyor Robert Browning, a member of the first party of Pākehā to negotiate the route over to the West Coast. Their journey soon displaced the original Māori name – obscuring a whole layer of existence. With the return of Nōti Raureka to maps, a curious trumper reclining beside the large tarn gracing the tussock-covered pass might now wonder ... who was Raureka? And why is this her nōti? Further inquiry would uncover the kōrero contained in Nic Low's essay in the previous edition of *Backcountry* – a woman, a life, a journey, a people, immense loss and disconnection, and a solid start in restoration and reconnection. All from idly pondering a name.

There is much wisdom in the statement: 'In the end we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.'³ By erasing names, an opportunity to learn about the past and present is lost. If we do not learn, how can we understand that there are co-existing layers of history and connection in our landscapes? And if we don't understand them, how can we possibly integrate them into our consciousness, as individuals and as a society, and carry them with us on our adventures, and love the landscape in its wholeness? If we do come to understand, maybe we can support a wider definition of conservation, that also safeguards human connections and relationships to places – our own and those of tāngata whenua.

Raureka and Browning never met. Likewise, we continue to sidestep the conversation they didn't have. As their figurative descendants, it's incumbent on us to build understanding across the cultural divide.

Such knowledge gained weighs nothing in our packs, but greatly enriches our trips. Not only that, it strengthens our ability to communicate cross-culturally and to better care for the places which hold so much meaning to us all.

Learn More

For outdoor enthusiasts in Te Waka o Aoraki/Te Wai Pounamu/South Island, two great resources for learning more about place names and stories are:

- The online Ngāi Tahu Atlas which shares over 1000 original Māori place names and travel routes, with histories: www.kahurumanu.co.nz/atlas.
- The website The Prow which lists and describes place names in Te Tau Ihu o te Waka a Māui/top of the South Island that have resulted from Treaty claims settlements www.theprow.org.nz/maori/geographic-names-tetauihu.



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Melanie Nelson Photo: Tiffany Larson

¹ Joseph Williams, 'He Aha Te Tikanga Māori' unpublished paper for the Law Commission, 1998. ² Pou Tēmara, Lecture at Victoria University, 2000, Wellington. ³ Baba Dioum in a paper to the General Assembly of the IUCN, 1968.



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