

Kōrero ki ngā maunga

In the shadow of Ruapehu

A kōrero with Ngāti Rangi
leader Che Wilson

by Melanie Nelson



Te Kāhui Maunga includes the central North Island mountains of Tongariro, Ruapehu and Ngāuruhoe. These mountains also fall within the more recent map overlay of Tongariro National Park with its dual World Heritage status for outstanding natural and cultural values. Treaty of Waitangi settlement negotiations for Tongariro National Park may start later this year with all groupings who have ancestral relationships to these significant places.

Ngāti Tūwharetoa's connection to these mountains is more commonly known than those of the other iwi. This article focuses on Ngāti Rangi who are one of the iwi from the Whanganui confederation of tribes who continue to uphold their ancestral relationships with, and responsibilities for, Mount Ruapehu.

Che Wilson, a leader of Ngāti Rangi, shared kōrero from his iwi with me. He explained that Ngāti Rangi were here prior to the main waka migration from Tahiti. Today their relationship, and that of the greater Whanganui confederation, is principally on the western, southern and south-eastern faces of Ruapehu.



‘Ruapehu is affectionately called Koro, because he is our grandfather, our ancestor. He is Te Whare-Tōka-o-Paerangi, our house of stone, our shelter protecting us from ash when he erupts. He’s our cathedral and so we would only climb to the pinnacles in times of prayer. He is a food source for us, we traditionally gathered kai in the bush and the higher shrub and grasslands.’

In its recent report, the Waitangi Tribunal recognised that the ‘gift’ from Ngāti Tūwharetoa which led to the establishment of New Zealand’s first national park was in fact a tuku – a conditional transfer with strings attached. Che acknowledges that history and notes that the Whanganui side of Ruapehu was never part of the national park’s creation.

‘Twenty years later there was a proclamation – that is the Crown’s word – we call it a confiscation. And it created a path for the Crown to make Ngāti Rangī invisible, to be ghosts on our own land. The government for over a century actively made sure we were excluded.’

Ruapehu was a significant food-gathering area for Ngāti Rangī however Che says the establishment of the national park inhibited access. Introduced predators further impacted kai sources – the iwi have stories

of hearing the cries of weka and titi as they left around the time of the Second World War.

‘The park is founded on a foreign notion of conservation where you lock it up and throw the key away. For us it’s as if when we enter the Mountain Road it’s got a big ‘Do Not Be Māori’ sign. While the national park opens access for many, we see it really differently. Our pantry has been closed and we will go to jail if we go to it. The notion of recreation is foreign to us, because we only go to the bush for a purpose.’ The mountain is also a burial ground. Che’s father’s ancestor was one of the last to be taken up in the 1920s to Te Wai ā-moe (Crater Lake). That place was reserved for a certain few and they waited 10 years before they could trek up the old path Te Ara-ki-Paretaitonga.

Che described that when people in the greater Whanganui confederation pass away, they don’t go to Cape Reinga in the north, but to the peaks of Mount Ruapehu, and from there to Te Pā-tatau-o-te-rangī, the launchpad or doorway to the heavens. They believe there is a vortex, Te Punga-o-ngā-rangī, above Ruapehu which takes them to the heavens where they become a star.

When Che was raised in the 1980s and 1990s you weren’t allowed on the mountain because of the tapu. Ngāti Rangī have evolved their range of relationships with Koro into the current day, however many will still struggle with what they do today.

‘There are different interpretations of tapu and associated practices to keep yourself safe. You went at a certain time of year, and did karakia to invoke your ability to see the unseen. There are key guardians in the mountains that we talk to to ask permission to go up, and also to give respect to them as they look after those places.

‘There are various layers to tapu. At the simplest level, tapu is a prohibition which is all about safety. It’s ice, it’s high, it’s cold. That’s at a practical common sense level. With high altitude some people’s mind goes – in te reo Māori most mental states have

Che Wilson with his son Te Kanawa
Photo: courtesy of Ngāti Rangī



the suffix 'rangī' [sky or heaven]. As you ascend you can go to a different place.'

Ngāti Rangī would also appreciate people showing consideration by not scattering the ashes of deceased people on the mountain. Che says that it also contravenes practices associated with tapu and is also not allowed by the National Park Management Plan.

Ngāti Rangī feel a responsibility to share some knowledge, to help visitors understand how to be respectful and stay safe. He says that it would be great if particular places could be respected and left sacrosanct by trampers and climbers. Those are Peretini (Girdlestone), Paretaitonga, Te Whiowhio (now Te Heuheu) and Nukuhau as they are the most special places where their spirit dwells before it takes its leap to the heavens.

Che says that for those who don't have the barrier of the national park, the key is to enjoy him, but respect him.

'Respect him and know that for some people you're walking on their cathedral, on their Vatican, on their Westminster Abbey, on their Blue Mosque. And though you're getting physical and spiritual sustenance from doing that, know for others it still shocks them that people do this for recreation purposes – even though for most it's more than that.'

He says if you're going to the mountain you should never treat it as a walk in the park. When people are injured or die there, it becomes Ngāti Rangī's responsibility to assist the police in Search and Rescue. They must also fulfil their own traditions to karakia to invoke the spirit of the mountain to appease him, and to send the wairua on its journey so it can climb to the peaks and enter the heavens, rather than being stuck as a result of the trauma.

'Irrespective of culture, the lofty peaks are a recognition of that which is special and unseen. And so whether it's Mohammed, whether it's Moses, whether it's Ngātoroirangi, or in our case whether it's Paerangi and Whiro, going to those lofty



Ngāti Rangī leader Che Wilson
Photo: courtesy of Ngāti Rangī

places is all about being inspired, and given a spiritual recharge.'

Che is excited about the future which he believes will be a great space, although not without its challenges. He believes that the more people can realise Ngāti Rangī with other iwi have an obligation to care for anyone in their area, the less fear there will be.

'People come to New Zealand for nature and culture – and I'd say those two are the same thing. I can't wait until the time we have a Southern Gateway that provides a succinct snapshot of who we are and how we see the world. It will become an international indigenous centre for volcanology and astronomy. And we will have evolved the meaning of conservation to be rooted in the practices of the Pacific, rather than the practices of Europe and the United States. The future is bright but it will take time.'

The Waitangi Tribunal reports on Te Kāhui Maunga make fascinating reading. See: www.waitangitribunal.govt.nz/news/tongariro-national-park-claims-2.

Nelson-based writer and consultant Melanie Nelson is a keen trumper who enjoys seeing the world through bilingual Pākehā eyes.



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Mt Ruapehu from the Matemateaonga Track Photo: Chris Tuffley

