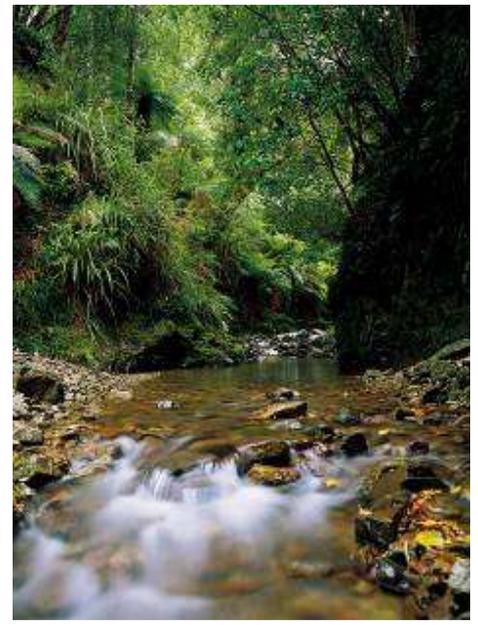


WAI TAPU – WATERWAYS

Wai Tapu – Waterways – Introduction

Water was described as wai ora (water of health) that in general represented the lifeblood of Papatūānuku. A spring that was used for medicinal purposes could also be called wai ora. There were also wai tapu (sacred waters) where birth, death and cleansing rites such as cleaning after childbirth or washing a body after death took place. The same location was always used and only specific people were allowed there at the appropriate time. Wai kino (evil or dangerous water) could be a hazardous piece of water that for some reason had claimed lives or a place where someone had been slain or died through an accident. Sometimes burial caves were found under water and were declared tapu or kino to retain their sanctity.



Akatarawa Stream pictured right

Wai Tapu

The inland waterways included rivers, swamps, coastal wetlands, streams and lakes. Our tupuna knew that each piece of water held numerous species within its confines, each one was a part of a big jigsaw that had to be kept intact. On the banks of each watercourse were plants that assisted to maintain the health of the water. The roots of trees kept banks stable so that excessive sediment did not deoxygenate the water, over-hanging branches helped to maintain steady light, which in turn helped to maintain a constant temperature and also provided food debris for water-based life forms.

Rain falls down through the different levels of trees until reaching the ground among the forest floor. This process allowed the drops of water to be filtered before entering streams and rivers. The downward flow of water carries with it other material from the land such as rotting trees, leaves, soil and stones. These sediments enter the waterways and are transported in the water. In small amounts, sedimentation is a natural process that provides food to water based life and flushes unneeded particles into the sea. Problems start to occur if too much sediment enters a waterway in a short period.

Plants growing along the edges of waterways were important. Leaf matter, which dropped into the water, was used as food. Overhanging banks kept fish cool during the day. Logs on the riverbed and in the banks acted as homes for numerous fish and insects, with the insects also acting as food for fish. The variation of features along a river or stream supported life too. Deep pools gave way to rapids that then made way for slower flows that entered deep pools again. Fish species feed and hide above and below rapids where leaf materials, insects and larvae would be carried, while koura preferred slower moving water where they could catch the same kinds of foods that floated past the rocks they hid under.

Permanent altering of stream flows was not a common practice because of the resulting unbalance this would cause to the life of the stream. Those that believe this was beyond the technology of Māori only have to look at the tonnes of earth and stone moved to create a defensive pa to see what our tupuna could accomplish. The small-scale alterations they did make were only for the purposes of trapping fish or for irrigation of crops. A common practice around Lake Wairarapa was that Māori would dig blind channels off the lake around the migration season. The eels would swim into these large canals and once full they were blocked off. The eels were then caught and dried for preservation. Swamps were important because they provided homes for eels, kourara, fish, flax, raupō and so forth. Wetlands were also excellent filters of paru (dirt) coming from the land. In addition, in times of threat, taonga were placed in swamps for safekeeping. This could range from personal adornments right through to canoes and carvings.

Wai Tapu continued

The availability of water is the key to determining where old time Māori would have lived and travelled. There are several basic concepts that Māori hold true to. The first is the necessity for water. During our study we found this to be true as pa, kainga and walking tracks are always found near water. They were built on high ground, sometimes strategically for defensive purposes, but more often than not to avoid flooding. Pa built on land immediately above water were high and usually on cliffs, headlands or points. Those papakāinga lower down were often several hundred metres away from the main rivers but close to streams and runoffs. Many pa were located at the junction of two waterways.

A build up of too much material in a stream will cause a blockage. Material such as soil would reduce visibility in the water that in turn would not allow some fish to see their food. Any foreign material in water would decrease the levels of oxygen. Any drastic change to the fish's habitat would mean that they had to move away or slowly die. Tupuna could not afford for this to happen for the one obvious reason that their food would be gone. But there were also other considerations. Different families used stretches of streams and rivers so that even if the fish only moved one hundred metres up stream this might have coincided with a family fishing boundary; the first family might have had only ten members at the time and the upstream family fifty. The second family might find it difficult to account for you even though they had extra fish. Going back downstream, if silt from your fishing area flowed down to another family's area they were obviously not going to be very happy with you and may want some form of recompense. Here can be seen the need to not have only considered your family's relationship with the land but also your place within the wider community.

He Whakatauki (Māori Proverb)

“E kore a parawhenua e haere ki te kore a Rakahore”.

“Parawhenua will not come out in the absence of Rakahore”

(The mountain streams were called Parawhenua and the rocks Rakahore. If it were not for the rocks that lay beneath mountain springs and streams neither would flow.)

Quick quiz – Wai Tapu

1. What does wai ora mean?
2. What does wai tapu mean?
3. What would happen to organisms and animals in waterways if there were drastic changes to the temperature, clarity and quality?
4. What does wai kino mean?

Answers at the back of booklet

Key Points – Wai Tapu

- Water represents the lifeblood of Papatūānuku;
- The streams and rivers represent the veins and capillaries in her body;
- The streams flush all of the rotten materials and soil downstream; and
- The forests and plants alongside waterways act as filters for water entering streams.