

HE MĀTAI I TE TAIAO

GRAEME ATKINS AND RAUKŪMARA PAE MAUNGA PROJECT

“Our communities cannot see the damage occurring in the inaccessible parts of the Raukūmara. Deer and possums are decimating the ngāhere, with removal of understorey and disruption to the canopy layer. It is hard to have an emotional connection with something that you do not know. Regaining access to our forests is crucial for our people to reclaim our pūrākau and tribal narratives of place and species”. Graeme Atkins pers. comm., Rotorua, May 2022



No mossy carpet in the Raukūmara Pae Maunga understorey

INTRODUCTION

East Coast biodiversity ranger, Graeme Atkins (Ngāti Porou) grew up learning from his grandmother about the power of the ngāhere and the rongoā that preside there. Graeme widely shares his knowledge of rongoā, ngāhere and te taiao with both Māori and Crown to restore the mana and mauri of te taiao and mātauranga Māori.

In 2020 Graeme’s long standing work in conservation was recognised nationally when he was awarded the country’s top conservation award. On the frontlines in the fight against myrtle rust, Graeme also leads the Raukūmara Pae Maunga Restoration project which includes 150,000-hectares of ancestral ngāhere located on steep mountain ranges shared between Te Whānau-a-Apanui and Ngāti Porou. The whenua and awa that make up the Raukūmara are vital to the social and cultural fabric of both iwi and yet the legacy of forestry, farming, climate change, extreme weather events, introduced pathogens and pests has seen the Raukūmara Pae Maunga stripped of its understorey, waterways disrupted, and birdsong and bird life silenced. Eroded soils on steep mountain ranges

now slip into the rivers, forestry slash degrades the health of beaches and moana and all life that resides in these habitats, including mahinga kai, and thus, mātauranga.

In 2020, Ngāti Porou and Te Whānau-a-Apanui joined with the Department of Conservation (DoC) to launch a restoration project that would see mana whenua become active kaitiaki of the area, working to protect and care for the ngāhere and rare species such as the whio (blue duck), and Hochstetter's frog. Across its four years of allocated funding, the project has generated a large team of locally-based environmental warriors and taiao rangers who have extended their skills of observation and deepened their understanding of mātauranga Māori in their roles as tiaki. Below, Graeme shines light on how these haukāinga tiaki have emerged across the years and how they all work to secure the ongoing wellbeing of the mauri and whakapapa of te taiao, ngāhere and mana whenua of Raukūmara Pae Maunga.

RECONNECTING TANGATA TO TE TAIAO AND NGĀHERE

Intergenerational knowledge transmission based on observation and local knowledge are key strategies for ensuring the flourishing of te taiao. Graeme has spent much time seeking out existing knowledge holders of the Raukūmara in order to extend the mātauranga continuum to rangatahi to encourage them to reconnect to te taiao and to their cultural heritage. There are decades of disconnect between mana whenua and the Raukūmara Pae Maunga that need to be healed in order to restore both tāngata, whenua and awa. As Graeme describes it:



Graeme with manuka brush used in the construction of Pa tauremu

“ Like I mentioned earlier, that's five generations, probably nearly six generations of disconnect. How do you expect people to engage with something when they no longer know anything about it? That was the issue. My formula has been if you can try and make it personal for people you get better engagement. I came from the rongoā Māori side of things. Personal health is something that we can all relate to. It's a way of getting to a personal level with people and then once you are there, then I let them know that a lot of the species that are or were, high value and high use for rongoā [practitioners] are in a bad way. [The ngāhere] is overrun with too many deer and possums, and you know there's been no funding to do anything about it.”

Graeme works with Ngāti Porou, Te Whānau-a-Apanui, and DoC to take whanāu, hunters, government officials and community members into the ngāhere so they can face, first hand, the devastation produced by introduced species, decades of depletive farming and forestry land use practices and the impact of roaming stock grazing within forest confines. Spreading the word about the perilous state of the Raukūmara Pae Maunga is designed to change hearts and minds and to encourage tāngata to connect back to the whenua, awa and ngāhere of this specific place. Storytelling and social media play an important role in the Raukūmara Pae restoration project.

“As a plant lover, especially of our native plants, it’s been terrible for one’s mental health watching it, over the last 30 years, go from [being] like a Garden of Eden to the current condition that it’s in now. About seven years ago we drew a line in the sand and just wasn’t going to accept watching the place fall to bits [any further]. One of my daughters introduced me to social media and how you could engage with wider sections of the community. I started posting some images, good and bad - mostly bad - of the changes that I was experiencing and seeing on the daily, when doing our mahi, especially on the Raukūmara. Some of them were pretty confronting images, hundreds and hundreds of dead tōtara.”

By communicating the loss of taonga species such as giant tōtara, Graeme hopes that community members then start to become aware of other endangered plant and animal species who have lived for millions of years but who are now on the verge of vanishing. Sharing the loss of life in the ngāhere hopefully works as a prompt for people to take more assertive action. Graeme has also shared the Raukūmara story with many media outlets and through short films that are designed to give a sense of hope for the future as much as they communicate the challenges currently in front of Ngāti Porou and Te Whānau-a-Apanui communities. See for example *Why Apu?* by Te Amokura Productions at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLoDRZ6T0y0>.

THE ROLE OF HAUKĀINGA

The Raukūmara Pae Maunga Project demonstrates how important it is to have haukāinga at the heart of any decision making to do with the health and wellbeing of te taiao and ngāhere. Since the launch of the project mana whenua have taken on the responsibilities of monitoring the current state of te taiao and taking measures to control the impact of pests, pathogens and predators on the ngāhere. Having the buy-in of whānau ensures that the actions taken by kaitiaki have broad support. Graeme notes:



The impact of mud silt and slash on taonga kai

“What I’ve hoped from sharing on my social post was that the whānau, because we’re doing the do, and all those in the know here, they know that and so for them to trust us to make the best decisions on their behalf for our taiao, that’s the space we’re in now. We’re really, really, really humbled about that because that was the goal.”

Mana whenua are now also taking ownership of the myrtle rust (plant pathogen) crisis which is infecting taonga plants such as native myrtle species: mānuka, kānuka, rātā, swamp maire, ramarama and pōhutukawa.

The Jobs for Nature programme instituted by the previous Labour-led government has generated a collective of trained taiao experts who are enthusiastic about the work they do. Describing the impact of the end of the programme on whānau in Gisborne, Graeme observes:

“They’re all working in the taiao space, they love it. You can see their enthusiasm when they report on how many stoats they’ve killed and how many possums they’ve killed each year, and they have competitions between projects. They’re all trained, they’ve all got a whole lot of new skill sets, and there’s nothing for them on the horizon. This new government has found \$26mil to continue the clean-up of slash and logs off our beaches and off our roads, and they more or less plucked that money out of the air, and yet there’s over 100 rangatahi in twelve different groups, and all their efforts are going to come undone because there’s no funding past June of 2024. Really, really sad about that. There is a whole army of keen soldiers right now that are willing to work in this space.”

While the benefits to both tāngata and whenua are obvious from the Raukūmara Pae Maunga project, the shifting political climate of Aotearoa puts such progressive moves at risk.



One of the several damaged catchments that flow into the Waiapu awa

CONCLUSIONS

Graeme’s longstanding commitment to te taiao, ngāhere and taonga species demonstrates the urgent need for tāngata to reconnect to whenua, awa and te taiao to ensure the flourishing of the mana and whakapapa of both ngāhere and tangata. Local knowledge, tūpuna wisdom, haukāinga passion for the ngāhere, and the sharing and embellishment of that knowledge are at the heart of the Raukūmara Pae Maunga Project. Learning to seeing again, the wider ecosystem and its complex relationships across all facets of that system, including the role of tāngata as tiaki and as nature, is the informational turn we need, to continue to address the health challenges of te taiao.



Raukūmara Pae Maunga view

How to cite this summary sheet: Smith, J Hutchings, J and Taura Y. “Graeme Atkins and Raukūmara Pae Maunga Project”, Research Summary, He Matai i te Taiao, Papawhakaritorito Trust: Kaitoke, 2024. ISBN 978-1-0670237-3-7

For more info about the Raukūmara Pae Maunga project contact:

Graeme Atkins

gatkins@doc.govt.nz