

HE MĀTAI I TE TAIAO

SHERIDAN WAITAI AND TE ARA WHĀNUI

WHAKANIKO ANŌ AI TE WHENUA - WALKING IN THE PRAYERS OF OUR GRANDMOTHERS

“My role within Te Ara Whānui is Te Haumihi. Te Haumihi being the noise, or the greeting of the wind, but predominantly the noise that you hear in the front of the waka that it makes if you’re travelling in the right direction. We believe that if we hear those sounds of all our seabirds again, if we hear these sounds in the summer, if we hear these things, then that tells us that we’re heading in the right direction.”
Sheridan Waitai pers. comm., February 2024.



Kopapa Waka Wananga Fourth Gen and Ngāti Kuri Taiao Team

INTRODUCTION

Sheridan Waitai (Ngāti Kuri) is the lead iwi representative for the WAI262 Flora and Fauna Claim, a legacy of mahi handed down to her through her grandmother, Saana Waitai-Murray, an original claimant. Sheridan shares her grandmother’s dedication to the welfare of Ngātu Kuri, whenua, whakapapa as well as the oceans where the islands of Motu o Pao (Cape Maria Van Diemen) Manawatāwhi (Three Kings) and Rangitāhua (Kermedec Islands) reside. The evidence provided to the WAI 262 Claim now shapes the strategic direction of Ngāti Kuri and is encapsulated in the name Te Ara Whānui, the many aspirations and the many many pathways (political, social, cultural, spiritual and environmental) needed to achieve these aspirations. As Sheridan describes the mātauranga which informs Te Ara Whānui:

“*Te Ara Whānui was a brief of evidence that we provided inside the Wai262 claim, well nan did. In the way that it has been provided as evidence, it’s really deep within te ao Māori. It’s not what’s written, it’s what’s unsaid, and what’s unsaid is the whole natural order of an invisible world, an invisible kind of thrive ability but it has a very clear oro, it has a very clear frequency, that’s interconnected.”*

THE THREE KEY CORNERSTONES OF TE ARA WHĀNUI



Manawatāwhi Islands off Te Rerenga Wairua and island Kainga of Ngāti Kuri

Ngāti Kuri work to give practical expression to this mātauranga through Te Ara Whānui which uses waka as a physical and conceptual framework with three key cornerstones to Ngāti Kuri's strategic direction. These are: Ka Uri, Te Haumihi and Te Rerenga Wairua. Ka Uri is the taurapa of the waka and a refurbished building provides a physical space where Ngāti Kuri taonga and mātauranga can be shared:

There is a project inside Te Ara Whānui which we call 'Ka Uri' which is the igniting of many, many descendants. We actually purchased an old tourism business and we've sunk around \$23 million into completely refurbishing and resetting that. This building now brings together those commercial, social, environmental aspects, and it re-sets all new narratives for us tribally. All our taiao is on the walls, the wood that we use for carvings, everything about Wai262, our kete are everywhere, our stories are being told, our narratives are being told by us, for us."

The tauihu of the waka in Te Ara Whānui's conceptual framing encompasses the oceans of the Pacific and the Tasman where significant Ngāti Kuri islands dwell. These islands are biodiversity hotspots both above and below the waters and Ngāti Kuri are the kaitiaki of these oceans, lands, and skies. Sheridan notes the "thrive ability" aspirations of Ngāti Kuri when she states:

Te Haumihi is around 1 million square kilometres of land, ocean and islandscapes that we want to manage under our own traditional management and regimes and provide our own evolutionary conservation practices privileging our own mātauranga Māori to transition into what thrive ability looks like."

By traditional management Sheridan refers to the reciprocal relationship that exists between Māori and te taiao based upon honouring the mana of very single living being.

The third key cornerstone of Te Ara Whānui is Te Rerenga Wairua which is also part of the whenua of Ngāti Kuri. Te Rerenga Wairua (Cape Reinga) is the northwestern-most tip of Aupōuri Peninsula where the wairua of tangata return to their traditional homeland. While Te Rerenga Wairua is a place shared across Te Moana-nui-a-kiwa, Ngāti Kuri have a particular responsibility to this landscape as Sheridan explains:

In Te Rerenga Wairua our vision there is it's not just the departing place of wairua, it's actually a major ecological bio-diversity hotspot as well. We have the restoration plans, but we have a physical reset happening, and our narratives are all being reset and happening, so that people actually have awareness and a type of behaviour in crossing that threshold to the wāhi of Te Rerenga Wairua"

MOKOPUNA CAPACITY BUILDING

These physical and narrative resets for Ngāti Kuri have emerged from a concerted effort to build people capacity in the last decade so that the aspirations of Te Ara Whānui can be implemented. These resets have included international Indigenous cultural exchanges, coaching and neurolinguistic reprogramming so that the fear of failure is replaced by a culture of learning where mistakes are part of the natural process. When asked what kinds of successes have emerged from Te Ara Whānui Sheridan notes:



DESCENDANTS OF WAI 262 ORIGINAL CLAIMANTS Sheridan Waitai, Hine Waitai-Dye and Chelsea Brown

Definitely in our own behaviours of how we treat each other, and also how we see ourselves within the context of our world, the living world. I've heavily invested since 2016 resetting relationships with a whole lot of diverse, and unnatural partners, totally unnatural, purposely though, to disrupt. Then I've focused on people and place. We've held the view that for one decade we will do nothing but invest in our people's capability, capacity, skills, knowledge uplift i roto i te ao Māori. [...] I [once] had a team of 17 that were resistant to learning because they were scared of failure. Now I have a team of 20- something that will be putting their hands up for any opportunity."

Sheridan was born into a legacy of mahi that she describes as future-focused and transformative for whānau, hapū and iwi. The work she continues today has been handed down to her by her grandmother. The importance of the next generation to issues of the current moment are at the forefront of Sheridan's mind and are encapsulated in the Fourth Gen project dedicated to igniting and sustaining rangatahi interests:

Again, being very, very intentional and [...] empowering the next generation to take their place and assume their roles, that's been hugely successful and rewarding. I'm seeing our whānau, our mokopuna, they look through the eyes of our tūpuna and they ask themselves, "Am I being a good tupuna, hei tupuna, he rangatira koe? Are you being a good tupuna?" We ask ourselves that question and we make mokopuna decisions."

CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING TE ARA WHĀNUI AND FUTURE VISIONS

One of the challenges for Ngāti Kuri is to encourage mokopuna to take an active role in decision making processes at the same time as older generations continue to fight for a better legacy for their children. While Ngāti Kuri are upskilling their people to continue to act as tiaki of the lands, waters and skies they whakapapa to, they do so within a larger context where multiple Pākehā-led agencies have legislative mandates that are often addressed in disconnected ways:

The reality is for us has been "All care, no responsibility" and when I say that I'm talking about the multiple agencies that have legislative obligations, but their jurisdiction starts here and ends here, not that they do their bit anyway. Uncoordinated, [they] share their own individual narratives about our space, have perceptions of our whenua, and our people, have no relationship, only want to do the compliance part, don't see the value in us. Just banging around [in a space] where everybody is responsible, but nobody does anything. Trying to

actually get data, trying to understand how well anybody is better off with DoC (Department of Conservation) being in our space, and Northland Regional Council and all that. There's absolutely no consistency of data capture, no real information for you to work from a baseline."

Moving beyond the consultation paradigm adopted by Crown-led agencies into more meaningful mana whenua engagement is a slow journey but one that Ngāti Kuri are taking steps to address. This includes having a dedicated Te Ara Whānui Research Centre that upholds the appropriate kawa and tikanga around engagement with external parties, including an initial letter of engagement with Ngāti Kuri:

"You don't get to come and we run you around all over the place for free, gone are those days. If we move from the letter of engagement, we roll into what we call the Pukaiao, which is an all living things protocol which covers off all our intellectual property, rights, all our data, how might data be used more moratorium on data, the type of activity that you'll be doing, how is it linked to Ngāti Kuri's aspirations of Te Hau Mihi. How will it be adding value, what is the point of difference of that value, how will you undertake that activity? So, then we come to the agreement and then our resources are working alongside that, so there are costs associated."

When asked what her vision for the future of Te Ara Whānui, Sheridan explains that Ngāti Kuri are already walking in the footsteps of their tūpuna:

"I think we're walking in it, I think we are already on that trajectory. We talk about whakaniko anō ai te whenua, for us is to adorn the sacred lands again. When we talk about that, that's not just about whenua base, it's about ocean base as well. It's interconnected for us, it's one and the same. ... I can already see we're already walking in those aspirations. That's what I mean, I think we're walking in the prayers of our grandmothers."



Te Paki Kopapa Waka Wananga mokopuna sanding down and preparing the Kopapa Waka named Ngā Mokopuna

CONCLUSIONS

For Ngāti Kuri, the first breath of life comes from the moana and the second breath comes from the whenua. The lands and waters they are tiaki to hold an amazing array of biodiversity and spiritual energy specific to this region. Sheridan and her whānau are working to secure an enduring intergenerational crew of tiaki who can carry the obligations handed down by tupuna to care for these lands, waters and skies. In doing so, Sheridan continues the work of her grandmother whose evidence to the WAI262 claim continues to reverberate within her community.

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