

# HE MĀTAI I TE TAIAO

STEPH AND STEVIE-RAE BLAIR AND  
RANGATAHI TUMEKE

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TUKUNA TŌ AHO KI NGĀ AU O TAUTUKU, KI TE PUNA  
MĀTAURAKA O NGĀ MĀTUA TĪPUNA -  
CAST YOUR LINE TO THE WHIRLPOOL OF TAUTUKU,  
TO THE POOL OF KNOWLEDGE OF OUR ANCESTORS

*"Fourteen years teaching in a classroom and watching our rangatahi trying to fit a square peg into a round hole really. With the whānau, I said, "let's take them home, let's take them back to the whenua, to the moana and the ngahere and start from scratch." Steph Blair pers. comm., February 2024.*



**TAUTUKU BAY AT TAUTUKU** Left to right Steph Blair, Jay Davis, Ataahua Tuhi, Alycia Baird, Destiny Naunau, Lucca Pudda, Rory Beale, Stevie-Rae Blair, Aleisha Mills, Hadley Gutsell

## INTRODUCTION

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Steph Blair (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Waitaha), along with her daughter Stevie-Rae, as well as son Josh and his wife Mel, are part of the founding whānau of Rangitahi Tumeke, a youth leadership programme designed to connect Māori who live in Murihiku to te taiao, to mātauraka Māori and to their taha Māori. The programme is a showcase of mana whenua-led habitat monitoring and education practices and the programme has been running for over ten years, contributing significantly to local capacity building and the development and sharing of mātauraka. The enduring success of Rangatahi Tumeke suggests that if more rangatahi had the opportunity to return home to te taiao as part of their education journey, they too would have more hope, inspiration and determination to pursue their dreams and ambitions as young adults. Furthermore, by fostering kaitiaki obligations within our rangatahi, we ensure the future flourishing of our taiao.



## NURTURING PATHWAYS FOR RANGATAHI

Based in the Catlins in the southeastern corner of Te Wai Pounamu, Rangatahi Tumeke offers rangatahi five days in the ngāhere, awa, moana and whenua that hold cultural significance for Ngāi Tahu whānau. The programme runs during school holidays and is open to not only Ngāi Tahu rangatahi, but to also mātāwaka whānau who migrated southward in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as to Pacifica and Pākehā rangatahi. Rangatahi Tumeke is a leadership course designed to instill hope, pride, and aspiration as pathways into young adult life, rather than an “at-risk” programme for those struggling in the Pākehā education system. It also enables the Blair whānau to extend their hospitality and exchange mātauraka as mana whenua with rangatahi in their rohe.

*“The foundation [for the programme] has been around traditional mahinga kai practices that were handed down to me from my tupuna in my whānau. I guess it's about acknowledging them as well and keeping them in that story along the way, and for the next generations too. I guess to give our rangatahi that experience of walking in, as one rangatahi described it, walking in the footsteps of our tūpuna, which is a pretty cool whakataukī, and that kind of sums it up really.”*

Over the five days rangatahi get to observe and monitor te taiao and also fish, flounder, camp out and abseil. They also explore waiata, karakia, and whakapapa connections to get to know their taha Māori. Stevie-Rae notes the hauoratanga, wairuatanga and maramatanga dimensions that flow from the programme in the following way:

*“A lot come, and they've never been and gathered different kai, some of them don't know what things are, they don't know things about them, then ‘nek minit’ you see them posting stories on Instagram of them out gathering something or doing something. I think that's really cool because you can tell in their wairua how happy it makes them, and we always try and get that into them, like don't ever forget how you feel when you're out doing this stuff, make sure that you keep on doing it for your hauora and all that sort of thing too, that stuff is really important.”*



**TAUTUKU ESTUARY BOARDWALK** Left - right: Ataahua Tuhi, Aleisha Mills, Hadley Gutsell, Stevie-Rae Blair, Destiny Naunau, Rory Beale, Steph Blair

## WHĀNAUNGATANGA AND KAITIAKITANGA

According to Steph and Stevie-Rae the success of the programme stems from the whānaungatanga connections established between rangatahi, te taiao and the programme itself. This is evident in the Tuakana–Teina structure where rangatahi who have previously participated in the programme return, to mentor and support newcomers. Additional measures of success are seen in those Rangatahi Tumeke participants who have achieved success in the education system, in their employment aspirations and in maintaining their connection to te taiao and their taha Māori. A significant aspect of the work done by Steph, Stevie-Rae, and their whānau is the kaitiaki dimension, which aims to instil in the younger generations a deep understanding of the historical and contemporary conditions of te taiao. This includes imparting a foundational knowledge of the state of our natural systems. As Stevie-Rae explains:

*Anytime we are gathering things we're talking to them about, like we've got kanakana and piharau (pouched lamprey) down at Waikawa [Catlins], so we talk to them a lot about that and what the barriers are. They've got a disease at the moment that they don't know what it is, so you're always talking about the risks to the particular species and then that kind of rolls into the whole holistic way we look at things."*

Over the years those who run the programme and those who return as pakeke to Rangatahi Tumeke witness the decline in size and numbers of mahika kai such as pātiki (flounder) and waikōura (freshwater crayfish). The degraded waterways, even in the more pristine environments such as the Catlins, are a sobering reminder of the challenges faced by kaitiaki to take care of te taiao. As Stevie notes:

*Apart from Fiordland, we are the biggest bit of almost untouched [whenua] and if there are farmlands [in the Catlins] it's all sheep and beef, not really any industry or anything like that. If it's looking like that at home, I mean I don't go and gather in other places because I don't trust it a lot across Murihiku, across Southland but imagine what it's like in those places if it's starting to do that at home."*

## FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

Over the next five years the Blair whānau hope to continue to do what they do well: to connect rangatahi to te taiao, to one another and to mātauranga Māori. Funding is a consistent issue, particularly given the ever-changing political climate, and yet Steph and Stevie-Rae are aware that the cost of programmes are a significant barrier for some of our whānau. More than 380 rangatahi have experienced Rangatahi Tumeke to date, and the ripple effects of these learnings over time will only grow. Going home to the ngāhere, as mana whenua, as mātāwaka, as



Tautuku Outdoor Lodge at Tautuku: the base for Rangatahi Tumeke wanaanga



tauwiwi, is a pathway to hope, strength and belonging, which is all we can wish for our rangatahi and for te taiao. Steph leaves us with the final word about the importance of feeling at home when she notes the future aspirations for the programme:

“That would be the two [aspirations], just to keep doing what we have done well, and enable that to happen through funding and the whare. If we had a place of our own I think it would be a whole lot more special for the rangatahi as well to have their own space to go to, a place to call home for them.”

## CONCLUSIONS

The Blair whānau exemplify the important role mana whenua play in driving system change and developing solutions to address the declining health and wellbeing of te taiao. The alternative education pathway offered by Rangatahi Tumeke highlights the importance of connecting rangatahi with te taiao, their tūpuna, themselves, and each other.. When our youth are given the opportunity to develop observational skills and engage in monitoring and restoration practices, they can reconnect with their roots in ways not possible within mainstream educational systems. Additionally, te taiao benefits from the care and engagement of these kaitiaki. Greater support is needed to ensure the long-term sustainability and local capacity of programmes like Rangatahi Tumeke, so they can continue to train and inspire the future generation of kaitiaki.



WAIKAWA AWA Left - right Lucca Pudda , Destiny Naunau , Stevie- Rae Blair

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