

# HE MĀTAI I TE TAIAO

## TE TĀTAI AO

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*“Ultimately the kaupapa at Te Atatū is connecting our whānau to the world around them and giving them a sense of what that means in a whakaaro Māori space.” Dion Pou pers. comm., February 2024*

## INTRODUCTION

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Tuia ki te rangi,  
Tuia ki te whenua,  
Tuia ki te moana  
Tuia ki te herenga tangata,  
E rongo te po, e rongo te ao  
Tihei mauri ora

Interweave the sky,  
the land,  
and the ocean,  
And with humankind,  
Through this we understand the world



View of Te Atatū Peninsula

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Dion Pou (Ngāpuhi) is a restoration ecologist who works with whānau and communities groups connected with Te Atatū North to monitor and restore local habitats. A key part of Dion’s mahi is to fostering a strong connection between the environment and the community to achieve a more effective and meaningful approaches to environmental monitoring and management. Dion advocates for a holistic place-based approach recognising that everything is interconnected. Monitoring and management are then set up to understand and leverage those place-based connections. This approach creates a network of kaupapa with wai (water) as its backbone. Wai is the great connector, naturally linking different elements from the mountains to the sea (ki uta ki tai), and scaling up to other kaupapa, places, and communities within the catchment.

Dion’s approach helps urban Māori connect to te taiao and to mātauranga Māori in ways that are restorative and generative for whenua, awa, moana, and tangata. Whānau-led monitoring and management practices at Te Atatū are leading the way in transforming disjointed mainstream management techniques into thriving whole-of-system approaches by leveraging the collective power of community.

## CONNECTING URBAN MĀORI WITH TAIAO AND WHAKAARO MĀORI

Located on the western side of Waitematā Harbour in Tāmaki Makaurau, Te Atatū Peninsula hosts a diverse range of natural habitats where *repo* and *mahinga kai* prevail. It is an exceedingly rare landscape in the heart of a large urban environment. The peninsula includes pastoral and recreational spaces, as well as a unique lower terrace which is home to salt marshes, fresh water ponds, shell banks and mangroves. Dion works with communities, scientists, schools and local authority representatives to “join the dots” across multiple and sometimes disconnected *kauapapa*. Noting that around 80% of Māori now live in urban environments, Dion has a focus on providing opportunity for *mātāwawaka whānau* to be practically connected to *taiao*:

“My *pātai* really, my *whakaaro* is: how do we bring them, most of our *whānau*, how do we create a pathway, a *huarahi* for them to follow, no matter where they are, Whether in their *rohe* or away from home, at *kura kaupapa* or at mainstream schools. That’s the bulk of our people, and that’s my little kids, they go to mainstream schools, we couldn’t send them to *kōhanga reo*. They’re the ones that I think get missed out all of the time especially in *taiao*, it’s always in the *rohe* talking to *hapū*, *marae*, maybe *iwi*. But 80% of our *whānau* are urban - that’s not them. That’s a massive gap that affects us all, and it really upsets me. Te Atatū *Marae* is a *mātāwaka marae*. It sits in a really high value space environmentally, but as *taiao* I honestly don’t know any other space like it, I don’t think. I say this all the time, if someone had of sat me down and asked me to construct a place that does what we need it to do, I still wouldn’t have come up with Te Atatū, it is an incredible space.

The ecological abundance and diversity of the Peninsula means that it is a busy space. For example, Forest and Bird pursue pest control outcomes, Sustainable Coastlines focus on litter collection and monitoring, there are citizen science engagement projects involving schools and the Te Wai o Pareira RiverCare group is dedicated to restoring the *mauri* of the local *awa*.”

“One of the main opportunities and challenges for us is connecting the massive diversity of people in that space. We’re just one player, and we’re not even the only Māori player because the primary Māori player is *mana whenua*, Te Kawerau ā Maki. *Kaitiakitanga* is seated within *whakapapa*. Only *Mana Whenua* are *kaitiaki tuturu*. This is *tika*, but again our voice gets lost, including the opportunity to support *Mana Whenua*. That is really the overarching *kaupapa* [...] to not only give *mātāwaka* a voice but to connect them to *taiao*.”



Dion with Puawai class from Matipo School and Tuakana from Rutherford High School

## ACKNOWLEDGING THE ROLE OF MANA WHENUA

Acknowledging the role of mana whenua as the key authority in setting priorities for biodiversity and how resources are aligned, Dion sees his role as manuhiri to koha to mana whenua by connecting communities to an understanding of the whakapapa that runs through taiao, and the primary place of Mana Whenua within that. Trying to convey a practical understanding of what it means to be connected to te taiao is a key aim of Dion's work:

“A lot of our whānau may not know a pūhā from a pūriri, which is not an inditement on them, that's [just] where we're at, and it's my job [...] to try and bring them along. That is the major challenge [...] trying to convey to whānau a sense of what taiao is. It's different to a science understanding, or at least a science approach to engaging with taiao. [...] If I start talking about how nothing exists in isolation, and if I say to them, stormwater has a whakapapa in Te Atatū, to awa, to repo, to moana, they may understand that but not necessarily be able to recognise it in the world around them. We want to convey that recognition, so that they can recognise it in their own space, and understand what that means. The Kaupapa is to uplift that understanding of what taiao is, and what our whakapapa means, it's not just a few lines on a whiteboard. Whakapapa is outside. So for me, kāore au he mātanga i te tikanga o te marae, me ērā momo mea, but I know taiao. Sharing that, is what I try to do for our Whanau. That's my koha to them, and to our whakapapa.”

## PLACE-BASED ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

Dion advocates for a place-based approach to ecological engagement. This work of connecting begins with pepehā: the maunga, awa and whenua that we connect to genealogically as tangata whenua:

“If you start with whānau and hapū at place, you start with a pepehā, so pepehā is a model for what we do. [...] Then you scale up through your whakapapa through iwi, through waka, you're scaling up through space and time. It is literally, ko wai au, ko wai au, it's like a catchment. That thinking is te pū o te kaupapa i Te Atatū, is utilizing those high-level concepts of the importance of place and whakapapa, cause you can only recognise systems like that when you start at place. Like our pepeha, starting at place, and then working outwards.”

A few years ago the Te Atatū community hosted a Matariki celebration where various communities associated with the Peninsula were invited to present their mahi to one another. A positive outcome of the event was the demonstration of how interconnected te taiao is and how diverse projects could connect up and support each other. Understanding the Peninsula within a whole system framework (ki uta ki tai - to the mountains, to the seas) is one of the positive outcomes of Dion's mahi:

What's working well is actually for me, is I can convert a lot of our whakaaro into kōrero Pākehā, kōrero pūtaiao, I can kōrero i ō rātou reo, and vice versa I think. That is really important because all of my work really is with those wider community groups, so I have to convey it in a way that makes sense. As soon as you talk about everything being



Maramataka. Tamanui te Ra

connected, no one disagrees. Where we are at the moment, society, everyone wants it. Whānau, a lot of the hapori whānui, they want it, and they understand that it's true. Being able to convey to them what that means in a sense that has a practical output, that has been massive.



Marine Metre Squared session with Te Atatū Intermediate & Amber Aratema

## CONCLUSIONS

Dion's mahi at Te Atatū demonstrates an urgent need to transform existing Crown-led monitoring and management practices so that they are more place-based and reflect ki uta ki tai approach. The need for collectivisation across diverse communities is paramount. Mātauranga-led solutions and education systems for developing skills and understandings are also vital if we are to address the continuing degradation of te taiao. Scaling up the lessons learned from Te Atatū could lead to thriving urban environments that have a close relationship with mahinga kai, taonga species, globally rare habitats and local communities.



Kahu monitoring with Shannon Vlasich Auck Uni summer student

**How to cite this summary sheet:** *Smith, J Hutchings, J and Taura Y. "Te Tātai Ao", Research Summary, He Matai i te Taiao, Papawhakaritorito Trust: Kaitoke, 2024.*

ISBN 978-1-99-117289-1

**For more information about this mahi contact:**

dionpou@hotmail.com