

The Fires of Ambition: Te Awa Tupua 2040

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Abstract

Upon introduction, Māori will often, ask “Ko wai koe?”, or at the beginning of a pepeha, Māori might say, “Ko wai au?” The concept of ‘ko wai au’ is both a question and a statement in one. In one sense ‘ko wai au’ is asking “Who am I?”, in another, it is also stating who I am by saying “I am water.” Ko wai au – wai is me. So the question really asks, which waters are you from? Which are the waters that feed you, that nourish you, that have sustained you and given you life? Ancestrally, tūrangawaewae (a place to stand and belong) was founded within the centralised societal frameworks of pre-colonial Aotearoa, based on whānau/hapū (family/sub-tribe), and it was formed in relation to the geographical features of a place: to the mountains, the rivers and the lakes that define a place. For Māori, water is central to who we are; and our waters have become inaccessible to us. For many of us, growing up Māori in New Zealand can be an extremely confusing time, particularly when living in urban centres, which applies to 84 percent of Māori, according to Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand. Contemporary urban neighbourhoods in Aotearoa do not reflect our whakapapa, histories and connections to whenua, disconnecting us from tūrangawaewae, providing an unstable environment to build our identity and culture on. We know we’re from here, but we don’t really know how, and what that means anymore. Not in the sense that our ancestors knew in detail how they were connected to every little part of the ecosystem that they were in. So if we don’t really know who we are, and where we come from, how do we then know where to go? How do we build an abundant pathway forward, without a clear understanding of the cultural, historical, ancestral, geographical and spiritual foundations that we live on? How do we connect to place? How do we build a strong sense of identity, when the awa (rivers) continue to be siphoned for money and power, the maunga (mountains) are quarried or built over, and the moana (ocean) is dominated by our built environment and polluted with our waste? And how do we connect to place, especially when we feel disconnected from our hau kāinga (true home)?

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