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## **FRST programme: Roothing enhanced by Māori values and knowledge Case study: Transit New Zealand and Ngati Naho, Meremere – Springhill Road**

**Garth Harmsworth, Landcare Research**

[HarmsworthG@LandcareResearch.co.nz](mailto:HarmsworthG@LandcareResearch.co.nz)

### **Background**

Construction on a 100-m section of the Waikato Expressway (major 4-lane highway), between Mercer and Longswamp, was temporarily stopped in 2002 while a solution was sought between the parties, Transit New Zealand (Transit) and the local hapū Ngāti Naho, regarding a significant cultural "taniwha" (a Māori mythological creature) and wetland site. The issue was widely publicised nationally and internationally in 2002 when it came to the attention of the media.

The small wetland and culturally significant site (~30 m by 20 m) was located between the existing road and the Waikato River, adjacent to the planned Expressway. Transit NZ had also identified the vicinity as having "higher environmental value than adjacent land" (Transit New Zealand 2002b) and there was a spring feeding a small remnant of kahikatea trees (*Podocarpus dacrydioides*) – a fact never presented by the media. "While a lot of the area we are working on is in swamp, this section over about 30 metres appears to be a spring which may be significant for a large stand of kahikatea trees, which need to be protected" (Transit New Zealand 2002b), "The discussions to date with Ngati Naho had focussed on how the Expressway could be constructed past this section in a manner which preserved the nature of the site" (Transit New Zealand 2002b). Therefore, "It was always a project intent to preserve the kahikatea stand" and "in fact our proposals always reflected this desire" (Ra Moses, Project Manager/Tangata Whenua liaison, Transit NZ). Without appropriate planning and construction, the ecological and cultural integrity of the site would have been severely damaged by the expressway. Design around the cultural site actually assisted the desire to protect and preserve the ecologically valued kahikatea site.

Media reports throughout New Zealand and internationally were sensational and defamatory, for example, "swamp monster halts road scheme", "swamp dwelling monster capable of causing traffic deaths", "swamp monster halts highway"; the BBC ran a story "Māori swamp creature delays road" and "construction on a major highway in New Zealand has been halted because a local Māori tribe says it is infringing on the habitat of a mythical swamp-dwelling monster". New Zealand politicians were interviewed for negative comment. Media reported that the road would have to be diverted around the taniwha at huge expense and that no one should have "bizarre beliefs" like this in the 21<sup>st</sup>

century. The media also questioned why protection was being considered for just a Māori cultural site.

The local Māori tribe in question, however, had a sincere set of beliefs. Ngāti Naho received no money from Transit for consultation but had a good working relationship with Transit New Zealand and had been working cooperatively with them in the previous years on road planning and design. Construction did stop in the immediate vicinity of the Taniwha site (100 m) on this part of the highway for 3 weeks while the issue was worked through and an amicable solution found. The rest of the 12-km project was never stopped as reported in the media but work continued as normal along the rest of the project.

### **Issue**

The taniwha in Waikato Māori legend are closely associated with the Waikato River. Local hapū (sub-tribes) believed that a taniwha called Karutahi (one eyed) lived in a swamp near Meremere at the side of the planned road (Cooper, T. 2003). The issue for Māori was that the planned straightening and widening of the road would affect, damage, and pollute the taniwha site at the side of the road and Māori elders had held concerns for many years about development and construction near the taniwha site.

The issue was discussed by Transit NZ and Ngāti Naho, and in November 2002 Transit NZ confirmed “it is looking at options to minimise any potential physical impacts on an identified area of wetland which has cultural and environmental significance” (Transit New Zealand 2002a). Many of the cultural sites, such as taniwha locations, were identified and marked on project maps before issues were raised during road construction in 2002. However, in this instance the Transit NZ project manager said “consultation with Māori on the expressway had already thrown up several other taniwha but this was the first time we had heard about this one”. Ngāti Naho representatives said this site had been marked for consultants before road construction but this was disputed by Transit NZ who stated “there was no record of this site identified in any of the meetings” (Transit NZ).

In New Zealand, many significant Māori cultural sites in the landscape have already been destroyed, significantly altered, or modified (~90% of all identified sites) during developments such as road construction. Much of this cultural information is local rather than national. Very few cultural sites are actually shown on maps and there are no central cultural databases because of the sensitivity and confidentiality of Māori knowledge. The reduced protection and management of sites has also been exacerbated both by the reduced connection and relationship of Māori to these sites, particularly as Māori increasingly move away from their cultural homelands to other areas such as cities, and by the diminished importance of these sites in a planning context, through lack of consultation, knowledge, and understanding.

### **Taniwha**

Taniwha have always been treasured by Māori and have been an intrinsic part of Māori culture for centuries. They were regarded as monsters, often taking the form of large eels (tuna), fish and reptiles and typically living at the sides or bends of rivers, in springs and

in caves. Taniwha are regarded as kaitiaki (guardians) of resources such as water, and were usually helpful rather than non-helpful. In the Waikato, a Māori whakatauki (saying) states *Waikato taniwharau, he piko he taniwha, he piko he taniwha*, meaning *The Waikato River has a taniwha at every bend*. However, this whakatauki may also be symbolic of the 19th century kingitanga movement, meaning there was a tribal chief at every bend of the river, which reinforced Māori sovereignty (*tinu rangatiratanga, mana whenua*) in this region (Cooper, T. 2003). The taniwha in the swamp affected by the expressway was one of three believed to live in the area near where Springhill Road joins the main highway at Meremere.

*For many Māori after a tragedy, such as a drowning, a tohunga (priest) will actively, in karakia (prayer), ask the taniwha for help to bring the body back. They realise the spirit has gone to god but they want the body back for closure so it can be buried with its ancestors. After the body is found, you go back again and reverse the process – the taniwha are then put back to sleep. In the Waikato, taniwha are put back to sleep at the base of Taupiri, a very sacred mountain. Here in the Waikato if I'm asked to bless something or help when someone is lost in the river, I'll immediately invoke the taniwha that have been put to sleep. In this approach I am asking them to be helpful guardians and protectors. Māori follow tikanga (protocols, principles, values) very closely to make sure everything is done the right way, according to that of local tribes (iwi/hapū) (Tui Adams, Ngāti Maniapoto; Cooper, T. 2003).*

For Māori the significance of taniwha is no different from the beliefs of many other different religions, or from mythology passed down in many non-Māori cultures throughout the world. For Ngāti Naho in this particular case study they wanted: “recognition that the taniwha exist...we already know that in a Māori sense. They should be identified and respected for what they are” (Corbett 2002).

### **Good practice**

Ngāti Naho have had an informal understanding with Transit for many years, and although no signed Memorandum was in place a good working relationship had developed and was the basis for ongoing dialogue during this event. In February 2004 Ngāti Naho, along with other key agencies such as local councils, signed a “Partnering Charter” for the Mercer to Longswamp Four Laning project as one of the key stakeholders involved in this Transit project. Building on this charter, Transit NZ intends to formalise an MOU with Ngāti Naho and other iwi groups in the future.

Ngāti Naho believed that issues surrounding the taniwha issue and significant cultural sites could have been discussed more fully with them at the start of the project and that “Transit New Zealand did consult the iwi about the Waikato Expressway, just not about the taniwha” (Corbett 2002). “One of the things we don't want to do is hold up the motorway. It's a matter of sitting down with Transit New Zealand and working out the problem – if there is a problem ... and coming to an amicable solution, and there is one”. Ngāti Naho also said “our organisation requested that a cultural report be prepared. That was only a couple of months ago, which was turned down. Transit New Zealand had reasons for that. We left it at that. A cultural report would have brought all the issues out.

There have been cultural reports done in this area, but not by Māori. I think that's the problem" (Corbett 2002).

Transit, on the other hand, believed there had been sufficient tangata whenua consultation and an effective process was followed. For Transit one of the key issues was that Ngāti Naho had not previously identified the "taniwha" site along with two other cultural sites and they were not originally shown on the proposed Expressway route. These issues had spread over a number of years, and also included other factors and issues that were discussed by both parties. The identified sites, according to Transit, were marked on project maps.

Since 2002 a number of cultural sites have been identified and are being managed; Ngāti Naho were relatively happy with the outcome. A hapū-led cultural database and cultural assessment of all known sites would have probably greatly helped the process.

The Transit NZ project manager at the time said the issue did not affect the current work around the site and that good progress continued (Transit New Zealand 2002a), but this was not reported in the media. Transit NZ continued to work with Ngāti Naho to understand the issue and to find a solution together.

### **Solution**

Consultation with Ngāti Naho cost nothing, and Ngāti Naho and Transit worked together constructively until a solution was found. "Together we wanted to come out with the right outcomes for both parties" (Malcolm Wara, Ngāti Naho). "This is a significant cultural site for us and we have got Transit to agree to a modification of their design, which preserves most of the site"; "we have asked Transit to ensure that when critical works are carried out (in future) a member of our hapū is given the opportunity to be present to ensure that cultural values are protected" (Transit 2002b). The whole "taniwha" issue took 3 weeks to resolve, during which time Transit NZ came back with a viable alternative to maintain the integrity of the taniwha and the wetland. A working solution was derived from this consultation without any monetary gain for Ngāti Naho. The options were to minimise any potential impacts on an identified area of wetland that had cultural and environmental significance.

Transit NZ modified their design to preserve the nature of the site, and to protect the kahikatea and taniwha site, and the Expressway was not moved or diverted (Fig. 1). A solution was found at minimal cost to the fill at the side of the road and the road footing, and the drainage was redirected back onto the site: "the solution was marginally more expensive than the technique we had intended to use, but the benefits environmentally and culturally are significant" (Transit 2002b). The alternative did not compromise safety, there was no narrowing of the carriageway, and 90% of the site was preserved. The solution involved "a 30 metre rock fill that will be placed adjacent to the site, this will allow the road embankment to be steeper at this location and preserve 90% of the site, the drainage will also be redirected to ensure that no water is unnecessarily drained from the site" (Transit 2002b). A small retaining rock wall was constructed around the taniwha site to protect it from debris and sediment from the road footing and the taniwha

site and wetland now connects to a small kahikatea forest remnant. The solution protected both the cultural taniwha site, and the kahikatea remnant wetland adjacent to the Expressway.

The cost of the modification added an extra \$20,000 to the \$75 million expressway and Ngāti Naho continue a good working relationship with Transit New Zealand. Another significant local site, an ancestral water spring at the top of a nearby hill, will be recognised by a small commemorative plaque.

### **Summary**

This case study illustrates the importance of roading agencies respecting cultural issues and building good working relationships with iwi and hapū. It also highlights the importance of having cultural values information accurately included in maps, especially at the start of projects.

In this case study a satisfactory outcome was finally achieved and construction was completed to the satisfaction of both parties at minimal cost. This highlights the importance of having in place a constructive dialogue and an effective consultation process from the start. It also highlights the challenges for roading companies and the need to achieve creative solutions (often outside the mainstream) to roading design that can take into account cultural, social, economic and ecological challenges. Many of these issues, however, are resolved by best construction methodology and process. Transit said that the issue “had not been about money, as speculated by many people, but was about agreeing on a construction methodology and process” (Transit New Zealand 2002b).

About 85% of all New Zealanders are non-Māori. A lack of education among the wider New Zealand public, and even amongst Māori, about cultural understanding and meaning of Māori cultural sites of significance means few people have respect for and knowledge of such areas and issues. Much of this cultural values recognition is specific to small localised areas, reflected by the values of local iwi, hapū, or whānau community groups. It needs to be addressed at this local level and handled sensitively by agencies. New Zealand and international audiences are generally manipulated and influenced by a sensational, uncaring, and often ignorant media – largely a dominant western secular viewpoint and set of values - that resorts to immediate ridicule of ‘other’ value and belief systems. This case study highlights the lack of understanding surrounding a local issue based on indigenous cultural values and sites, where the group having these ‘indigenous’ values were publicly ridiculed through highly sensational, insensitive, and unbalanced national and international reporting.

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