

Kia Maanu, Kia Ora: Stay Afloat, Stay Alive – Acknowledging the significance of tikanga Māori in formulating and communicating water safety policies and practices

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Abstract

The traditional beliefs and practices of Māori demonstrate great respect for water, for its dangers as well as its life-giving properties, and Māori have, along with other Polynesian peoples, been known for their skill in swimming, fishing and canoeing. However, Māori now outnumber others in New Zealand in terms of the proportion involved in drowning and water-related injury. In seeking to promote water safety among Māori, *Water Safety New Zealand* has enlisted the help of Māori communities. Its message - *Kia Maanu, Kia Ora* (Stay Afloat, Stay Alive) – is underpinned by an acknowledgment of the need to reinforce the traditional respect for water that permeates the Māori worldview.

Introduction

In Aotearoa, water is a major feature of our landscape and lifestyle. The seas, rivers, lakes and ponds provide us with some of the most spectacular and challenging sites in the world. Every day, people of all ages from a wide range of communities enjoy easy access to water for recreational, non-recreational and cultural purposes.

Traditionally, Māori, in common with many indigenous peoples, had great respect for the physical and spiritual properties of water and developed high level skills in swimming, fishing and canoeing. The fact that a disproportionately high percentage of Māori are now involved in drowning and water-related accidents is one of many indications of the dissociation of many Māori from traditional beliefs and practices that has accompanied colonization. In attempting to provide water safety education that targets Māori, *Water Safety New Zealand* has acknowledged the significance of this and has sought the support of Māori communities in communicating its message - *Kia Maanu, Kia Ora* (Stay Afloat, Stay Alive) – a message that is underpinned by recognition of the importance of culturally informed water safety practices.

***Kia Ora* (Stay Afloat, Stay Alive): 2003 and beyond**

On average, 27 Māori people drown and many more are hospitalised every year as a result of water-related injuries (Chalmers, 2004). In 2003, Water Safety New Zealand took a proactive approach to establishing a water safety strategy for Māori. The overall aim of this strategy was to reduce the number of Māori involved in water-related accidents in New Zealand. The approach was reviewed in 2006.

Water is one of our greatest *taonga* (treasures), both physically and spiritually. Physically, water is vital to sustaining life and well-being on Earth. At the same time, it has the capacity to destroy life. Spiritually, water is a life force whose meaning and significance changes with its shape and form. Douglas (1994) discusses the physical

and spiritual significance of water to Māori in terms of the significance of the words used to refer to it.

He Wai

- *Waiora* – The term given to the purest form of water, the spiritual and physical expression of *Ranginui* (sky father) and *Papatuanuku* (mother earth). Pure water such as rain is termed *Te Waiora a Tane* and has the power to give life, to sustain well-being, and to counteract evil.
- *Waimaori* – The term used to refer to water in its day-to-day manifestations, to water that has no specific sacred associations, water that can be used for everyday purposes, such as swimming and gathering food.
- *Waikino* – The term used for water that is rushing rapidly through a gorge or flowing past hazardous obstacles such as large boulders or submerged trees. In this manifestation, water has the potential to cause harm to humans.
- *Waimate* – This term is used to refer to dead, damaged or polluted water, water that has lost its power to rejuvenate either itself or other living things.
- *Waitai* – This is the name used to describe the sea, the surf, or the tide. This is sea water as opposed to fresh water (*waimaori*) and is linked to the process or cycle by which water returns to *Tangaroa*.

Early Observations of Māori Aquatics

Māori have always been acknowledged as possessing expertise in swimming and aquatic activities. Early European historians who observed Māori lifestyle wrote extensively about Māori games and pastimes in, on and near water. Thus, for example, Best, 1976 (p. 40) noted:

The Maori of New Zealand like unto his Polynesian brethren was absolutely and thoroughly at home in the water. He practised surf riding, with and without boards, and also in small canoes, as did the Hawaiians and others.

In the past, Māori adapted their swimming styles to water conditions to ensure safety while swimming near marae at local beaches, rivers, lakes, springs and ponds. Best (1976, p. 40) maintains that “Maori knew four different methods of swimming, though, apparently [largely] confined himself to the sidestroke (*kau tahoe*)”. Other strokes included *kau apuru* (breaststroke), freestyle as it is known today, and a form of backstroke known as *kau kiore*. Māori children were taught to swim almost before they could walk, sometimes with *poito* (floats) fastened to them when learning their swimming skills. Māori youth were experienced at paddling or sailing *waka* (canoes) for long periods in changeable conditions: “All forms of canoe were much appreciated by young folk and both sexes learned the use of paddles (*hoe*) in youth. Children manipulated small canoes and capsized merely added to their enjoyment” (Best, 1976, p. 43).

Seafood gathering and harvesting was a shared cultural activity amongst *whānau* members and Māori used their knowledge of the celestial bodies together with a *maramataka* (calendar) to identify the best times and conditions for fishing, confining certain activities to certain seasons and times of the day and night. They also exercised *rāhui*, placing restrictions on access to local water sites if a drowning or conservation crisis occurred: “Rahui is a mark to warn people against trespassing;

used in the case of tapu, or for temporary protection of fruit, birds, or fish” (Williams, 1992, p. 42). Although the term ‘taniwha’ is a term that is now often wrongly used to refer to mythical monsters that lives in water, a *taniwha* is, in fact, a *kaitiaki* or guardian with the power to protect and foster the life principle and general welfare of local water sites.

Particularly in the Waikato, Wanganui and Rotorua regions, Māori commonly travelled by water until the early 1900s, negotiating rivers, lakes and seas as they travelled around Aotearoa. King (1983, p. 126) notes that “coastal tribes were involved heavily in sea transport, especially on the East Coast of the North Island where some Ngati Porou hapu operated their own trading vessels between Gisborne and Auckland”. Because Māori depended on the waterways for transport to trading stations and other settlements, they developed strategies, such as the pulley system, to ensure safe and effective river crossings for the crew and passengers of *waka*. In the Waikato region, the pulley system was used as a means of ferrying goods across the river to a landing stage.

Outlining the problem

It is clear that Māori traditionally had a wealth of knowledge, experience and skill in the environment of water. Why then are a disproportionately high number of Māori now involved in water-related accidents? Part of the reason may be that although Māori have retained their close association with water, many, as a result of the disruption of traditional social structures, no longer have access to traditional ways of learning respect for water and the skills required for surviving in and around it. Whatever the reason, the problem has been with us for some time. In an article written for *Te Ao Hou* in the 1960s, Ruhia Sage (1965, pp. 43-44), Dominion President of the Māori Women’s Welfare League, exposed the high rate of drownings among Māori compared to non-Māori: “It is a serious cause for concern that so many of these tragedies should involve our Maori people. The Maori population ratio is about one in 14, but this drowning rate is about one in six”.

Drowning and water related injuries in Aotearoa are the third highest causes of accidental death, following vehicle accidents and falls: “On average 130 people have drowned in New Zealand every year. New Zealand’s death rate from unintentional drowning is about double the rates of Australia and the United States (Chalmers, McNoe, & Stephenson, 2004, p. 4). Research carried out by the University of Otago Injury Prevention Research Unit on data collated over the last 20 years shows that although the total number of people who drowned in Aotearoa decreased by 45% between 1985 and 2004, the number of Māori drownings has steadily increased. Drown Base data from 1994-2003 show that 22% of those who drowned were Māori although the 2001 Census indicates that only 15% of the New Zealand population identified as Māori (Statistics New Zealand, 2001).

Drown Base is the official drowning database of Water Safety New Zealand and contains records of all drownings in Aotearoa. This system collates all data from drowning incidents as advised by Coroner and Police reports. The following facts cover a 10 year period from 1994 - 2003.

The most common sites for Māori drowning are:

1. River
2. Beaches
3. 0-1km from shore

The most common activities for Māori drowning are:

1. Accidental immersion (no intention of entering the water)
2. Swimming
3. Fishing/food gathering

The most at risk age groups are:

1. 15 – 44 years
2. Preschool aged children 0 – 4 years (Accidental immersion)

The most at risk regions are:

1. Waikato
2. Bay of Plenty
3. Northland
4. Wanganui

Major Risk areas identified for Māori:

1. Supervision
2. Learning to swim
3. Rivers

Water recreation and fishing in uncontrolled and unsupervised locations is still common amongst Māori, with Māori men being most at risk – 84% of Māori who drown are male.

Māori children account for 44% of all children under five years who drown. In most cases, improper supervision or lack of supervision is the principal issue in Māori children drowning.

Nearly half (46%) of all Māori children who drown do so while swimming.

Over the last few decades, the New Zealand Physical Education Curriculum has undergone critical changes in terms of the provision of swimming and water safety education in schools. In 1967, schools in Aotearoa were required to “ensure as far as possible that all children develop safe and sensible practices in the use of pools, beaches, rivers and other swimming facilities” (New Zealand Physical Education Branch, 1967). Now, however, the curriculum has an holistic focus on physical and health education, and schools are required only to provide opportunities for children to learn fundamental aquatic skills by the end of Year Six. The following facts revealed in *New Zealand Youth Water Safety Survey 2003* are of serious concern:

- In just three years (between 2000 and 2002) 37 secondary and 201 primary schools closed their pools.

- A survey conducted in 2003 found that 42% of children in higher decile (richer) schools learned to swim at private lessons, compared with only 14% of those in lower decile schools.
- Lack of school swimming facilities means *whānau* are now charged for swimming lessons that should be free. In addition, transportation costs have become a major factor in relation to transporting children to swimming lessons.

A Drowning Prevention Strategy

A Drowning Prevention Strategy (DPS) was released in 2005: *Towards a Water Safe New Zealand 2005 – 2015 (Te Rautaki Ārai i te Toremitanga: Kia Tupu ai a Aotearoa hei Whenua Haumarū ōna Wai, 2005-2015)*. This is “a plan to prevent death and injury due to drowning and other water related causes and for enhancing water safety in New Zealand”. This strategy aims to involve iwi as key water safety partners: “Communities and individuals must be empowered to develop the necessary skills and expertise to improve their water safety” (Accident Compensation Corporation, 2005). An essential part of the DPS vision is to create a water safety culture that is based on a set of guiding principles or a shared set of beliefs. One of the main principles behind the Strategy is *Appropriateness*:

Appropriateness - Working under the Strategy must recognize that different communities and groups have different needs. What may work for one population group may not work for another. The Strategy must respond to the needs of New Zealand’s different cultures, genders and age groups (Accident Compensation Corporation, 2005).

The idea of taking account of cultural beliefs and practices is not new. Many working in the Health Service Industry recognise the benefits of health promotion programmes by Māori for Māori. Thus, for example, Ellis, Sperling and Toma-Dryden (1999, p. 6) refer to a model that “aims to provide Maori with a set of guidelines to ensure that the health message portrayed is the message intended for the particular Maori audience”. Furthermore, the Maritime Safety Authority in association with *Nga Waka Federation*, has provided guidelines that cover safety roles and procedures for those involved with *waka*. These guidelines, based on the collective wisdom of the *waka* leaders who attended consultation meetings throughout Aotearoa, were approved in October 2001 for the operation of *Waka Taua*.

Most drowning incidents could have been prevented. In fact, “59 per cent of those who drowned were from non-recreation accidents, when there was no intention of entering the water” (Water Safety N.Z., 2004). Bearing this in mind, it is important to develop an approach that focuses not only on recreational activities, but one that involves all areas of potential risk. This being the case, cultural considerations, including respect for, and understanding of water, must clearly play a major role.

A Water Safety Strategy for Māori

Water Safety New Zealand has taken a proactive approach to delivering water safety education specifically for Māori. The overall aim of the strategy, launched at Parliament in November 2003, is to allow for the development of targeted initiatives and projects that meet the needs of Māori. In the first year, the emphasis was on data gathering and dissemination at a national and regional level. In launching the strategy,

whose main message was ‘*Keep your whanau afloat*’, the Minister of Māori Affairs, the Hon Parekura Horomia, concluded: “What concerns me is that with the expected increase in the Māori population over the next 10-20 years, coupled with more business and commercial opportunities with water, through such activities as fishing ventures through the fisheries allocation and marine farms there is going to be more tragedy and more needless loss of life” (Kokiri Paetae, Dec 2003, p. 14).

The message - *Keep Your Whanau Afloat* – was widely broadcast in the media – on television, on iwi radio stations, and in newspapers and magazines. It was also publicized in *kanohi ki te kanohi* (face to face) contexts at Māori cultural and sporting events. The overall aim was not only to communicate the message to individuals, but to gain the respect and support of *iwi*, *whānau*, and community *marae*. Water Safety New Zealand believe that the best way of making sure that water safety messages are successfully communicated is to ensure that Māori take ownership of the problem and take the water safety message into their own communities.

Kia Maanu, Kia Ora!

In 2004, Water Safety New Zealand, in association with The Māori Language Commission (*Te Taura Whiri i te reo Māori*), set up the Ma Te Reo Fund to support a project in the Waikato region: *Kia Maanu, Kia Ora!* (*‘Stay Afloat, Stay Alive!’*). A Māori language water safety resource was distributed to Tainui Raupatu Lands Trust *marae*. The aim was to promote a culturally appropriate approach to water safety through the promotion of *te reo Māori* and *tikanga Māori* in the context of water safety advice. The emphasis was on teaching and learning – learning to swim, providing appropriate supervision, using lifejackets and other buoyancy equipment etc.

Towards a safer future

A current focus of *Water Safety New Zealand* is the provision of educational resources and programmes for students whose first language is Māori and those who are involved in *Kōhanga Reo* (Early Childhood Education), *Kura Kaupapa* (Primary-Intermediate schools) and Māori community groups. The teaching resources are to be linked to curricula: *Te Whāriki* (the Early Childhood Curriculum); *Hauora* (the Health and Physical Education curriculum for primary and secondary schools) and, where appropriate, other curricula such as curricula for *Te Reo Māori*, English, Social Studies and Technology. These resources are to be made available via a website that is linked to other water safety educational programmes.¹ They will reinforce the traditional relationships of Māori and water, providing key messages whose aim is to promote safer practices in or near water. Some of the key messages are outlined below:

- Respect the power of water;
- Proper supervision in, on and near water: Within Sight, Within Reach;
- Always be water wise in the home, the pool, the river, the lake, or beach;
- Learn to swim;
- Wear proper clothing & use safe equipment;
- Always check the conditions.

Another strategy is to promote water safety education via regional water safety forums whose purpose is to explore regional water safety initiatives. The focus is on

at risk groups and community awareness. These forums provide Māori organisations and groups with expert guidance and assistance in specific areas such as swimming pool fencing, standards development and risk management, along with updates on training and educational resources. Support and advice on rules, bylaws and regulations will help with the identification and management of water safety hazards in the community.

Conclusion

The strategies employed to reduce Māori drowning and water-related accidents in Aotearoa have produced some positive outcomes in relation to the promotion of water safety initiatives targeted at Māori. However, the extent to which these strategies are effective in terms of a reduction in the number of Māori involved in water-related accidents is what really counts. Currently, these strategies are being evaluated and reviewed. The ongoing challenge is to find effective ways of ensuring that Māori are encouraged to maintain their traditional respect for the power of water and their traditional skills in avoiding its potential dangers.

Endnotes

1. The New Zealand Fire Service has already used this model of education to good effect by producing a Māori language fire safety resource called *Maui tinei ahi* (Get Firewise).

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