Consciousness-centered stewardship: An Indigenous standpoint

Abstract

Dominion-driven stewardship, which stages human interventions with an anthropocentric lens, externalises problems. We present consciousness-centered stewardship, seen through the Māori ethic of kaitiakitanga, as the missing connective tissue that looks to fix ourselves. We advocate an approach that appreciates a collective self-intelligence in the world and being a steward with a "conscious mind" as part of a transformative way forward. Sustainable development from this perspective thus includes paying attention to personal growth.

Keywords: Indigenous Peoples, Māori, ecological, sustainable development, kaitiakitanga, stewardship

Introduction

Indigenous Peoples' advanced cultural knowledge systems protect enormous tracts of the world's biodiversity. Indigenous approaches set a preeminent standard of sustainable development that has endured through millennia, adapting and changing to various forces. Indigenous Peoples protect 80 per cent of the world's biodiversity (Raygorodetsky 2018), an incredible feat accomplished by a collective pocket of just 370 million people across 5,000 societies, making up 5 per cent of the global population. However, Indigenous Peoples account for 15 per cent of the world's extremely poor (Raygorodetsky 2018; Waldmüller et al. 2022; World Bank 2021) and "lag behind on virtually every social, economic, or political indicator considered in the SDGs" (Sunuwar 2019 para. 3). A paradox is that the world's best and most knowledgeable sustainability practitioners and philosophers are deemed 'extremely poor' because they are 'underdeveloped' by Western derived measures. A further paradox is

that Indigenous Peoples are a controlled target for development because they did not run roughshod over their part of the planet, preserving some of the healthiest remaining ecosystems. They understand the consciousness that is required to live well in this world.

A consciousness-centered approach involves appreciating multiple intelligences, inviting a subjective, intimate relationship with the world, drawing upon spiritual sources and energies as guidance, as well as taking practical steps in the community to ensure a flourishing world. As noted by Spiller and Nicholson (2023 pp. 311-312) “Indigenous peoples are geographically diverse and culturally heterogenous however there are some key tenets we identified across a wide body of Indigenous leadership literature that provide touchstones of connection.” These points of connection include an appreciation that humans co-evolve alongside all aspects of creation, a keen sense of symbiotic exchange and reciprocity, an abiding relationship with place and community, upholding ancestral and cultural wisdom and a commitment to activism, resistance and resilience to protect ecologies and Indigenous ways of life.

Too often, humans are so busy acting upon the world to fix problems that we overlook that it is we who need fixing. A pivotal consideration distinguishing a consciousness-centered approach from a dominion-driven approach to stewardship is that we must also examine ourselves rather than simply externalising problems as 'out there' in the environment that must be fixed. The preponderance of solutions based on a scientific “data-driven landscape” (Waldmüller et al. 2022 p. 471) compounds an externalising of problems and placing that which is to be fixed in the world or other people. We argue that development is not simply out there in the world external to us but must also be incorporated internally to ensure a level of consciousness that takes responsibility for human-created problems and associated solutions. To move beyond the ineffectiveness of whack-a-mole fixing of environmental issues as they pop up, we must consider our own involvement and development.

Indigenous approaches are needed for true sustainability and planetary health, yet the sidelining of Indigenous self-determination and land stewardship has exacerbated the sustainability issues of the whole planet. Loomis (2000 p. 893) highlights how traction in the 1990s saw a concerted effort by Western ecological economists to develop sustainable economic approaches based on Capital Theory. He argues that Indigenous ideas and efforts should have been more addressed. The drive to sustainable development sidelined Indigenous self-determination in bringing their own contextual, holistic philosophies and ways of being and solving ecological problems. Despite this vast knowledge repository, hegemonic developmental norms and processes have systematically sought to overlook, co-opt and subsume them.

This paper presents the idea of consciousness-centered stewardship from an Indigenous Māori standpoint. We orient to the Māori ethic of kaitiakitanga, stewardship, noting that this is a multi-faceted ethic that embraces a vast and complex philosophy and set of practices. Kaitiakitanga, as an ethic of care, is described as a "long-term intergenerational obligation to protect, maintain, and enhance the spiritual and material wellbeing of precious resources that have been handed down by ancestors and will be passed on to future generations" (Nicholson et al. 2015 p. 6). In a Māori ethic of kaitiakitanga, the world is dynamic, and landscapes are living, not static canvasses upon which to exert our will.

We first set out some key tenets of the connective tissue that weaves through Indigenous worldviews. Embracing consciousness-centered stewardship and the Māori ethic of kaitiakitanga instils that each person is born with agency and is a portal of consciousness. We then explain a kaitiakitanga approach: tracing sources of belonging to a shared origin, consciously creating wellbeing, the importance of reciprocity, living landscapes and agency. We present a table that distinguishes between dominion-driven and consciousness-centered stewardship and some practical steps people can take to cultivate stewardship consciousness.

The connective tissue of Indigenous stewardship wisdom

Ancient wisdom in Indigenous communities promotes much broader and more holistic approaches than many other frameworks advocating sustainable development (Cajete 2000). Founded on principles of reciprocal exchange and care between human and non-human realms, Indigenous Peoples, whether in community, political or corporate settings, are stewards tasked with ensuring the wellbeing of social and ecological communities. Even economically, many Indigenous businesses have a long-term intergenerational purpose, delivering multi-dimensional wellbeing rather than single-mindedly pursuing profit. They are stewards who navigate the pressure points and make conscious compromises to support more humane, life-giving and world-nourishing business practices (Spiller and Nicholson 2023), and systems refined over centuries are in place to deal with inevitable human shortcomings.

The U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (n.d.) clarifies that Indigenous Peoples have a history of continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories. The consequences of colonisation have been devasting for Indigenous communities and ecologies under their purview. Nevertheless, despite it all, they have retained their unique cultures, ontologies and epistemologies (Hausdoerffer et al. 2021; Nicholson et al. 2015; Spiller et al. 2020; Verbos and Humphries 2014).

Notwithstanding, Indigenous Peoples are systemically defined in relation to colonisation; there are bedrock ideas amid the heterogeneity that unite them. Some of these precepts are the valuing of cosmogenealogies and creation stories, a deep belief in sacred ecologies, that humans dwell in kinship relationships with all creation, treasuring wisdom that has been tested through the millennia and comes to each generation as the gift of knowledge; and an intergenerational orientation to consider future generations and be good ancestors of tomorrow (Hausdoerffer et al. 2021; Spiller and Nicholsen 2023; Velasco-Herrejón et al. 2021). Indigenous outlooks embrace a holistic and integrated view of spiritual, material,

human and ecological dimensions and believe that individual wellbeing correlates to the wellbeing of the broader social, ecological and spiritual collective (Cajete 2000; Kawharu 2009; Marsden 2003; Murton 2012; Spiller, Pio, et al. 2011; Tate 2012).

Indigenous Peoples have developed sophisticated systems that sustain life in intimacy with place. They have developed epistemologies and ontologies that reflect relational, dynamic living systems of knowledge which shape governance and decision-making systems, law and lore, and collective approaches that involve everyone in society (Spiller, Erakovic et al. 2011; Waldmüller et al. 2022). Yap and Watene (2019 p. 7) explain the relational aspects of an Indigenous approach:

> For many Indigenous peoples, human beings are only one part of a development story that includes and weaves all things in the world (and universe) together (Marsden 2003 in Watene and Yap 2015). Development from this perspective is relational. The starting points for wellbeing and development are shared origins, shared existences and interdependent futures.

Velasco-Herrejón et al. (2021 p. 4) highlight the “sense of collective stewardship of natural resources” endemic in Indigenous communities that upholds “a mutually beneficial process of nurturing and healing”. Thus, the institutions that enable collective stewardship are often communal structures that engage in participatory collective decision-making processes. Economies rally around the maximum use of minimum resources to create multi-dimensional wellbeing. Time is one of a 'perpetual present' that is cyclical, rhythmic and less bounded by chronological and temporal constraints. Stakeholders are in perpetuity and include all facets of creation, not just people (Spiller et al. 2020; Velasco-Herrejón et al. 2021).

Consciousness-centered stewardship: Kaitiakitanga

For decades, Aotearoa New Zealand has been a crucible of change throughout phases of colonisation as the two rubbing sticks of Māori and colonising settlers have sought and fought to be in effective partnership. This dynamic process yields sparks of catalytic change. Alternative models of sustainable development populate the landscape from the highest echelons of government, such as the He Ara Waiora blueprint that sets out a Māori worldview to influence policy. The NZ Treasury's Living Standards Framework (2021a) has evolved to incorporate aspects of a Māori worldview articulated by He Ara Waiora, which sits alongside a complementary framework. He Ara Waiora starts with wairua (spirit and the centre) as the foundation of all wellbeing and embraces Te Taiao, the environment and Te Ira Tangata, the human domain (The Treasury 2021b).

Loomis (1999) recommends building on the intellectual weight of Māori academics and practitioners in the vanguard of change. Self-determined development requires de-colonising and questioning Western scientific methods more critically. An underlying belief is that uncritically following a flawed paradigm is not tenable. Thus, a steadfast belief in the power of Māori knowledge systems flourishes alongside a discerning synthesis of Western scientific methods (Loomis 1999; Marsden 2003; Winiata and Winiata 1994). Several frameworks grounded in a Māori worldview, such as spiritual frameworks steeped in Māori cosmogony, cosmology, mythology, and religion, and monitoring frameworks organised around Māori values, have been making their way into government agencies (Awatere and Harmsworth 2014 p. 8).

Kaitiakitanga

In the higher realm of the metaphoric mind (Cajete 2000), many Indigenous approaches seek to access a spiritual dimension of time and potent space in which creative energies are available for humans to harness, consciously bringing potential into being. More than a step-

by-step guide on how to ‘do’ stewardship, many Indigenous knowledge systems encourage us to use our senses: to see, to listen and to feel to cultivate a holistic, spiritually aware state upon which to take action and make decisions (Spiller and Nicholson 2023). Many Indigenous cosmologies see the material world as emanating from an originating source of spiritual connectedness. For Māori, every entity of creation can be traced back to the energies that brought forth the universe (Hēnare 2015; Marsden 2003; Tate 2012).

We focus on several aspects of what is a vast interlocking and sophisticated philosophy and practice in a Māori worldview: whakapapa (genealogies), mauri ora (consciously created wellbeing), hau (reciprocity) and living landscapes. We are acutely aware that in attempting to lay out some aspects of kaitiakitanga, we are reducing an entire complex philosophy of consciousness down to some selected basics. We intend to raise awareness of the luminosity of Indigenous culture and why the right to self-determination will ensure the preserves of Indigenous Peoples continue to protect large tracts of the world's biodiversity interlinked with cultural diversity.

Whakapapa: genealogies that trace to a shared origin

Māori cosmogenealogies tell the story of a woven universe (Marsden 2003) whereby every aspect of creation has an origin story and lineage. Whilst there are tribal differences, this is a way of dwelling in the world with a belief in belonging to all creation and tracing lineages, whether a human, rock, tree or animal, takes us to a place of connectedness from whence all things emerge. For some tribes, tracing through layers of genealogy through cosmological realms takes us to the point of coalescence (Barlow 1991; Marsden 2003). Spiller, Erakovic et al. (2011) explain that humans self-actualise through interaction with ancestors, kin and events. The highly evolved and sophisticated ordering of relationships links humans in intimate relationships with every aspect of creation.

Mauri ora: consciously created wellbeing

Ensuring healthy relationships with the environment emerges from an intimacy motivated by genuine concern for mauri ora, meaning being awake to the local environment's reality and consciously creating wellbeing. Successful stewardship requires mindful praxis of culturally instituted principles with local environmental needs, which can help ensure mauri ora and the wellbeing of ecologies and people that dwell therein. In consciously creating wellbeing, mauri ora, humans are "the conscious mind of Mother Earth and our contribution is to enhance and maintain her life support systems" (Marsden 2003 p. 46).

An example of sustainable Indigenous development is conscious non-development. The best environmental management system is sometimes one of non-interference to allow space and time for the environment to repair itself. Leaving each local ecosystem to regenerate enables "everything to move and live in accordance with the conditions and limits of its existence" (Barlow 1991 p. 83). Ecosystems can heal and find their own natural, healthy balance. Practising kaitiakitanga, as an ethic of care, includes rāhui, which Mead (1997 p. 168) describes as "a means of prohibiting a specific human activity from occurring or from continuing". Rāhui gives space and time for restoration to natural balance, and this balance is made possible because mauri is oriented towards healing and sustaining life:

> The processes within the physical universe are therefore "pro-life" and the law of self-regeneration latent within creation will, if not interfered with, tend towards healing and harmonising the ecosystems and biological functions within Mother Earth. (Marsden 2003 p. 49)

If humans harbour negative attitudes towards nature, these will manifest in indifferent and negligent actions, diminishing the mauri ora, the wellbeing of the environment. Indigenous knowledge systems and practice demonstrate how quantitative, prescriptive, science-centred

solutions can often be inadequate as a sole solution for environmental sustainability. Indigenous societies advocate for a relationship with the environment that appreciates the intrinsic life force of all aspects of creation and seeks to develop reciprocal relationships of respect with the environment.

Hau: reciprocity

Kaitiakitanga is cultivated by respecting the hau, vital essence of the land, which, coupled with the mauri life force, helps support spiritual vitality that enhances environmental wellbeing. Hau is an aspect of kaitiakitanga that, together with mauri, is an intrinsic component of environmental wellbeing. Hēnare (2015 p. 90) invites us to consider:

> Denial of the responsibilities of guardianship over creation and being unable to nurture and feed both the life forces (mauri and hau) of the diverse substances and forms of creation, has profound implications for both humans and nature.

Reciprocal exchange is a principle that brings awareness that everything is connected and that our actions have impacts. One meaning of hau is breath, a reminder of the giving and receiving that occurs through breathing. Spiller and Stockdale (2013 p. 25) say:

> Every aspect of creation is breathing in and breathing out in multifarious ways, and this is an aspect of the state of gifted exchange, or reciprocity, upon which human wellbeing depends… The exhalation of one element becomes the life force available to be inhaled by another. Hau is a process of continuous receiving and giving, in which all creation exists in a state of reciprocity through exchanging life energy.

Our breath of life is drawn from plants, algae, and cyanobacteria in lakes and oceans and even water vapour split by radiation from the sun and stars. From a Māori vantage point, it

makes sense that hau, as a metaphysical and pragmatic principle of reciprocity, has multi-layered meanings associated with vital essence, breath, winds, air, and ceremonial offerings (Nicholson 2019). It points to what it means to live well and sustainably.

However, no other plant, animal, fungi, protista or monera breathes out polluted machine air as humans do. We tend to think of breathing as ensuring clean air for our individual and collective wellbeing (99% of humans do not have clean air) and that breathing is confined to our biological process. If we step back and consider breathing from a systemic viewpoint, the quality of air humans collectively put into the world is horrendous. When we are over-consuming hau, it is called kaihau; eating the hau (Patterson 1992 p. 96) leads to disharmony and imbalance. In other words, to act thoughtlessly with greed regarding the gifts of nature results in a loss of vitality and wellbeing, which, in turn, can affect the wellbeing of humans.

'Resource management' from a Māori worldview means managing ourselves and how our actions impact the world. We are the critical 'resource' that puts wellbeing at risk. While measuring emissions and air quality is valuable, as noted throughout this paper, focusing narrowly on the observables and the variables only partially explains the bigger picture.

Living Landscapes

Indigenous traditions explicitly describe the fundamental role landscapes play in human wellbeing. Ancestral landscapes embody the connection between people and their ecosystems. Imbued with an assemblage of life forces, physical spaces carry the footprints of ancestors who once moved through the lands (Beckwith 2007; Hēnare 1988; Kawharu 2009). The collective will of the ancestors of the spiritual, natural and human realms shapes the value systems guiding present and future generations (Kawharu 2009). Landscapes are brought into being through naming and other spoken word rituals such as singing, chanting and narratives, which imprint ancestral legacies into the landscape, keeping them alive in the

present—physically, experientially, and temporally. Place names and narratives record and express spiritual, philosophical and historical accounts and natural explanations of phenomena, thereby indivisibly fusing Indigenous wisdom with landscapes (Cajete 2000; Tate 2012).

Cultural identity, traditions and values are bound to particular landscapes. This way, landscapes transcend mere biophysical elements and processes and encompass material, spiritual and socio-cultural dimensions (Panelli and Tipa 2007). As Burgess et al. (2008 p. 2) explain:

> This is because the natural landscape equates to cultural landscape which in turn relates to tūpuna or ancestral landscape. Physical place is an expression of whakapapa (genealogy). It includes indigenous perspectives about the relationships between people and the environment and is also the story of the individual elements of that environment.

Therefore, environmental degradation and land alienation affect spiritual, ecological and human wellbeing (Cajete 2000; Dell 2017; Hēnare 2015; Panelli and Tipa 2007). Kaitiakitanga thus looks beyond the current use of resources and includes the relevance of ancestral associations and responsibilities.

Kaitiakitanga encompasses caring for physical landscapes of land and sea and tending to a culture shaped by the ancestral and social landscapes such as language, knowledge, history, values and people. Beyond sustainability, kaitiakitanga ensures communities have the freedom and capabilities to practice their cultural values, experience the landscape, and be part of the natural community. Environmental management, for example, is not only to provide physical sustenance for the community, but cultural practices surrounding the integrity of the landscape support the cultural wellbeing and identity of the people.

Living landscapes, comprising multi-layered ecosystems, are a spiritual and cultural process where interactions between humans and nature are most acute (Hirsch 1995; Wu 2013). As an integrated whole, landscapes co-evolve with human culture and encompass the tangible biophysical space and the multi-dimensional, intangible humanistic, cognitive space (Carmel and Naveh 2002; Wu 2013). Therefore, to devalue and denigrate the landscape is to degrade the human spirit (hooks 2008).

Agency as a portal of consciousness

This section examines the *who*: the kaitiaki—the steward, guardian, defender and protector. A kaitiaki goes beyond the limiting notion of a 'now' self and embraces the idea of an intergenerational self that reflects ancestors and descendants and, thus, is part of a movement through time. Speaking to Kereopa, a Māori tohunga, expert in sacred lore, spiritual beliefs, traditions, and genealogies, Moon (2003 pp. 131-132) gathered his advice for people wanting to understand how they can become a kaitiaki:

> When one considers kaitiaki, you have to consider for what purpose it is being used … So it is about knowing the place of things in this world, including your place in this world. When you get to that point, you realise that thinking of all things is the same … if you are fully aware of the world you live in, what you do to a tree is what you do to yourself. So when you are a guardian … you are actually looking after yourself.

To be effective, as Kereopa instructs in the quote, kaitiaki are encouraged to know their place intimately and, at the same time, maintain a perspective of the whole. Being a kaitiaki is a time-honoured, culturally steeped tradition that occurs through collective community recognition. Cultural pockets worldwide are home to these rare people who are caretakers and warriors for some of the last vestiges of genuinely biodiverse ecologies the planet has left. In

an article outlining some distinctions and concerns with the increasingly widespread use of the word kaitiaki in Aotearoa New Zealand, Malcolm (2020) notes that different tribes have different expressions. Some tribes, such as Malcolm's own, distinguish between the human form and the spiritual 'atua' form related to gods, supernatural beings and guardian entities.

Discussion: Everybody everywhere, all at once

To play upon the title of the movie 'Everything Everywhere All at Once' we propose that a shift to consciousness-centered stewardship will require an 'Everybody everywhere all at once' approach. Individual entrepreneurs, tribal organisations, conventional organisations, activists, creatives and leaders from all walks of life – everyone can take up the responsibilities, behaviours, and accountabilities of consciousness-centered stewardship and make changes in pockets around the world. We present the following distinctions between dominion-driven and consciousness-centered stewardship as set out in Table 1:

Dominion driven stewardship	Consciousness centered stewardship
Fix world	Fix ourselves
Data-driven landscapes	Living landscapes
Material source	Spiritual sources and energies
Objective, separate	Subjective, intimate
Rational logic dominates	Taps into multiple intelligences
Individual intelligence valorised	Collective self-intelligence
Acting upon	Acting alongside
Institutions are the primary vehicle	Everyone is a portal
Policy makes things happen	People in community make things happen

Table 1: Comparison of Dominion-driven and Consciousness-centered stewardship

Far beyond Western scientific measures, time-tested Indigenous knowledge systems attest to Indigenous rights for sustainable development within their cultural terms and standards. They are also examples for others to take heed of the holistic lifeways required to bring about

lasting sustainable change, not whack-a-mole fixes. A conscious adaptive system is a dynamic, interactive and reciprocal process that can only come about through dwelling in the world, not simply acting upon it. Some important ideas are:

- Living landscapes are not inert and cannot be fully understood through composite data sets. They contain memory and unseen life forces and are the repository of the collective intelligence of each part of creation.
- Connecting to the higher realms of the human mind goes beyond 'thinking' and 'solving' through rationalistic methods only to access imagination, wisdom, metaphor, creativity and a higher level of interconnected consciousness.
- Spiritual centredness is the starting and ending point.
- The exchange of life energies is palpable through observation of impact and signs in the world.
- Time is held as a perpetual present.
- Consciously connecting to all creation intimately through kinship affinities cultivates relationships and reciprocity.

Some practices supporting a consciousness-centred awareness include exploring our connectedness to place. For example, taking up the Māori concept of whakapapa discussed earlier can consist of taking time to introduce ourselves fully. Rather than mention one's name and role, time can be taken to introduce our ancestral lines, our spiritual connection to place, and how we experience belonging (see Spiller, 2021 for a discussion on "I AM consciousness" and whakapapa). Another awareness practice is cultivating deeper sensory awareness of the unseen and tuning into the 'vibe' of places. Dwelling in silence in nature can help refine our sensory *tairongo* awareness – the subtle smells, sounds, touch, taste and sights of a place. Connecting with local Indigenous communities and learning about their practices will support their efforts as well as build consciousness-centred awareness in the world.

Conclusion

The ineffectiveness of human dominion-centered approaches and piecemeal solutions has exacerbated global sustainability issues. The marginalization of Indigenous self-determination and land stewardship has pushed Indigenous approaches to the side. As actors worldwide continue advocating and implementing sustainable development, we must consider examining and expanding our consciousness and look to Indigenous leadership in environmental stewardship. Indigenous ideas can be fruitful in showing us how. We have provided examples from Māori traditions and encourage others to learn about Indigenous traditions, practices, and relationships with the land in their local contexts. We argue that consciousness needs to be included in much of the collective endeavour to address environmental and ecological problems.

Conflict of Interest and Data statement

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest. This manuscript has no associated data deposited in repositories.

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Note on style. Regardless of how words appear in the original, we have used macrons as they should appear on Māori words.