



# Tiakitanga

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resource

*Many schools use the term kaitiakitanga to mean caring for our environment as a responsible NZ citizen. While a worthwhile aspiration, nevertheless it can unintentionally ride roughshod over a Māori tikanga with deeper meanings which need to be considered. In consultation with Nick Bryant (Ngāpuhi, Ngati Whatua) Mike Stone learns more about kaitiakitanga and tiakitanga.*

## What is kaitiakitanga?

Kaitiakitanga is often translated as guardianship – caring for and protecting the environment – and is associated with conservation. It is seen as a way of managing the environment based on a traditional Māori worldview.

But it is more than that. This term also has relational, spiritual and political connotations.

You may have come across the word mātaiahikā in the new curriculum, which is linked with “connecting with place and community – learning through local relationships with tangata whenua and the community”. The term ahi kā means home fires burning and can reflect a connection to home or where your people belong.

If an iwi maintains ahi kā in a space continuously and for a long time, it makes them responsible for that place, and mana whenua by definition. This does not give them ownership in a western sense; it is about responsibility for, and connection with, the land.

Mana whenua hold rights as kaitiaki, responsible to ensure the mauri (life force) of the things within that area is nurtured and sustained, a spiritual as much as a physical role.

This role may be held by individuals representing the iwi or by the iwi itself. So a particular person may be kaitiaki of the shellfish of an area; for example, able to put a rāhui in place to stop harvesting. Kaitiaki may also be a real creature or an imagined one, a spiritual entity that acts as a

guardian of the forest or river.

As land ownership can be contested, this role also has political ramifications about who has the right to be kaitiaki.

The underlying framework of kaitiakitanga (Browning, 2022) includes :

- Whakapapa, a long-standing relationship to the land, its people and their ancestors.
- Mauri being safeguarded and sustained.
- Rangatiratanga being connected to and supported
- Mana (prestige, authority, status, spiritual power).

So to be kaitiaki we need to whakapapa to the land we are caring for, which applies only to Māori. Del Wihongi says, “Everybody on this planet has a role to play as a guardian. But if you use the word kaitiaki, that person must be Māori because of the depth and meaning of the word, and the responsibilities that go with it” (Roberts et al., 1995).

## Illustrations of kaitiakitanga

A traditional pūrakau tells the story of Rata, a young leader on a journey to avenge his father and in need of a waka. He goes into a forest, chooses a majestic totara and fells it after a day’s hard labour. But in his haste, he has not thanked the guardians as tikanga requires.

When he returns at day break he finds the totara standing whole, with no evidence of his work. He fells it again but the totara is restored again the next morning. So he tries again on the third day but hides and waits.

He sees Tāne guardians, te tini o Hākuri, emerge, sweep up the chips, and make the tree whole again. Rata acknowledges his wrong, asks their blessing and rests while the guardians fell the tree and hew out the waka in a single night.

The moral of this story can be explained as the importance of tikanga Māori, the process to follow to make it right. But it also illustrates kaitiakitanga, caring for a precious taonga, and shows that

*Puketoki  
Scenic  
Reserve,  
Whakamarama,  
Bay of  
Plenty.*



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kaitiaki are all around us.

The way harakeke flax is collected also shows kaitiakitanga. Weavers and harvesters' customary practices for gathering and sustaining the harakeke include cutting carefully to guard the precious shoots budding at the centre of the plant, and leaving leaf remnants around the plant to compost and replenish it at the roots.

This central part of the flax is explained as the child sheltered by its parents on either side, with the composted soil maintaining the whānau or tribal base. Te Arawa kuia Huhana Mihinui describes this as a flaxroots, hapū-centred understanding of resource management (Browning, 2022).

Both the pūrakau and harakeke practice show an ancestral presence in precious resources, a concern for practical survival and an underlying obligation to care for hapū in Māori relationship with resources. Kaitiakitanga over the hapū resources is an act of connection with family and with ancestors.

## Tiakitanga

Kaitiakitanga is a term not much used before the RMA was enacted in 1991 (Browning, 2022). The act defines kaitiakitanga as “the exercise of guardianship by the tāngata whenua of an area in accordance with tikanga Māori in relation to natural and physical resources.” So the responsibility is enshrined in law.

The word kaitiakitanga has three parts. Tiaki can mean to guard, preserve, keep, conserve, nurture, protect and watch over. The prefix kai is about who is doing the work, or who ‘feeds’ the kaupapa. Just like the kaikōrero is the person who speaks on marae, the kaitiaki is the one who has the role of caring for tribal resources. The suffix tanga turns the word into a noun – preservation, conservation, protection.

Tauwiwi cannot be kaitiaki, as defined in tikanga and in law. Tauwiwi can, however, engage in **kaitiakitanga**, which is work done under the guidance of mana whenua.

Without meaningful engagement with mana whenua, a safer way of describing the work that many teachers and students do is **tiakitanga**. This role of tiaki is removed from the spiritual dimension and from political discussions of land



Harvesting harakeke, Te Papa MA\_I278676.

ownership and ahi kā. It is just about caring for living things, all living things, equally.

The land, and the things living on the land, are what is important. As the whakataukī says: Whatungarongaro te tangata, toitū te whenua; as people disappear from sight, the land remains.

## References

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[The Resource Management Act 1991](#).  
Roberts, Norman, Minhinnick, Wihongi, & Kirkwood, 1995, Kaitiakitanga: Maori perspectives on conservation. *Pacific Conservation Biology*, 2(1), 7-20.  
Science Learning Hub, [Understanding kaitiakitanga](#).

## Ngā Kupu

- Iwi** – Tribe, large group with a common ancestor.  
**Pūrakau** – Myth, ancient legend, story.  
**Rāhui** – Temporary ritual prohibition, closed season, ban, reserve.  
**Rangatiratanga** – Chieftainship, right to exercise authority, chiefly autonomy.  
**Tāngata whenua** – people born of the whenua; ie, local people, hosts, indigenous people.  
**Tauwiwi** – Pākehā and other non-Māori, foreigner, person from afar, outsider, stranger.  
**Whakapapa** – Genealogy, genealogical table, lineage, descent.  
**Whenua** – Land, domain; placenta, afterbirth.

Te Aka Māori Dictionary

Nick is not claiming to speak for his iwi, nor does his opinion carry more or less weight than others' contributions. He is giving the opinion of a Māori science teacher in this national conversation of mana orite mo te mātauranga Māori.  
This article has been checked by Pauline Waiti.



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