

Whanganui National Park

Cultural perspectives

Whanganui



Whanganui River S. Jones

The Whanganui River winds its way from the mountains to the Tasman Sea through numerous hills and valleys. Lowland forest surrounds the river in its middle and lower reaches – the heart of Whanganui National Park. The area has a unique history and Māori culture is an important part of the park experience.

History

Early Māori used the Whanganui River and its tributaries to facilitate trade and communication among themselves and as far as Wellington, Waikato, Taranaki, Taupo, and Bay of Plenty regions at least 600 years ago. Within the dense ngahere (native forests) of the Whanganui region, early Māori from Te Atihau nui a papārangi cultivated the sheltered terraces and built their pā on strategic heights. In time, the upper river became linked by a series of pā which are called 'the plaited fibres of Hinengākau'.

Every bend and rapid of the river has a guardian, or kaitiaki, who maintains the mauri (life force) of that stretch of the river. Whanganui hapū (sub-tribes) were renowned for their canoeing skills and maintained extensive networks of weirs and fishing traps along the river until the arrival of riverboats forced changes to customary practices. Generations of river iwi have learned to use and protect this great taonga.

The arrival of European missionaries in the region in the 1840s saw the conversion of many people to Christianity and the establishment of chapels at villages along the river. Land sales and a consequent mistrust of authorities led many Māori to strengthen their links with the Pai Marire religion, which centred around traditional Māori beliefs. Followers of Pai Marire were also known as the Hau Hau, and two of their strongholds were Maraekowhai and Pipiriki. They conducted services around 'niu' poles, two of which still stand at Maraekowhai.

Māori were major traders and several flourmills were built between the 1840s and 1860s to grind wheat grown in areas along the riverbanks. A regular riverboat service was established by 1891, carrying passengers, mail and freight to Māori and to European settlers between Whanganui and Taumarunui. As a consequence, tourism flourished in the region until the 1920s. The main riverboat trade ceased in the 1920s due to better roads, a main trunk railway and other tourist attractions, although riverboats were still operating in the late 1950s.



Whanganui River story

There are many versions of the creation story of the Whanganui River. One tells that when the great mountains Tongariro and Taranaki came into conflict over the lovely maiden Pihanga, Taranaki was asked to leave on the advice of Ruapehu to ensure that his extreme tapu (sacredness) was maintained. Beset with grief, he headed toward the setting sun, filling the Whanganui River with his tears.

Customary use

Native plants and animals play a significant spiritual and cultural role in the Māori way of life. The park has provided food, medicines, fishing nets, hīnaki (eel-pots) and construction materials. The customary use by tangata whenua of indigenous species is essential to the maintenance of their cultural and traditional knowledge. Māori currently use natural resources in the following ways:

- Harvesting of plants and animals for food and medicine
- Use of flax, pīngao, cabbage tree (ti kouka), kiekie and feathers for weaving
- Use of dyes from mud, soil, tree bark and berries
- Use of large trees for waka, whare and pou (canoe, house, carved column)
- Use of oils from plant seeds
- Making of taonga from bones, shells and wood
- Use of traditional utu piharau (lamprey) traps and eel weirs



Pouwhenua at Tieke
Kāinga C. Greensmith

Tieke Kainga J. R. Lythgoe



Co-management

Tieke is one of many old pā on the Whanganui River. The Department has entered into a partnership with Te Whanau o Tieke to re-establish a kāinga (village) at Tieke, which enables traditional connections with this land to be restored for the benefit of both tangata whenua and visitors to the park. The facilities at Tieke are managed jointly by Te Whanau O Tieke and the Department of Conservation.

There are proposals to develop further co-management initiatives through effective relationships, elsewhere in the park.

Wāhi tapu and wāhi taonga

Wāhi tapu (sacred places) and wāhi taonga (treasured places) are sites and landscape features with special spiritual, emotional or historic significance to tangata whenua. They may be specific sites, general locations or wider areas such as mountains and rivers. While these sites are important historically, wāhi tapu and wāhi taonga are still important today. Traditional customs and practices are still observed at these places.

Encouraging public access to wāhi tapu and wāhi taonga, such as abandoned pā sites, is a major concern to Whanganui Iwi. Their disturbance or desecration is highly offensive. The Department is working with iwi to ensure that wāhi tapu and wāhi taonga sites are protected, for example by consultation and continuous dialogue with tangata whenua on all camp and hut site locations.

Further information

To find out more, contact one of the following Department of Conservation offices:

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