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Rangatiratanga and Kaitiakitanga in Response to Climate Change: The Case of Ngāi Tahu in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Aotearoa (New Zealand) is currently facing a global environmental crisis, with hotter days, vanishing glaciers, and ocean acidification predicted over the coming century. The impacts of climate change are, and will be, disproportionately borne by tangata whenua (Māori). This article explores the pursuit of rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga amidst settler-colonialism, capitalism, and climate change. I define rangatiratanga as exercising Māori leadership, asserting sovereignty over takiwā/rohe Māori (territory/territorial boundaries), and enabling kaitiakitanga. I refer to kaitiakitanga as an ethos, enabled by rangatiratanga, which aims to positively influence a relationship to the environment, protecting and enhancing it for both current and future generations.

Choosing Ngāi Tahu as my instrumental case, I argue that the iwi (tribe) has established itself as a climate actor through its statement of claim before the High Court, asserting its jurisdiction over water, and climate action plan Te Kounga Paparangi. Ngāi Tahu remains constrained by a need to provide economically for its tribal members and corporatisation enforced by the 1997 Waitangi Tribunal settlement.

Keywords: Dairy industry; climate change; Māori, New Zealand; Ngāi Tahu.

Introduction

> Toitū te Marae o Tāne, Toitū te Marae o Tangaroa, Toitū te Iwi - When land and water are sustained, the people will prosper. (Ngāi Tahu)

Aotearoa New Zealand (henceforth, Aotearoa) is "often seen as a climate leader on the international stage" (Timperley, 2020, p. 176), known globally for its idyllic "clean green image" (Chapman, 2001, p. 3) which drives its value as a tourist destination and exporter of dairy products in the international market. Yet eight of the country's warmest years have been recorded in the last decade (Tatauranga Aotearoa - Statistics New Zealand [Stats NZ], 2023). Indigenous species of all kinds, including most seabirds, shorebirds, and freshwater fish, are threatened with extinction, as are 45 out of 71 rare ecosystems (Stats NZ, n.d.). Freshwater wetland areas have decreased (Stats NZ, 2025), and lakes, rivers, and groundwater have been rated poor quality for their concentrations of nitrogen, phosphorus, and *Escherichia coli* (Stats NZ, n.d.). Regardless of the measure used, evidence irrefutably shows that the climate in Aotearoa is rapidly changing (Elder, 2021).

The agricultural industry contributes the largest share of the country's emissions, at approximately 50% (Manatū Mō Te Taiao - Ministry for the Environment, n.d). As Foote et al. (2015) raise, the dairy industry imposes many environmental externalities,

including "nitrate contamination of drinking water, nutrient pollution to lakes, soil compaction, and greenhouse gas emissions" (p. 709). This has led some to critique the dairy industry as the "biggest climate change problem" in Aotearoa (Baskett, 2021, para. 1). However, the dairy industry remains the largest source of export revenue for Aotearoa (DairyNZ, 2025; Rathore, 2023). Competing economic and environmental interests have left the country stuck in a political gridlock, while the window to ameliorate climate change's worst impacts rapidly closes (Harvey, 2021; Ngāi Tahu, 2018).

Consequences of climate inaction in Aotearoa continue to be disproportionately borne by Māori or tangata whenua (the people of the land; Jones et al., 2014, p. 54) because of their reliance on and deep relation to the natural resources that provide materially, financially, culturally, and spiritually for many iwi (tribes; Okeroa, 2008). A multiple ownership system, imposed through the Māori Land Court, has caused "high administration costs and diminishing economic returns as the number of owners per land parcel increases" (Manatū Ahu Matua - Ministry for Primary Industries, 2014, p. 2). Since the quantity of landowners means that most owners can no longer live on their land or earn their livelihoods from it, pressure has increased "to manage and govern [Māori lands] in a more corporate fashion" (Manatū Ahu Matua - Ministry for Primary Industries, 2014; Te Puni Kōkiri - Ministry for Māori Development, 2009), such as through dairy farming. Many Māori farms attempt to balance a "quadruple bottom line" approach; comprised of environmental stewardship, social responsibility, intergenerational wealth creation, and cultural revitalisation (Thomson, 2022, para. 3). However, this is done in contexts where iwi do not own or steward the same arable land they did pre-colonisation, are bound to government regulations and laws, and are forced to participate in a global capitalist system. These factors make it difficult to practice long-held cultural and environmental values such as rangatiratanga (sovereignty) and kaitiakitanga (environmental guardianship).

Rangatiratanga is defined by Te Aka (a te reo Māori dictionary) as "chieftainship", the "right to exercise authority", and "chiefly autonomy", among other interpretations (Moorfield, 2024). Central to its conception are "[Māori] autonomy and independence, the right to an identity, both individually and in the group, and the right to express that identity without being impeded in any way" (Nikora, 2001, p. 377). Rangatiratanga encompasses rights, responsibilities, and obligations that are particular to environmental management and care (Ngāi Tahu, 2020, paras. 3, 6). For the purposes of this article, I refer to rangatiratanga in three forms: exercising Māori leadership, asserting sovereignty over takiwā/rohe Māori (territory/territorial boundaries), and enabling kaitiakitanga.

Kaitiakitanga can be defined as "guardianship", "stewardship", and "trusteeship" (Moorfield, 2024), as well as "guardianship, preservation, conservation, fostering, protecting, and wise use of resources" (Spiller et al., 2011, p. 226). This value stems from a belief that "Māori see themselves as a part of, rather than separated from, ecosystems" (Harmsworth & Awatere, 2013, p. 276). Kaitiakitanga thus weaves together "ancestral, environmental and social threads of identity, purpose and practice" (Kawharu, 2000, p. 350), informed by "centuries of achieving intergenerational sustainability" (McAllister et al., 2023, p. 3). Central to conceptualising kaitiakitanga is a "contention that our own lives are enhanced when we enhance the lives of human beings, other communities, nonhuman animals, and the natural world" (Watene, 2022, p. 267). Here, I refer to kaitiakitanga as an ethos, enabled by rangatiratanga, which aims to positively influence a relationship to the environment, protecting and enhancing it for both current and future generations.

Using Ngāi Tahu as my case study, I explore the limits, obligations, and constraints Māori face as climate actors seeking to exercise rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga while operating under settler-colonialism, capitalism, and climate change. I argue that Ngāi Tahu has consciously established itself as a climate actor through two key climate actions: a statement of claim before the High Court asserting jurisdiction of the iwi over water, and the Ngāi Tahu climate action plan Te Kounga Paparangi (Ngāi Tahu, 2023). In both actions, the ability of the iwi to exercise rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga remains constrained by 1) a need to provide economically for tribal members; and 2) colonial-capitalist structures, including corporatisation enforced by the 1997 Waitangi Tribunal settlement.

Positionality Statement

I come to this research as someone Indigenous to Turtle Island; my matrilineage is of Anishinaabe and Ukrainian descent, while my patrilineage is of German and Dutch descent. I am a band member of Tootinaowaziibeeng Treaty Reserve. I was drawn to this research topic because the struggle for sovereignty over our own lands is one shared by both my own Anishinaabe Nation and tangata whenua in Aotearoa. Turtle Island and Aotearoa share many similarities, including long histories of Indigenous resistance challenging each country's respective government to reckon with settler-colonialism, capitalism, and climate change. As an invited guest to Ngāi Tahu territory for six months, I make no normative claims about what the iwi should do. Instead, I write this article to document how Ngāi Tahu has used rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga to decolonise Crown-occupied land and address the current global climate crisis. I write about Ngāi Tahu because I believe the climate actions the iwi has taken contain valuable insights for other Indigenous-led initiatives in Aotearoa and Turtle Island striving for a healthier environment.

Mātauranga Māori Versus the Pākehā Environmental Approach

This section explains the two theoretical frameworks that have influenced perceptions and decision-making about the environment and climate change in Aotearoa: Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) and the Pākehā sustainability paradigm[12]. Mātauranga Māori is a holistic and relational approach, one that imparts rangatiratanga over Māori lives and lands, as well as a kaitiaki responsibility to know and care for Papatūānuku (Mother Earth). This approach contrasts greatly with the natural resource exploitation and conservation and protection efforts that define the Pākehā sustainability paradigm.

Mātauranga Māori encompasses "Māori worldview, values, culture and cultural practice, and perspectives that establish Māori identity, responsibilities, and rights to manage and use resources" (Clapcott et al., 2018, p. 457). This framework is foundationally defined by "relationships between everything seen and unseen, humans and more-than humans, the natural and spiritual world, which in turn shape Māori [actions]" (Clapcott et al., 2018, p. 457). It "spans all aspects of Indigenous Māori knowledge conceptualised, developed and maintained through practice and connection" (Wehi et al., 2019, p. 1).

Mātauranga Māori purports that "Papatūānuku is the mother of the earth and source of sustenance for all beings, including people" (Royal, 2012). Papatūānuku is known to "possess an inherent, powerful personality that is logically prior to, and completely independent of, human existence" (Tomas, 2011, p. 224), compelling both a spiritual and environmental responsibility to know and care for her and all interconnected species (Ralph, 2023, para. 18; Ruru, 2018, p. 253). As kaitiaki (guardians), Māori carry a responsibility to Papatūānuku (Keenan, 2022, p. 18) and are "endowed from birth with obligations, and empowered at the same time to care, respect, conserve, and create mauri ora (conscious well-being)" (Spiller et al., 2011, p. 223). Thus, the practice of kaitiakitanga affirms not only an environmental ethic, but a means of preserving one's cultural, spiritual, and relational responsibilities.

Rangatiratanga provides Māori with absolute, independent authority over their lives, resources, and land (Hope, 2004). This encompasses the ability to uphold "sovereignty, decision-making power and Māori control over things Māori" (Broughton & McBreen, 2015, p. 84) as well as "the centrality of mātauranga Māori" (Te One & Clifford, 2021, p. 2). As Mutu (2021) describes:

> Rangatiratanga implies the independence to exist and be who we are without interference from outsiders, as well as the inalienable right to make our decisions about our lives and resources, and to live in accordance with the laws our ancestors handed down to us. (p. 269)

Rangatiratanga includes rights, responsibilities, and obligations to practice environmental management and care "for the benefit of present and future generations" (Ngāi Tahu, 2020, paras. 3, 6). Kaitiakitanga forms both "an expression and affirmation of rangatiratanga" (Kawharu, 2000, p. 353) because one cannot exercise care responsibilities without having the power to make and enforce relevant decisions.

Contrarily, the Pākehā sustainability paradigm is an anthropocentric, resource-oriented, and nonintegrative approach. The Pākehā sustainability paradigm purports a superiority of humankind over nature that authorises humans to control their environments and "glorifies environmental change of the early colonial era as an expression of national character" (Hellmann, 2022, para. 22). This approach reflects "values, principles, and rules [that] arose in a European colonial context" (Tomas, 2011, p. 219), in particular Judeo-Christian traditions which argue that "man is given dominion over the rest of creation" (Roberts et al., 1995, p. 10). From this vantage point, the Pākehā sustainability paradigm considers itself to be separate from and superior to nature.

The Pākehā sustainability paradigm sees land as a frontier for progress, economic development and productivity (Bosselmann, 2016). Under this paradigm, certain lands are conserved for their scenic and recreational value (Nathan, 2015). For example, the *Scenery Preservation Act 1903* decreed the lands of Aotearoa to "fenced, preserved and conserved intact" for the "inalienable patrimony of the people of New Zealand". As Abraham and Driver (2023) note, when the *Scenery Preservation Act 1903* was legislated, it did not include Māori, who had little input in "managing national parks or writing the laws which governed them" (para. 22). Rather, conservation authority was vested in Pākehā-led environmental groups. Their approach has remained adamant that humans cannot be trusted to use resources sustainably (Abraham & Driver, 2023) and that Māori land use cannot look after the environment as well as Pākehā preservationism can (Delahunty, 2020).

While not all Pākehā agree with the Pākehā sustainability paradigm (Mitcalfe, 2008), it continues to dominate economic and political decision-making in Aotearoa today. Laws, policies, and practices formed through this framework remain premised on Western superiority and the suppression of Indigenous legal and political orders (Coyle, 2020). Aotearoa has deployed the

Pākehā sustainability paradigm to "regulate people's access and use of natural resources" (Forster, 2016, p. 323), while continuing to commodify these resources "within the [current] paradigm of capitalist, industrial and economic systems" (Gray et al., 2022, p. 112). This approach is fundamentally "incompatible with approaches that seek to overcome the human environment dichotomy" (Coyle, 2020, p. 74), such as Mātauranga Māori. In practice, the Pākehā sustainability paradigm has failed the environment, species, and people of Aotearoa; 66% of the country's rivers have become unswimmable and 75% of native freshwater fish species have become threatened with extinction (Manatū Mō Te Taiao - Ministry for the Environment, 2020; Roy, 2019).

Sustainable development frameworks continue to remain the dominant lens through which settler-colonial governments make environmental decisions today (Andger et al., 2002). Critics argue that these types of frameworks deepen socio-environmental inequities by appropriating natural resources and the environmental commons for private profit (Bakker, 2010, p. 715), while failing to challenge overriding paradigms of colonial extraction that define the climate crisis (Eichler & Baumeister, 2018). The Pākehā sustainability paradigm and sustainable development frameworks view climate change as "an economic opportunity [rather than] an environmental issue" (Goyes & South, 2019, p. 99) and ecosystems as "potential sources of revenue and not habitats of many human and non-human beings" (Goyes & South, 2019, p. 99). Thus, they neglect Indigenous peoples and their knowledge of the environment. To repair the harms of settler-colonialism, capitalism, and climate change, which are both historical and ongoing, a "responsive governance praxis that engages with both human and more-than-human wellbeing" (Yates et al., 2022, p. 268) is needed.

As "people and societies increasingly look to Indigenous knowledge for [climate] solutions" (McAllister et al., 2023, para. 1), Mātauranga Māori demonstrates an opportunity to seriously consider not just climate adaptation and management strategies, but values such as rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga that can underpin them (Schneider et al., 2017). While Mātauranga Māori contains some of the values underlying the *Resource Management Act 1991* (sustainable management of resources) and the *Fisheries Act 1996* (sustainability and utilisation), it is "broader than each of these concepts" (Environment Foundation, 2018, para. 8). Mātauranga Māori demonstrates deep cultural, spiritual, and relational values associated with the environment, alongside an understanding of kaitiaki "responsibilities to care for and protect the land, water, and other natural resources for future generations" (Simmonds, 2022, para. 2). By honouring and upholding Mātauranga Māori as a key strategy in its environmental decision-making and climate actions, Aotearoa can better uphold its Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi, a treaty signed between the British Crown and 500 Māori Chiefs in 1840) obligations while ensuring long-term sustainability for the benefit of future generations (Nuku, 2024, para. 3).

Research Design

This research is an extension of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded project titled *Reaching for Net-Zero Carbon Emissions While Reckoning with Settler-Colonialism: The Case of Dairying in Aotearoa New Zealand*. This SSHRC project is in alignment with the 2022 Indigenous Collaboration Arrangement signed between Te Puni Kōkiri (New Zealand Ministry for Māori Development), Indigenous Services Canada, and Crown–Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada. The arrangement intends to "exchange information and best practices around economic, cultural, political, social, and environmental policy issues" (Indigenous Services Canada, 2022). Due to COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time, my intended fieldwork (interviews, field visits) had to be abandoned; instead, I reviewed and analysed treaty documents, court settlements, and academic and grey literature. My work to shed light on Māori organisational decision-making related to climate change (Cousin, 2005, p. 422) was aided by the use of an instrumental case study (Gerring, 2016).

Where possible, I endeavoured to include Māori-authored resources and te reo Māori words, out of respect for tangata whenua, whom I believe should have every opportunity possible to teach about their own culture in their own words (Stursberg, 2020, para. 3). I endeavoured to capture the human impacts of climate change on hapū (subtribes) and whānau (extended family) through the literature. However, I know my work would have further benefited from the inclusion of interviews with Ngāi Tahu iwi members to more deeply capture how personal the impacts of losing one's tūrangawaewae (a place to stand) have been for Ngāi Tahu and tangata whenua more generally.

The Ngāi Tahu Case Study

Ngāi Tahu is facing a climate crisis. Average temperatures in Ngāi Tahu takiwā are expected to increase by up to 3 degrees celsius by the end of the century (Ngāi Tahu, 2018). Sea levels are expected to rise by up to 2 metres, exposing 16 out of 18 marae (community meeting grounds) to flooding (Ngāi Tahu, 2023). Agricultural pollution, primarily caused by the dairy industry, has caused rivers to bloom with toxic algae, watercress to reek of effluent, and fish and eel populations to become threatened (Environment Canterbury, 2023; McClure, 2021). Waikirikiri (the Selwyn River), historically an integral eel

gathering place for Ngāi Tahu, has completely dried up (TVNZ, 2020), costing the iwi an integral source of nourishment and cultural history (Te Rūnanga o Waihao Inc., n.d.).

The question of how best to respond to settler-colonialism and climate change is one that Ngāi Tahu has been forced to grapple with since the arrival of Pākehā. Ngāi Tahu ancestors made their first contact with Europeans in 1795. Around 1840, at the time Te Tiriti o Waitangi negotiations were taking place, Pākehā were a minority population who posed little threat to the iwi (Wanhalla, 2011). Ngāi Tahu signed Te Tiriti believing it to be a "convenient arrangement between equals" (Wanhalla, 2011, para. 11). Instead, the British wielded the signing of Te Tiriti as a tool of colonial imposition (Charters, 2022).

Ngāi Tahu sold 34.5 million acres, or 80% of Te Waipounamu (the South Island), to the British Crown between 1844 and 1864 (Ngāi Tahu, n.d.). Conditions of the sale included reserving one tenth of each purchase for the iwi, building schools and hospitals, and leaving fishing and other food gathering undisturbed. These sales paid a fraction of one penny an acre to the iwi and drastically reduced its land base, while few of the schools and hospitals the land sales promised were built (Tau, 2017; Te Manatu Taonga, 2021).

Ngāi Tahu members began seeking redress for these losses as early as 1849, a fight which continued for seven generations (Te Manatu Taonga, 2021). In 1986, Hēnare Rakiihia Tau, on behalf of the Ngāi Tahu Trust Board, filed a claim with the Waitangi Tribunal, a standing commission of inquiry established to address breaches of promises made by the Crown in the Treaty of Waitangi (Te Manatu Taonga, 2021; Waitangi Tribunal, n.d.). The Ngāi Tahu claim dealt with 73 grievances, made in nine parts. Eight claims referred to specific land sales, while the ninth dealt with fishing and food gathering, known as "the DNA of Ngāi Tahu, and an intrinsic part of the Tribe's identity" (Ngāi Tahu, 2015, para. 21).

The *Ngāi Tahu Claim Settlement Act 1998* was "central to Ngāi Tahu's aspirations for their Treaty settlement negotiations and was prominent throughout the entire process" (Fisher, 2015, p. 26). The iwi successfully "achieved legislative recognition to govern its own people to a certain extent" (Fisher, 2015, p. 43), albeit not to the extent of their own aspirations. The iwi honoured its value of kaitiakitanga through many settlement outcomes sought, for example, the restoration of place names and species, and input on conservation decision-making bodies (Ngāi Tahu, 2023).

These values have motivated environmental activities and programmes pursued by the iwi ever since. They have prioritised the integration of local Mātauranga Māori into climate responses while articulating a sense of self-sufficiency in tribal environmental management (Bargh et al., 2014; Ngāi Tahu, 2023)—an underlying current present in their 2020 statement of claim in the High Court and Te Kounga Paparangi.

The Ngāi Tahu High Court Claim

In 2020, claimants representing Ngāi Tahu filed a statement of claim in the High Court in Ōtautahi for the "ongoing degradation of awa and moana caused by environmental mismanagement" in the area (Tumahai, 2020, para. 1). According to Te Maire Tau (2020), "The Crown's sovereignty can only extend over something it owns, and ownership of water requires a deed of purchase" (p. 11), something to which Ngāi Tahu never consented.

The current Ngāi Tahu claim seeks a declaration from the Crown recognising that the iwi has rangatiratanga over freshwater on its land and over the creation of new freshwater governance and regulatory regimes. Recognising this will require repealing current legislation, particularly the Resource Management Act (1991; RMA), which Vaughan (2021) argues is a "notoriously complex and ineffective set of laws which do not properly implement the acknowledgement of Te Tiriti" (p. 19). Reversing the threatened status of eels, for example, will require a fundamental transformation of current scientific approaches used to manage their populations (Te Rūnanga o Waihao Inc., n.d.).

Illustrating the increasing incompatibility between Aotearoa's competing environmental governance paradigms—Mātauranga Māori and the Pākehā sustainability framework—the Waitangi Tribunal concluded in 2021 that the Resource Management Act failed to adequately protect and recognise rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga (Manatū Mō Te Taiao, 2021). Further, the tribunal found that a test case was needed to determine "whether native title in freshwater (as a component of an indivisible freshwater taonga) exists and has not been extinguished" (Llewellyn & Lewis, 2022, para. 11). The Ngāi Tahu claim, which remains live at the time of writing, will serve as that test case, potentially setting a new precedent for freshwater standards in Aotearoa (Cunningham, 2024).

The Ngāi Tahu Climate Action Plan

In addition to their High Court claim, Ngāi Tahu continues to take precedent-setting action through Te Kounga Paparangi, which seeks to "mitigate climate change, build resilience, and promote sustainable business practices through 88 different actions" (Ngāi Tahu, 2023). Te Kounga Paparangi can be read as a document rooted in kaitiakitanga and rangatiratanga, with the former as the basis for ensuring sustainability for current and future generations, and the latter as the basis for exercising Māori guardianship.

For the iwi, acting as "effective kaitiaki" of the environment entails minimising the impacts of climate change, maintaining a meaningful relationship with their tūrangawaewae, and engaging in protection, restoration, and enhancement work (Ngāi Tahu, 2023, p. 17). Current kaitiakitanga actions being pursued by Ngāi Tahu under Te Kounga Paparangi include electrifying a fleet of tourism jet boats in Queenstown to save 150 tonnes of carbon emissions per boat annually (Ngāi Tahu, 2023); as well as implementing rainwater harvesting and wetland stormwater treatment systems for new redevelopment projects (Ngāi Tahu, 2023), among others.

Aspirations of rangatiratanga can be found in the context section of the climate action plan, titled Te Kounga Paparangi: "We have no choice but to develop a response and show leadership, in the effort to reduce the impacts of climate change, and in the crucial adaptation work for the ongoing wellbeing of our people and our communities" (Ngāi Tahu, 2023, p. 9).

Section Te Tāhū o te Whāriki*:* Anchoring the Foundation further elaborates:

> Seven generations of Ngāi Tahu tūpuna [ancestors] fought for the resolution of Te Kerēme [the claim], enabling all the opportunities we now have to lift and strengthen our people. We now have a new set of challenges, and we will do all we can to create a legacy for whānau to come in response to the effects of climate change. We stand strong in the belief that amidst change and loss there is hope, and opportunities to thrive. (Ngāi Tahu, 2023, p. 2)

The iwi face immense pressure to balance its ambition to create benefits and well-being for its communities while upholding its kaitiaki responsibilities (Lambert & Mark-Shadbolt, 2021). Ngāi Tahu has committed to "innovative, successful, sustainable, climate responsible business" (Ngāi Tahu, 2023, p. 23) and asked its Holdings Corporation and subsidiaries to produce "targets to progressively reduce greenhouse gas emissions" (Ngāi Tahu, 2023, p. 29).

At the same time, commitments made by Ngāi Tahu to climate-responsible business are complicated by iwi investments in dairy, the most environmentally damaging industry in the country. If Te Kounga Paparangi is any indication, Ngāi Tahu seems to be more interested in lowering its emissions through agritech-based solutions and regenerative farming trials than abandoning the dairy industry entirely (Ngāi Tahu, 2023). This raises questions about what it means—and whether it is possible—to completely decolonise while participating in a dominant capitalist system.

Important to remember here is that "Māori bear the burdens of working within settler paradigms that have become the assumed and universal norm" (Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019, p. 25). Ngāi Tahu continues to make decisions intended to actualise Mātauranga Māori, in particular key values of rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga. However, these decisions are often shaped by the dominant Pākehā sustainability paradigm and constrained by state control "of all financial means including land, water, and taxes" (Scobie et al., 2023, p. 415). The capacity of the iwi to exercise rangatiratanga has become closely linked to its ability to generate capitalist revenue, with dairy investments remaining a crucial source of funding for education grants, environmental initiatives, language revitalisation, and marae projects. But given the seriousness of the climate crisis, are there morally and ecologically superior investment alternatives to pursue? As the climate crisis worsens and the dairy industry continues to pollute Ngāi Tahu waters, this is a difficult question that the iwi will have no choice but to answer.

Conclusion

> He nui maunga e kore e taea te whakaneke, he nui ngaru moana, Mā te ihu o te waka e wāhi - A great mountain cannot be moved, but a giant wave can be broken by the prow of a canoe [Do not give up too easily – some things are possible]. (Mateparae, 2012, para. 15)

Settler-colonialism and capitalism have devastated the planet. Depleted freshwater sources, poisoned soil, coastal erosion, increased greenhouse gas emissions, and biodiversity losses are just some of the manifestations of climate change today (Harvey, 2023; National Geographic Society, 2023; Stats NZ, n.d.). Aotearoa is no exception to this unfolding global crisis. Tangata whenua continue to bear the worst consequences of climate change in the country, including forced relocations; food

insecurity; infectious diseases; heat-related deaths; mental illness; and losses of language, culture, and spirituality (Awatere et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2014). Thus, it is due time that climate policies account for "the inextricable links between climate change, poverty, extreme inequality, and racial and economic injustice" (Hathaway, 2020, p. 13; see also Garutsa, 2021).

The responsibility to consider climate change and racial justice is one that current political leadership in Aotearoa is failing to uphold. In October 2023, the country's citizens elected a coalition government formed by the National Party, ACT Party, and New Zealand First. This government has sought to repeal the *Natural and Built Environment Act 2023*, reverse a ban on offshore oil and gas, "reinterpret" Te Tiriti, and cancel all work on He Puapua (the country's United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples implementation plan) (Armstrong, 2025; Luxon et al., 2024). In response, thousands of Māori protesters have taken to Parliament and the streets, objecting to the confiscation of their treaty rights (Duff, 2023). Perhaps most famously, a 9-day hikoi (march) drew 42,000 protestors from the northern tip of the North Island to Wellington (Holt, 2024). Protesting treaty infringements is not a new phenomenon for Māori. The actions taken by the coalition government since late 2023 are merely emblematic of a much longer history of settler-colonialism, capitalism, and climate change, and the bicultural tensions which have shaped Aotearoa since the arrival of Pākehā.

Reducing emissions and keeping on track with the oft cited 1.5˚C of warming target "will be achieved only by real structural change" (Levermann, 2019, para. 3) that must include amplifying Indigenous environmental knowledge and values. For Indigenous people who have already experienced irretrievable environmental injustices at the hands of settler-colonialism, capitalism, and industrialisation, "it may be too late to achieve environmental justice" (Whyte, 2020, p. 1). Nonetheless, continuing to pursue climate action remains vital, because failing to "address loss and damage will only result in those that are already most vulnerable … facing ever increasing levels of the negative impacts of climate change" (Thomas, 2022, para. 26). Mātauranga Māori, composed of Māori traditions, values, concepts, philosophies, world views, and understandings, provides a vital contribution to the solutions needed to address settler-colonialism and climate change in Aotearoa. The values of rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga, expressed as constituent parts, can offer a paradigm shift—from the current dominating Pākehā sustainability paradigm toward a more responsive, well-being-led framework that "engages with human and more-than-human wellbeing" (Yates et al., 2022, p. 268). At the same time, Māori sovereignty cannot necessarily solve climate change as kaitiakitanga aspirations are complicated by actual Māori participation within the dominant capitalist system, such as investments in dairy that Ngāi Tahu and other iwi have chosen to pursue.

While agritech-based solutions and regenerative farming trials can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, it cannot be denied that even the most environmentally friendly dairy farms still pose detrimental environmental impacts (Baskaran et al., 2009). This raises the question of whether dairy farms are fundamentally incompatible with rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga. However, the environmental and economic choices available to iwi will be constrained as long as current policies endure. These include the settler-colonial state retaining ownership "of all financial means including land, water, and taxes" (Scobie et al., 2023, p. 415) and the multiple ownership systems imposed on Māori (through, for example, the Māori Land Court and 1997 Waitangi Tribunal settlement). If the Government of Aotearoa is to honour Te Tiriti in the context of the current climate crisis, prioritising Māori rangatiratanga as a central strategy for environmental governance and climate action would constitute a tangible demonstration of that commitment.

[1] For the purposes of this article, the Pākehā sustainability paradigm is used synonymously with "Western" in the context of Aotearoa.
[2] Direct quotations from Māori authors were chosen deliberately through this section to ensure local scholars and voices were prioritised in the theorisation of Mātauranga Māori.

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