

Moving in the realms of the Gods

A NEW BOOK by historian and author Barry Brailsford, to be published later this year, will add to current knowledge about centuries old Maori conservation practices.

The book, at present called "Ngatapuwaē" until Maori elders decide on its name, sets out for the first time in writing the ancient and sacred histories of two of the oldest tribes in Aotearoa, Waitaha and Rapuwai of the South Island. It draws heavily on thousands of waiata and sacred karakia which tell of events right back to the coming of the great waka to the shores of Aotearoa. These oral histories contain much information which has previously been kept secret to protect it against misuse. A tapu on the release of the information has recently been lifted to allow publication of the book.

Brailsford says both Waitaha and Rapuwai had a tremendously sophisticated system of resource management. "Any intervention in nature was based on an enormous amount of careful observation of natural cycles. It was gentle and bound with kawa (protocols) and was intended to replenish, not deplete resources. There was nothing haphazard in what they did."

He says a Maori cosmology or world view where the human species is kin to all life is central to an ethic where conservation and sustainability were, "not just a way of life but life itself."

"The trees and the birds are the children of Tane Mahuta, and we are also of Tane Mahuta, so we are kin to the trees and the birds. The fish are the children of Tangaroa and we are kin to Tangaroa. When we hunt and fish and fell a tree we move in the realms of the Gods. We touch the lives of our kin and in the taking and touching there is always a need, and a kawa to ensure the Gods are not angered by our actions," Brailsford writes.

The tending of sea gardens is one example of how such beliefs were put into practice. Seeding of shellfish beds was common. Kelp bags or poha drilled with a special pattern of holes were filled with ovid/gravid pipi or other shellfish. The bags were lodged in rocky crevices or in the sand below a particular wave line on the foreshore. Wave pressure would slowly disperse the eggs over a period of time into the surrounding sand or rocks, helping to build up the shellfish population.

Management of the sea gardens could also involve careful use of natural predators. "If the pipi coming from a particular bed are skinny and not very juicy because of overcrowding then a particular type of whelk would be introduced. Only the big pipi with a healthy and strong muscle would be able to keep their shells tightly closed and withstand the whelk," says Peter Ruka, a Christchurch fisher closely involved with research for "Ngatapuwaē". The whelk would effectively thin out the bed by eating the less healthy pipi and leaving the stronger ones to increase in size and reproduce.

Other waiata transcribed by Brailsford explain how surplus fish from netting expedi-



Motukeikei on the West Coast. On the rock ledges that fringe these small islands, the Waitaha seeded black mussels carried in their waka from distant waters. Those who saved the mussel spat were required to nurture the crop from generation to generation. Photo: Derek Mitchell

tions were held in rock pools until they were needed and released if they weren't, and how at the appropriate time of year long nets would be strung across particular bays at night to protect fish breeding areas from incursions by squid.

Ruka believes that much of the knowledge in the waiata and karakia can assist both conservationists and fisheries scientists by ensuring, for example, that marine reserves are located in areas which traditionally have been known to be fish breeding areas.

"The waiata involves thousands of years of folk wisdom. We don't have to re-invent the wheel and act as if it is only what we have learnt in the last 150 years which is important," says Ruka. "In the old world every little harbour had a role to play. Some were kohanga (nests/nurseries) and some were set aside as fishing areas. The restrictions on fishing followed natural cycles." If this traditional knowledge was used there would be substantial changes to current fishing regulations to better protect the species concerned.

Ruka says current regulations governing paua should be changed to prohibit the taking of paua larger than four inches because the bigger paua are more important as breeding stock. "Currently we protect the little ones but we never give them a chance to grow old."

"Never hunt mahuta, the giants, and never hunt the young still to know the world," Brailsford writes. "When the tuna (eels) run into the lakes and down the streams to the sea there is a kawa that binds the hunter. The

small ones, the males, are first to take to the trail of the seasons. They are allowed to pass through the traps. Those that follow on another moon, the middle sized females are the eels we seek, for their eggs are few and their flesh is sweet. The poutuna, the ancient ones that are much taller than our people, swim by with our karakia to help them on their way to the sea. For they are the true egg carriers. They are the future. That is the way with all fish. We never hunt the young or old."

Brailsford says much more research and writing needs to be done about the ancient histories and unravelling the skeins of knowledge which they contain. He is hopeful that the book "Ngatapuwaē" will encourage that to happen and help New Zealanders to give meaning to the words,

*"Toi tu te marae a Tane
Toi tu te marae a Tangaroa
Toi tu te iwi."*

"If the marae of Tane and the marae of Tangaroa survive so will the people." 🦋

Eugenie Sage

Correction

The story in the November 1990 *Forest & Bird* "Lobster on the Rocks" referred to "the incompetence of fisheries managers"; it did not give recognition to the fact that MAF have recommended rock lobster catch reductions for the past few years. These were not implemented by the Government of the day.