

Public Rāhui and Road Blocks in Aotearoa: Navigating Iwi/Hapū Perspectives and Mana Motuhake

Mark Harvey

The University of Auckland

Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic there have been wide-spread public debates over public access for walkers, cyclists and vehicles in relation to the land rights and the safety of iwi/hapu (Māori tribes and sub-tribes) in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This includes checkpoints or road blocks set up by iwi/hapu in rural areas to stop the spread of the pandemic (Harris and Williams, 2020; Ngata, 2020), and the ongoing rāhui or temporary ban on all forms of public access in regional conservation forests by Te Kawerau ā Maki iwi of Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland to stop the growth of the ecological pest kauri dieback by visitors. This article reflects on the complexities of these bans by considering public responses to them, including settler politics, discourses of rights and freedoms, and white supremacy. Consideration is given to the perspectives of iwi/hapu themselves and contingent histories (for instance Te Kawerau ā Maki, 2020). This is reflected on through mana motuhake (authority, self-determination and agency), alongside Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Māori perspectives of the Treaty of Waitangi; Orange, 1987; Walker, 2004) and mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge).

Local resident: "It's my right to walk through there. No one has the right to stop me."

Rāhui Volunteer: "No, you're in breach of the rāhui in this forest."

When you consider how closely Māori hold our ancestors, our reverence for history, and the scale of the loss we have suffered from epidemics, it is easy to understand the unease Māori communities felt when COVID-19 arrived on our shores. (Ngata, 2020)

As I write this, we face the precipice of apocalypse on at least two fronts; our ecosystem and the COVID-19 pandemic (Of course, I'm sure I don't need to remind us). For many around the world Aotearoa/New Zealand, from where I am writing this, appears to be staying ahead of these waves of calamity, with touristic slogans like '100% Pure New Zealand' and our widely considered extremely successful government strategies for keeping the pandemic at bay (Jones, 2020b). Contrary to popular international beliefs we face the risk of major ecological destruction, with widespread loss of native species and habitat due to human intervention over at least the last 180 years since our annexation under the British crown—loss that is not letting up (Lee, Wood, and Rogers, 2009). We have had four COVID 'lockdowns', of mostly 14 day periods so far, with 2609 people catching it (as of time of writing, with no community cases)—numbers far lower than other Western countries (Ministry of Health, 2021).

One of our most revered native trees is the kauri, (see Figure 1) which grows wider than the length of a car if left for thousands of years. It has potentially the third highest carbon capture rate of trees in the world and is at serious risk of extinction, due first to the well-known logging of 98% of its population primarily by European settlers between the mid 1800s and 1920s, and more recently to what appears to be an international migrant—a soil-born mould *Phytophthora agathidicida*, or kauri dieback disease (a relation to potato blight). This threat is exacerbated by variables like climate change making trees weaker with droughts, meaning our northern Aotearoa forests face habitat collapse, especially if humans are allowed to walk and move freely in them without any controls (DOC, 2021; Auckland Council, 2017). As an indication of how auspicious kauri are, they are considered tupuna/ancestors for more than half of Māori. It is generally considered that both these threats to our existence come from the human manipulation of our natural environment, out of balance with what it can sustain (Jandu, 2020; Hill and Waipara, 2017). One might ask what kauri dieback has to do with our sense of public participation and public access? In this article I argue that it has 'everything to do with it', along with COVID-19, when considering Māori, our iwi (tribes) and hapū (sub-tribes), and preventing members of the public from accessing land that is within tribal territory (rohe).

During the COVID-19 pandemic there have been widespread public debates over public access for walkers, cyclists and vehicles in relation to the land rights and the safety of iwi/hapu in Aotearoa. This includes debate regarding checkpoints set up by iwi/hapu in several rural areas, in order to stop the spread of COVID-19 (Harris and Williams, 2020; Ngata, 2020), and the ongoing rāhui or temporary cultural ban on all forms of public access in regional conservation forests placed by Te Kawerau ā Maki iwi of Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland to stop the spread of the ecological pest kauri dieback by visitors (2020). In this article I reflect on these bans by considering public responses of opposition to them. Moreover, I intend to do this in relation to Māori perspectives of rights and legalities, with some mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), in application of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) foundational call to decolonise research via indigenous frameworks. I begin with my personal standpoint—a usual way to begin in Māori contexts.



Figure 1: *Young kauri*. Kauri forest of Te Wao Nui a Tiriwa/Hikurangi (taken in line with rāhui rules), photograph by Mark Harvey (2021)

A Standpoint and Some Background

I arrive to this from a culturally mixed perspective—from the standpoint of identifying as Māori (Mātāwaka/urban Māori with Ngāti Toa iwi whakapapa/ancestry) and Pākehā (non-Māori, European, mainly British descent), forced to grow up in denial of our Māori heritage, a story not-uncommon across Aotearoa for ‘mix-bloods’ like me. While I do not belong to the iwi/hapū who placed the discussed blocks to public access (Te Kawerau a Maki), I am attempting to operate as an accomplice and ally from neighbouring Māori iwi, and simultaneously a partner from the Pākehā world, as an environmental conservationist, local resident, social activist, researcher, and artist. Of note here, unlike many other colonised indigenous peoples, for Māori one is never ‘part Māori,’ but is *only ever Māori*, no matter how little actual Māori DNA one has or the sense of privilege one might experience by operating within Pākehā cultural norms (Hayden, 2018). But due to my Pākehā privileging and the nature of iwi protocols, I am not a spokesperson for the iwi discussed here. As many Māori authors argue (such as Tuhivai Smith, 1999), for one to attempt to approach this topic as a Pākehā it is considered to be a responsibility to learn and uphold (and uplift/whakatairanga) perspectives of tangata whenua (people of the land, ie. Māori) in ways that respect kaupapa Māori and the mana of Māori, without undermining their voice, from a ‘hyphen space’ as an ally/accomplice (Jones and Te Kawehau, 2015). (Kaupapa Māori refers here to a Māori approach, customary practice and way of behaving and seeing the world. Mana refers to that which is more than rights and empowerment, involving spiritual well-being and integrity and recognition of one’s culture, whakapapa/ancestry and status among other related things.) This is in order to do our ‘fair share’ as Pākehā in ‘standing up for it’, because so often Pākehā rely on Māori to defend themselves/ourselves as Māori to the point of exhaustion leading to feeling ‘worn down’ from continually having to repeat things in order to gain rights, a sense of empowerment, and mana (Jones, 2020a).

This perspective of learning and of partnership as an aspect of kaupapa Māori can be seen to be generally inclusive, in contrast to a modern Pākehā world view, where one usually sees oneself as an individual first and foremost, and always ‘in segments’—as, for instance, ‘part-Māori’, but never part of the collective of ‘being Māori’ (Salmond, 2017). In mātauranga Māori and kaupapa Māori one is always part of the collective, and this goes further, in that we are each interconnected with ecology, spirituality and all things around and through us (Salmond, 2017). One could go so far as to say this ancient cultural perspective was arrived at hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of years before Western theoreticians considered related ideas about our inter-relationships with the non-human, such as Rosi Braidotti’s (2017) operating in the post-human world and Karen Barad’s (2007) notion of intra-action (this is not to underrate what these theories offer). This is why, for instance, we see spirals as a common visual motif and metaphor within toi Māori/Māori arts (Salmond, 2017), such as tā moko (tattoos), kapa haka (song and dance), and whakairo (carving).



Figure 2: *Is it all our right?* Te Wao Nui a Tiriwa/Hikurangi forest track (recently made open to the public), photograph by Mark Harvey (2021)

Te Wao Nui a Tiriwa / Hikurangi Rāhui

In 2017, Te Kawerau ā Maki, one of the thirteen recognised iwi of the region of Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), declared a rāhui (temporary ban and restrictions) on members of the public entering the public forest of Te Wao Nui a Tiriwa, or Hikurangi (a region commonly known in Pākehā contexts as the Waitākere Ranges) (See Figure 2). The decision was made by kaumātua (tribal elders) in response to the continued spread of kauri dieback across the region, particularly by walkers on tracks through the bush. The iwi declared the rāhui also because they, like many of us (including allies, ecologists, local scientists with related specialities, conservationists, local activists, and other iwi) perceived that neither local nor central

government were doing enough to prevent the spread of the disease and save our kauri forests, especially considering the important ecosystem role kauri trees have in supporting many other native species (Kauri Rescue, 2021). While many local residents, like me, support this ongoing rāhui there are many (mainly Pākehā) residents and visitors from the nearby metropolis of Auckland City who have continued to object and resist it (Friends of Parks, 2021).

Whenua, Te Tiriti, and Mana Motuhake

Providing some subtext is the nature of ownership of public and private lands in Hikurangi, which is a reflection of most of Aotearoa. Due to the last 180 odd years of European colonisation, most land was annexed by force by the British, and later New Zealand governments, often with the pretext of punishing iwi/hapu for fighting against the Crown. The result has been severe intergenerational poverty, isolation from one's own culture, and trauma for Māori throughout Aotearoa (Anderson, Binney, Harris, 2015; Walker, 2004), a situation echoed in other colonised nations. As Nick Estes (2021), a citizen of the Lower Bule Sioux Tribe, notes about ongoing land acquisition through colonisation (in reference to Bill Gates buying up US land):

Land is power, land is wealth, and, more importantly, land is about race and class. The relationship to land—who owns it, who works it and who cares for it—reflects obscene levels of inequality and legacies of colonialism and white supremacy in the United States, and also the world.

Other reasons for land isolation for iwi/hapu include landsales by members of the iwi or hapū, often for a lot less than the lands were worth, and widely viewed as colonial exploitation (King, 2012; Walker, 2004). This is generally considered to be the case for Hikurangi. It is more complex still, in that most of this region was sold by another claimant iwi, Ngāti Whatua from the 1840s, to Pākehā farmers, land speculators and to local government, without the consent of Te Kawerau ā Maki (Auckland Council, 2021a). Under Crown law, Auckland Council are the current legal owners of the approximately 17,000 hectare Hikurangi Forest Park with most of the remainder owned privately (mainly by Pākehā). The exception is several acres the council has recently gifted back to Te Kawerau ā Maki iwi in Te Henga.

What gives iwi/hapu jurisdiction over all of the land (whenua) and waters (awa and moana) of Aotearoa, no matter who has land titles on paper under colonial Crown law is Te Tiriti o Waitangi of 1840 (The Treaty of Waitangi, 1840; Orange, 1987; Walker, 2004), which was the founding document of the nation state of New Zealand under the British Empire, and a power sharing agreement between the Crown and Māori. The use of Te Reo (the Māori language) name for this treaty rather than the English one, The Treaty of Waitangi, is an attempt to performatively acknowledge the precedence of this Māori version. In one sense this could be seen to apply Judith Butler and Athena Athanasious' (2013) views, among others (e.g. Varisco, 2007), that calling something up through naming it assigns it with political power to enact that which it names, including resistance to colonisation. More specifically this is a strategy that many Māori legal experts and authors take, such as Margaret Mutu (2019) and Moana Jackson (2019). The Māori version—Te Tiriti—does not state that Māori have ceded the governorship of the lands and waters of Aotearoa over to the Crown (Orange, 1987; Mutu, 2019; Walker, 2004). I draw here from Te Tiriti because it is the one legal document in Aotearoa that is widely acknowledged as a tool towards gaining restitution and reparations for Māori, against the intergenerational and ongoing colonial trauma inflicted by crown law and settlers since 1840 (Orange, 1987; Walker, 2004)—including iwi-initiated rāhui and checkpoints.

From this perspective, Māori still maintain jurisdiction over our tribal lands and waters, no matter what property titles under crown law exist, private or public. In contrast, the English version of The Treaty claims that Māori have ceded governance over our land and waters, however this was never agreed to by our rangatira/chiefs (Orange, 1987; Walker, 2004). This view is still the mainstream Pākehā perspective and it is upheld by many mainly Pākehā centrist and right-leaning politicians, as well as colonial and racist groups such as Hobsons Choice (Elers and Jayan, 2020). Only very recently, from the last 30 years onward, has the Crown begun to take notice of aspects of the Māori text of Te Tiriti through the Waitangi Tribunal, opting to still defer to the English version to justify land and water confiscations off Māori (Orange, 1987; Walker, 2004). There are countless examples of this in laws presiding over land, where Māori rights are over-ridden (such as the Public Works Act), even more so than in many other countries where there are colonial and indigenous peoples. This impacts many areas of legislation besides land ownership, such as education, crime, and healthcare, where Crown centralised governance structures continue to override Māori initiatives (Durie, 2011; Anderson, Binney, and Harris, 2015; Sykes, 2021).

A further complexity here is that *mana motuhake* (defined in one sense as self determination) as implied in Te Tiriti, does not mean a single set of laws that unify all Māori. Rather, in kaupapa Māori, separate iwi/hapū self-governance is paramount (Paora, Tuiono, and Flavell, 2011). The notions of national identity and pan-Māori identity only came about with contact with Pākehā. A key aspect to the definition of *mana motuhake* is the last part (*motuhake*), referring to separate, stand alone, and position independently—or be self-governing. With this come notions of the uplifting of the *mana* of the iwi/hapū, the preservation of *wairua* (feeling and spirit), *hauora* (continued health), and connections of *whakapapa* (geneological connection) to ancestors in the *whenua* (land) and other aspects of environment such as *awa* (waterways). One way of seeing *mana motuhake* is the upholding of *Oranga Iho Nui*—a regenerative, circular and distributive economy, or Māori view of doughnut economics (See Figure 3)—that ensures the balancing of “the safe and just space for humanity to thrive and ecology to regenerate”, with “ecological foundation” and “social well being” (Boasa-Dean and Shareef, 2021) for iwi/hapū in our *rohe* (geographical areas). No matter what *mana motuhake* can achieve, key here is that all privately and publicly owned land, even that iwi/hapū has no Crown-endorsed title of ‘ownership’ over, is subject to the *rangatiratanga* (chieftainship) of iwi/hapū that reside in that area. Nowadays, at least on a symbolic level, there is an acknowledgement of iwi/hapū relationships, for instance in some local governance committees and public signposts. Sometimes iwi/hapū are brought in to consult on issues, but not often enough, as illustrated by ongoing debates about increasing Māori representation in local councils (Mitchell, 2020).

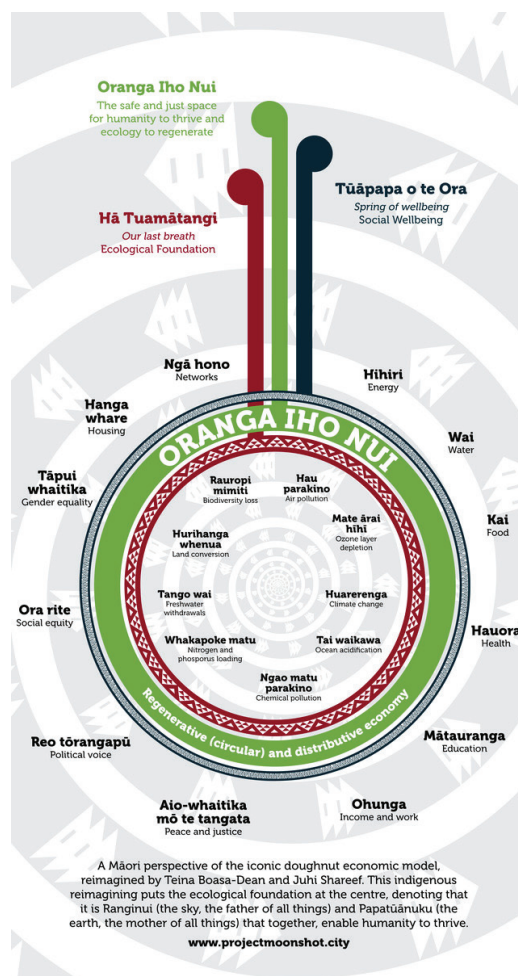


Figure 3: *Oranga Iho Nui*. A Māori perspective of Doughnut Economics (Boasa-Dean and Shareef, 2021).

In the case of the Hikurangi Forest Park, Auckland Council has recently agreed to consult with Te Kawerau ā Maki in recognition to some degree of their mana motuhake on what are considered major decisions concerning the governance of the area (for instance Auckland Council, 2021b) and in this way partially acknowledge the iwi and its right to govern under Te Tiriti. To many of us it is an example of a potential beginning in the process of ‘thawing the ice of colonial legal whitewashing and steamrolling of our peoples’.

Tracking the Hikurangi Rāhui

Due to the dominating approach to land governance by local and central government of abiding to the English version of Te Tiriti, in addition to opposition from many local Pākehā who objected to the rāhui, it took Auckland Council approximately eighteen months to support the rāhui placed by Te Kawerau ā Maki and begin to implement official track closures. It is widely known that ongoing objections by many local Pākehā to the rāhui expressed across public and social media have been fueled by their collective misassumption that iwi have no right to define what council does, often with the justification that these individuals have democratic rights as residents, ‘no less than Māori’. Objectors often state that it is their right to go anywhere because they assert that there is only ‘one law for all’ and iwi/hapū have no other rights under their colonial interpretation of the law (Friends of Parks, 2021). Many ignored the iwi-led rāhui on this basis until Auckland Council joined in because they stated they would only follow what the council regulates. By denying Te Tiriti in these ways, and

therefore denying Māori rights, this behaviour can be seen as a continuation of the process of colonisation and of intergenerational injustices against us (Jackson, 2018; 2019; Walker, 2004). From this perspective, it is another example of white racism in action, no matter how little or much these Pākehā say they ‘are not trying to be racist’, or don’t have racist intentions. This is a common aspect of white racism, where ‘actions speak louder than words’ as many authors have noted (e.g. DiAngelo, 2018; Saad, 2020).

A common statement by these Pākehā rāhui-deniers is that it is their ‘right’ to have free access to the forest. This is despite the aforementioned mana motuhake of the local iwi, and of support shown by ecologists and related scientists towards the rāhui, in order to give the forest and kauri the best chance to heal. Many of these transgressors have stated it is their right as locals to exercise where they like in the forest (Friends of Parks, 2021). Often they say this because they pay local government taxes. Even a local tramping club (who are primarily Pākehā) has joined this call to re-open the tracks ‘because it is their right’ (Friends of Parks, 2021). Current ongoing research into this issue is so far finding that many local Pākehā do not want to obey the rules of the rāhui—they have been carrying out these behaviours for years and many of these respondents see their right to do this as part of their identity of living around the forest (MFA, 2021). There are what appears to be a minority of Pākehā who have continued to call for the opening up of the whole forest park to all, because of impacts on local businesses and the tourism industry, who have had to curtail their activities (Waitākere Local Board, 2018). Further fueling the issue is anti-science sentiment, fake news, and scepticism of scientific research on kauri dieback and its ecological impact, with many saying things like ‘they know the science and it’s inconclusive’, sometimes even making racist statements inferring that Māori do not understand science (Friends of Parks, 2021). A misconception among some Pākehā conservationists is that Māori have no idea about environmental protection, despite mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) placing environmental care at the centre of engagement with life, interconnected with everything else (Swarbrick, 2021), and the commonly expressed belief that to protect nature is to protect people.



Figure 4: *Feet cleaner*. Kauri Dieback spray station, Waitākere Hikurangi forest track (recently made open to the public), photograph by Mark Harvey (2021)

As can be noted of different forms of rāhui around the country, from checkpoints to barring fishing in specific areas, to bans on swimming at beaches where someone has just died, this cultural regulatory practice is not one of banning people outright, rather it is placed to help people moderate their behaviour so that the object of the iwi/hapū's protection can be carried out. It is not permanent, despite some misconceptions, especially from those opposed to it (Taua-Gordon, 2021). Te Kawerau ā Maki have only ever called for the temporary closure of bush tracks to give the ngahere (forest) the time it appears to need to heal from kauri dieback, with the support of iwi, scientists, ecologists, conservationists and both local and national government. Since Auckland Council has agreed to support the rāhui it has been gradually rebuilding tracks and forest accessways so that they align with the latest Western scientific perspectives on what can best protect kauri from further infection. The iwi here has been informed mostly by Western science research on kauri, alongside careful consideration of mātauranga Māori and iwi protocols, providing an example of how Western Science and Māori knowledge can collaborate to benefit the forest and people (Kauri Rescue, 2021). This endeavor is also leading to ongoing partnerships between the iwi and scientists in research around preserving and healing kauri from rongoā (Māori medicine), beyond what Western science can achieve alone.

Since the implementation of the rāhui, more and more tracks have been gradually upgraded and re-opened by Auckland Council, on condition of the iwi's approval. One can see this as a positive way to rebuild positive relationships with members of the public, especially Pākehā who want to use the forest for their recreation. It can also be seen as a potentially positive model for how other local councils can work with iwi through rāhui—as an interim approach until ownership of lands and waterways can be fully returned to iwi/hapū.

Despite the efforts of Te Kawerau ā Maki and Auckland Council, it is well known throughout Auckland Council staff, local scientific, ecology and conservation that it is not uncommon to see local Pākehā residents breaching the rāhui rules. As a local ally and coming from neighbouring iwi, a practicing community conservationist, and resident in one of the semi-suburban/rural parts of this forest, I have at times joined other local activists to hand out information on the rāhui around the entrances to forest tracks approximately a kilometre from where I live, and to inform walkers, runners, cyclists and dog-walkers of the rules. It appears that, since the rāhui began, 80-95% of these track visitors have complied with the rules that Te Kawerau ā Maki and Auckland Council have installed (MFA, 2021). There have been some convictions of people breaching the rāhui, with fines for repeat offenders, who local park rangers have begun to know by name (Nichols, 2021). In a more recent addition to the already mentioned reasons for resisting the rāhui rules, when I asked an older Pākehā male to spray the bottom of his feet at a disinfectant spray-station at the entrance to a local forest track, as per the national guidelines for kauri dieback (see Figure 4), he adamantly refused on the grounds that he did not want to catch COVID-19 from touching the equipment—despite the disinfectant being hospital grade and commonly used against the virus.

Checkpoints and Road Blocks

Each time we have so far had national and regional lockdowns for COVID-19, from March 2020 to March 2021, iwi/hapū in rural contexts have set up their own road and pedestrian checkpoints or what some call roadblocks, in addition to the government's stop-points. Examples include iwi Ngāti Manuhiri, with the whole of Pakiri Beach (a former residence of my family), Te Tai Tokerau Border Control (by different iwi such as Ngāpuhi) in Northland and, on the East Coast of the North Island, by a collective of iwi including Ngāti Porou (Localmatters, 2020; Peters, 2020; Owen, 2021). As with the forest rāhui in Hikurangi these have been carried out as an expression of mana motuhake, in this case to keep vulnerable

members of iwi/hapū safe (Ngata, 2020). Usually these checkpoints have lasted two to three weeks, with seven weeks being the longest, and have always corresponded with government reports of community COVID-19 outbreaks, sometimes with only one or two known cases (as in the case of January, 2020 in Northland). Local residents, no matter their culture, have been allowed through the checkpoints, but not visitors with no reason outside of ‘essential services’ for residents, such as medical treatment, food deliveries and house repairs. These checkpoints are taking place in a context of complex social impacts from the lockdowns here, including the closing of national borders, with what can be considered to be xenophobic, racist exclusion of migrants and their family members. Many businesses have also laid off low-paid workers (such as in cafes, hitting women the hardest) and have forced many others in essential low-income jobs like cleaning, security, supermarkets to work more (including non-European migrants and Pacific Islanders). These lockdowns have also resulted in many Māori and Pacific Island students leaving their tertiary education in order to work in essential jobs to support themselves and their families due to relatives losing their jobs, something I have personally witnessed in my role as an academic.

At times the New Zealand Police have partnered with Māori on local checkpoints, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic has continued, but this has not always been the case. (See Figure 5). They cannot be legally enforced under Crown law, unless there is a national COVID-19 lockdown in place (Burrows, 2020; Satherly, 2020). Initially these checkpoints were set up during the first 7-week-long lockdown beginning March, 2020 without government or Police involvement, but after 3-4 weeks officials met with iwi and agreed to support the checkpoints. As Tina Ngata (2020), one of the East Coast iwi checkpoints organisers argues,

When you further consider that not only has the state historically failed to protect our ancestors, but that the common Indigenous experience of colonisation includes the use of disease as a genocidal weapon, then you can understand why we could not wait for anyone to come and save us.



Figure 5: *Wait*. Roadblock cones (generically used in iwi/hapū-led checkpoints), photograph by Mark Harvey (2021)

As is described by a range of historians and authors such as Ngata (2020), Mason Durie (2011) and Anderson et al. (2015), Māori have faced several virus epidemics since the 1700s due to European colonisation and contact, with mass fatalities. One of the worst was the major international flu epidemic of 1918/1919, where Māori experienced one of the highest fatality rates in the world with whole villages wiped out (Ngata, 2020). Ngata notes, as an example of iwi/hapū engagement with their histories, that with the advent of COVID-19 many recall the value of placing lockdowns over their rohe/area on public roads and throughfares. She adds that only the two Māori towns with self-imposed lockdowns in the 1918/1919 flu epidemic prevented its second wave from occurring.

Māori are extremely at risk of suffering mass fatalities from COVID-19. A high proportion of Māori have what are regarded by medical institutions as major risk factors, such as obesity, respiratory and heart illness; these health risk statistics are far higher—often more than twice higher—for Māori than for Pākehā (Espiner, 2020; Ngata, 2020). This is often noted as a direct result of intergenerational poverty incurred by colonial acts such as land alienation (Durie, 2011; Anderson et al., 2015). This is compounded by geographical isolation from the mainstream health system for Māori in rural contexts, in a medical system governed centrally by the Crown, that often does not consider Māori rights or needs (Espiner, 2020), despite Te Tiriti. It is also well-known that there have been no significant government efforts to protect Māori anymore than other parts of the general population ‘on the ground’ in this last year from COVID-19—despite unfulfilled promises from government Māori leaders to roll-out vaccinations for Māori quickly. A very recent government-level report has emphasised the lack of Māori governance and consultation by government agencies in relation to COVID-19, despite acknowledged disproportionate health risks for Māori and what Te Tiriti calls for, in reflection of the wider health services (Kukutai and Ruru, 2021). Therefore, as many of my own Māori colleagues and friends tell me, ‘it is better to be safe than sorry’ with setting up these rural checkpoints, even if there is no official lockdown sometimes and there is even one community case of COVID-19 (See Figure 6).



Figure 6: !!, photograph by Mark Harvey (2021)

Despite this, there has continued to be opposition to these rural Māori-initiated checkpoints. A small number of Pākehā in national media claim it is too early to do this (Chen, 2021). Sometimes it has come from prominent ‘Shock Jock’ Pākehā media commentators such as Sean Plunket, who was found guilty and fined for breaching the New Zealand Broadcasting Authority’s standards over a racist statement in relation to the checkpoints that “amplified and reflected casual racism” (Jones, 2020c). Plunket

called iwi “bullies”, “rogues” and “highwaymen”, questioned how many iwi members were on a benefit, and asked why, with no context, it didn’t focus on issues like child abuse. (Jones, 2020c)

This racist response is not uncommon among his demographic to issues like this, and can be seen to illustrate denial of the traumas caused by colonisation, as Walker (2004) and Jackson (2019) note. In my own personal experience, one only has to look at daily Facebook comments associated with mainstream news outlets to see the continued high prevalence of such commentary. This perspective has been compounded by some conservative politicians and business leaders refuting the need for the checkpoints, such as consistent calls to keep the roads free so that local businesses can operate freely, including tourism (Cheng, 2020; Auckland Chamber of Commerce, 2020). This has been compounded at times by COVID-19-denying minority rightwing politicians and protestors who place their trust in conspiracy theories, often influenced by well-known international conspiracy movements like QAnon, instead of peer-reviewed science (Farrier, 2020; RNZ, 2021). Both these anti-COVID-19 lockdown/checkpoints stances can be seen to ignore the majority of scientific recommendations that the NZ Government has attempted to follow toward keeping its citizens safe (Geoghegan, Moreland, Le Gross and Ussher, 2021), but moreover, Māori mana motuhake in terms of being able to keeping Māori safe.

While opposition has been mostly from Pākehā commentators, others who have opposed the checkpoints are Māori, illustrating the plurality of Māori viewpoints. For instance, in 2020 the Deputy Prime Minister at the time, Winston Peters (Ngāpuhi iwi) argued for only having a government-led COVID-19 response (Waatea News, 2020). Peters is well-known for objecting to Māori governance outside of Crown Law, conferring only to the English version of The Treaty, ignoring Te Tiriti. The former leader of parliament’s opposition party, Minister of Parliament (MP) Simon Bridges, who is also Māori, when in that role in 2020, made what appeared to be false claims of locals being stopped from going to the local general store, while claiming checkpoints are illegal and unnecessary, and that everyone has a right to drive and walk where they like (Harris and Williamson, 2020; Ngata, 2020). Based on Te Tiriti, as Max Harris and David Williams note (2020), the checkpoints have not been in breach of Crown local government laws or public menace legislation, despite what MP Bridges argues. A dilemma here is that the views of these Māori politicians can be seen to encourage and effectively enable white racism in issues like this, not to mention undermine the potential of Tino Rangatiratanga (Māori self-determination and sovereignty) that Te Tiriti calls for. One could go so far as to potentially label their anti-mana motuhake stance as a form of ‘colonial-Stockholm syndrome’, where colonised people can take on and identify with attitudes of their colonisers (Vltcheck, 2019).

Closing Remarks

Ki te kahore he whakakitenga ka ngaro te iwi

Without foresight or vision the people will be lost

(Māori proverb, said to be pronounced by Kingi Tawhiao Potatau te Wherowhero, to show the urgency of unification and strong Maori leadership.)

Without mana motuhake for iwi/hapū in their/our own rohe/geographic areas of jurisdiction under Te Tiriti, we are likely as Māori to allow our health, well-being and ecology to continue to fall into decline—particularly in this time of potential apocalypse. Just as all of the current science suggests, unabated public access in epidemics (for people and for our kauri trees) is likely to lead to ill-health, especially for Māori and our forests. As has been shown by these efforts to close off general public access, the Hikurangi rāhui and rural Māori COVID-19 checkpoints, iwi/hapū continue to take the initiative to protect our tangata (people) and taiao (environment), despite resistance from the Crown, local councils and some individuals (Pākehā, and even a small minority of Māori) who do not recognise Māori mana motuhake. These efforts by iwi/hapū are not happening in a vacuum, as there are many other examples such initiatives—especially in relation to ensuring the return of Crown-confiscated/stolen Māori land, such as the ongoing campaign to return Ihumātao back to iwi in Mangere, Auckland (Hobbs, 2018). This can be seen to be occurring because current Pākehā/Crown law cannot address what Māori need, nor can it fully embrace tikanga (Māori protocols), as Annette Sykes (2021) argues.

Some possible public pedagogical methods towards beginning to address this issue, and supporting the rights of Māori, can include legal reformation via constitutional change so that Te Tiriti o Waitangi as opposed to The Treaty of Waitangi is fully recognised. This could be a parallel Māori governmental system, including a parliament, laws and government services. From a Kaupapa Māori perspective this would involve public consultation, guided and led by Māori and set up so that Māori are not drowned out by the larger Pākehā populous, where Māori have a say over Māori concepts and legal kaupapa. Another way toward this, many argue, lies in continuing the Crown process of returning iwi/hapū land and waterways through the Waitangi Tribunal (Walker, 2004). Te Tiriti allows for these possibilities. It is very often argued that, in order for Aotearoa to become a more inclusive and decolonised nation state where Māori sovereignty is paramount, much more education is needed for people outside of iwi/hapū contexts to understand these issues from Māori perspectives, in line with Te Tiriti, so that everyone chooses to ‘walk with respect’ through iwi territory. Tangata Tiriti (or ‘the people of the treaty’, which refers to the people who live in Aotearoa because of Te Tiriti, such as Pākehā), who are allied with Māori on these issues, following Māori guidance and kaupapa, can be seen to be critically important in helping to educate others around these issues. As many of my Māori friends, whanau and colleagues note, we often feel burned out from the sheer task of educating others about our rights, needs and mātauranga Māori, as Jones and Hoskins (2015) imply. This can in turn help local authorities and the government to design places of public access in accordance with local tribal custom, with wider community support from all demographics, groups and institutions, from schools to tramping clubs, and Pākehā neighbours in the bush. If we can achieve a sense of ‘critical mass’ in these kinds of awareness and legal change, it might be possible to implement things like rāhui and checkpoints, when needed, without public outcries and conflicts laced with racism and aggression.

Meanwhile, iwi/hapū, along with Pākehā allies, including Pākehā scientists, conservationists, activists and others, face a continued uphill battle of fending off those local Pākehā who walk wherever they like, placing their individual rights over others and over our forests. One can argue that it is by our collective efforts that we can eventually overcome this obstruction towards reaching mana motuhake.

Naku te rourou nau te rourou ka ora ai te iwi
With your basket and my basket the people will live
(Māori proverb that refers to co-operation and the combination of resources towards a common goal)

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