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A Māori Way to Manage Pests – Tame Malcolm (2022)

When it comes to animal pest management in Aotearoa, there are a few controversial topics. Simply asking about some of these topics on social media can erupt into full blown debates. For example, will we eradicate possums, stoats, and rats by 2050 as per the predator free Governments goal? Should cats be controlled? Should deer and pigs be considered a pest or a resource? Should Aotearoa look to gene editing technology?

However, in my opinion, none are more controversial than the use of 1080 toxin to control pest species. The use of 1080 has spawned countless rallies and protests¹ by the small number of those opposed to it. Worse still, is the damage and threats² caused by those opposed to those who support.

Amidst the noise of the 1080 debate is one message by those opposed that I absolutely loathe. Something along the lines of “you are not Māori if you support 1080!” Furthermore, they say that using 1080 isn’t a Māori way to manage pests.

In short, there is only one answer to such a nonsense notion of questioning if someone is Māori, if you have whakapapa Māori, you are Māori.

As to the second part of their argument, is there specific way of doing Māori pest management? Is it following traditional tikanga and kawa to control pests? Is it using the ways of our tūpuna, i.e., pre-European Māori approaches? Or is it simply just being Māori and managing pests?

I think we can all agree, that trying to define a ‘Māori’ way would be difficult. Māori culture has evolved from the time when our tūpuna left Hawaiki, to their arrival in Aotearoa, the hundreds of years spent living in this ecosystem, European arrival, and colonisation, right up to now with all this new technology.

So, what is it about the use of 1080 toxin that is deemed, un-Māori? Is it the fact that it is using a toxin to kill an animal? Some say, that adding a poison to our whenua is unnatural, and therefore un-Māori. But Māori history and our culture has many examples of toxin use. Kawakawa³ for example – a known insecticide – would be used to kill insects. It would be buried in the ground around kūmara gardens, i.e., adding poison to the whenua to deter insects.

Some readers may be thinking, kawakawa is from our whenua whereas 1080 isn’t. However, the active ingredient in 1080 – sodium monofluoroacetate – can be found in pūha⁴.

At some pā sites around the country, our tūpuna would line their kūmara pits with rarauhe⁵ (bracken fern). Being a toxic plant, kiore that would try and burrow into the kūmara pits would have to gnaw through the rarauhe to get to the kūmara, thus get poisoned.

¹ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/106933934/protectors-make-a-nationwide-stand-against-1080>

² <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/doc-security-being-reviewed-amid-sinister-1080-threats-to-attack-staff-shoot-down-choppers/RJA2EJNYPCMGCOQ3VXJODLYZZY/>

³ <https://maoriplantuse.landcareresearch.co.nz/WebForms/PeoplePlantsDetails.aspx?PKey=df6c4669-4a57-4473-8b3f-ce49593273a2>

⁴ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/15961/1080-in-puha-not-seen-as-offputting#:~:text=Lincoln%20University%20has%20found%201080,for%20it%20to%20kill%20anyone>

⁵ <https://www.istor.org/stable/20704988>

Another aspect of the use of 1080 not being Māori is that it gets into water. Now, the science shows that 1080 breaks down⁶ in water very readily. Secondly, toxins in water were not something foreign to our tūpuna. In some iwi, tūpapku (deceased) were buried in lakes and rivers⁷. This would result in a rāhui (ban) being placed on that area and no food or water was to be taken from that area for physical and spiritual wellbeing.

As you can see, our tūpuna were no strangers to toxin. They knew how to mitigate the effects of toxins in plants like karak⁸a, that could then become a food source. Alternatively, our tūpuna would translocate ongaonga⁹ – stinging nettle – and place it in areas that would deter unwelcomed visitors.

Recently, there was research into using the toxic native tutu¹⁰ species as a toxin. Not only did the research show it was possible, but it also garnered interest from Māori communities who were keen on using our own mātauranga to address the pest problem.

Some have argued that the mass killing of pests that is expected from using 1080 toxin is also un-Māori like. But this argument doesn't really hold up because our tūpuna would catch large quantities of fish using nets. Tāruke (crayfish trap) and hīnaki, both operate on the premise of catching on mass.

Perhaps it is the fact that 1080 results in large quantities of dead lying around. Again, this is not something new to our culture. After battles, our tūpuna would lay out dead bodies. Like the large rock called Te Aroaro o te rangi ka awatea found on Mokoia island in lake Rotorua where the dead were splayed out to dry.

Then there are those that agree that using 1080 means whānau cannot go into the forest and that access to the forest is our right as Māori. This argument forgets that rāhui were commonplace for managing resources, as well as protecting the people and the mauri of the forest.

Finally, there are some who argue the use 1080 isn't whakaaro Māori because it means whānau cannot be employed to trap. This argument confuses me because at its heart, this argument is putting people's needs first. I.e., the need for employment is the first consideration. If I have learnt anything from my kaumātua and whānau, it is that the environment is number one. If you do not take care of the environment, it will not take care of you.

Therefore, I end by saying that perhaps the most Māori way I can think of to manage pest animals, is to put the needs of the environment above the needs and want of humans. Afterall, it was human greed that got us in this mess, so human greed won't get us out.

⁶ <https://niwa.co.nz/publications/wa/water-atmosphere-2-february-2011/water-safe-after-1080-drop#:~:text=Laboratory%20studies%20by%20Landcare%20Research,reducing%201080%20levels%20in%20water>

⁷ <https://teara.govt.nz/en/tangihanga-death-customs/page-4>

⁸ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/14-02-2018/how-to-prepare-the-delicious-but-poisonous-karaka-berry>

⁹ <https://teara.govt.nz/en/document/9773/stinging-hairs-of-ongaonga>

¹⁰ <https://www.1news.co.nz/2020/02/28/potential-alternative-to-1080-poison-found-by-new-zealand-researchers/>