

Commentary on the Māori Biodiversity Authority (2021) - Tame Malcolm

I have welcomed the news that the NZ Government will establish a **Māori Health Authority** to specifically address the health issues faced by Māori communities. It makes sense to have a bespoke solution to an issue that hasn't been addressed by the status quo for so long now.

This got me thinking, could we establish other Māori authorities that could address other issues faced by Māori. NZ have been trying the same approach for generations, yet we are still seeing the same issues with little or no improvement.

So, how about a Māori authority in to address the decline of Aotearoa's biodiversity? As a result of deforestation, logging, and habitat lost and the arrival of introduced species, our current indigenous species are on the brink of being lost like the many before them that are now extinct. Our rate of extinction is on a **fast track** and something needs to be done.

Now critics may be quick to demand why a Māori biodiversity authority should be established. For me it is simple, Māori are intrinsically linked to our taonga species. For some Iwi, the species currently under threat are part of their whakapapa. Where a western idea of lineage relies on two people joining to produce offspring, the ideology of whakapapa is that two people, plus the environment in which they live produce offspring. Meaning that some Iwi see the species as their ancestors and family.

Secondly, biodiversity is linked to our culture and our health. **Evidence/conjecture** suggests that a decline in biodiversity leads to a decline in culture. Furthermore, a decline in biodiversity leads to a decline in **health**. This is emphasized in the tribal sayings where *ko au te taiao, ko te taiao ko au* (they are the environment, and the environment is them). Thus, protecting, enhancing, and restoring our biodiversity results in improving Māori health and Māori culture meaning a Māori biodiversity authority would have more skin in the game than anyone.

I also imagine that potential critics of a Māori biodiversity authority would find it hard to comprehend how Māori could address that others have not. An answer to this is two-fold. Firstly, Māori had survived in Aotearoa's environment for centuries. Yes, during the early days there was a sharp learning curve on the impacts Māori ancestors had on the environment (e.g., **Moa**). Therefore, a set of principles and protocols were developed that ensured the environment remained healthy, thus our tūpuna survived.

Ostensibly, by adopting these principles and protocols and adapting them for today, there would be better outcomes for our biodiversity. This is evident in the fact that Māori owned land has the highest **degree of biodiversity**. While some argue that this is a result of Māori land being less economically developed, I would argue that it is because of those principles and protocols mentioned that this land is more developed philosophically and environmentally.

This idea of a Māori biodiversity authority is timely as well given that the Department of Conservation (DoC) is working with everyone on **Te Mana o Te Taiao – New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy**. The strategy aims to address the biodiversity decline by connecting all Iwi, the Crown, the private sector, community groups and landowners in which I would describe as a revolutionary and innovative approach by DoC.

Finally, as well as the sad state of our biodiversity, the Government is also facing surmounting pressure to address the **WAI262** claim; a claim lodged to the Waitangi tribunal in 1991 on the Crown's failure to protect our taonga. A Māori biodiversity authority could be the biggest step to addressing this claim.

However, after carefully laying out these arguments, I am left with the contradictory idea that we do not need a Māori biodiversity authority as these essentially already exist in the form of whanau, hapū and Iwi. They are the best placed to respond quickly and appropriately at a local level as well as possessing all the positive supporting reasons listed above.

Giving the power back to tangata whenua would not only support Māori aspirations and my notion of a Māori biodiversity authority, but it would also support our friends within DoC. During the review of DoC's **general policies**, there was a high appetite for constitutional reform which would see DoC better supporting tangata whenua aspirations resulting in a new approach to an old problem.