

Waihi North Project

Social Science Impacts

INTRODUCTION

1. My name is Bridgette Masters- Awatere
2. I am a Professor of Kaupapa Māori Psychology and the Associate Dean Māori of the Division of Arts, Law, Psychology and Social Sciences - at the University of Waikato where I have worked for 24 years.
3. I am also a registered Psychologist and Māori health researcher who has undertaken several projects on climate change and Māori health.
4. My qualifications are all from the University of Waikato and include a Bachelor of Social Science (BSocSc) in Māori and Psychology, a Master of Social Science (MSocSc) in Psychology, a Post Graduate Diploma in Community Psychology (PGDipPsych(Comm)) and a Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology.
5. I have read the Environment Court Practice Note 2023 - Code of Conduct for Expert Witnesses (**Code**), and agree to comply with it. My qualifications as an expert are set out above. The matters addressed in my evidence are within my area of expertise. However, where I make statements on issues that are not in my area of expertise, I will state whose evidence I have relied upon. I have not omitted to consider material facts known to me that might alter or detract from the opinions expressed in my evidence.
6. I have also generally reviewed the first iteration of consent conditions. I have not reviewed, but seek an opportunity to review, the latest iteration

of consent conditions, and related documents. Unfortunately these arrived too late in preparation of my evidence.

SCOPE OF EVIDENCE

7. My evidence refers to the Waihi North Project Social Impact Assessment and the gaps in that data.
8. My evidence covers the following:
 - a. CIAs had not been completed at the time of writing the referenced reports.
 - b. The absence of a clear and consistent voice of support for the mining project from iwi, hapū, hāpori groups or others who represent the diverse range of interests and livelihoods of Māori.
 - c. Consultation with tangata whenua and others on climate change impacts and its relevance to environment when making their assessment of impacts from the proposed expansion of the Waihi Gold mining project into the Coromandel Forest Park.
 - d. The relevance to meet Treaty of Waitangi obligations to Māori
9. In preparing this evidence, I reviewed:
 - a. Cultural Impact Assessment Report¹,
 - b. Cultural Values Assessment Report², and

¹Website sources

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.fasttrack.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/4133/B.49-Clough-Heritage-and-Archaeological-Effects-Part1.pdf

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https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.fasttrack.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/4184/F.01-Waihi-North-Project-Consultation-Summary.pdf

c. Social Impact Assessment Report³.

PREVIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTERS

10. We have seen both globally and nationally that when industries are allowed to operate with weak governance and poor accountability, the result is preventable harm and, in many cases, loss of life. Mining is no exception.

11. In 2015 the BHP Marana Mine tailing dam collapsed killing 19 people, making thousands homeless and destroying rivers and the environment for hundreds of kilometres. This disaster is just one example of the many 21st Century toxic tailings from mining incidents causing social, environmental, cultural and economic damage.

12. International disasters illustrate the dangers of prioritising short-term economic gain over environmental protection and community wellbeing. For example, the 1984 Bhopal chemical disaster, caused by a poorly regulated pesticide plant, released toxic methyl isocyanate into the surrounding environment, resulting in between 3,000 and 16,000 deaths and over half a million injuries.

13. More recently, the 2014 Flint, Michigan water crisis demonstrated how the removal of democratic safeguards in favour of economic expediency led to widespread contamination, Legionnaires' disease, lead poisoning, and carcinogen exposure that endangered an entire city's population.

14. These cases provide clear warnings for Aotearoa: poorly governed extractive industries, including mining, pose unacceptable risks to public health,

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https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.fasttrack.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/4145/B.57-WSP-Social-Impact-Assessment.pdf

environmental justice, and intergenerational wellbeing. To allow mining expansion under weakened regulatory oversight would repeat these same mistakes, exposing communities and ecosystems to irreversible damage.

15. While Aotearoa has largely been protected from such mass environmental disasters by the RMA, its associated policy frameworks and planning processes, several recent events demonstrate that the resource management architecture needs strengthening from a public health perspective.

MĀORI VOICES IN CLIMATE RESEARCH

16. This submission draws on participant voices documented in the *Haumanu Hauora* report (Masters-Awatere et al, 2022) that I produced as part of the Deep South National Science Challenge Vision Mātauranga Programme.

17. Haumanu Hauora (the research) investigated Māori experiences of climate change and the readiness of health services and their policies to respond to the impacts.

18. The research involved four studies. Three types of participants were included:

- a. Tangata Whenua (focus groups, as well as individual interviews)
- b. Health Service Staff (focus groups, as well as individual interviews)
- c. Rangatahi (individual interviews).

19. Māori participants were from whānau, hapū, and iwi in the Waikato, Lakes and Bay of Plenty regions.

20. Non-Māori participants were employees of a health organisation and resident within the Waikato, Lakes and Bay of Plenty regions.

21. Excerpts of quotes from participants of our studies highlight how climate change is affecting cultural sites, food systems, waterways, health, and intergenerational well-being.

22. Environmental impacts through mining will have overlapping and similar impacts on social and cultural well-being.

MATTERS RAISED IN THE RESEARCH

23. Climate change impacts such as flooding, erosion, and storm surges have caused damage to marae, urupā, housing, and community infrastructure.

24. These impacts strike at the heart of Māori identity, culture, and whakapapa.

Comments reflect to protect marae from climate damage.

Damage to Marae and Urupā

- *“...down the road 53 tipuna had to be excavated from our urupā because it’s on the bank of the river and the river was eroding to the point where the tipuna were falling into the awa, due in part to erosion...”* (Rangatahi, participant 5)

25. This experience demonstrates that the cultural and spiritual dimensions must be prioritised in adaptation planning.

26. In the Bay of Plenty, where marae, urupā, and coastal landscapes are already under pressure from climate impacts, the additional strain of mining would further compromise Māori health, tino rangatiratanga, and the intergenerational responsibilities guaranteed under Te Tiriti.

27. Long term effects of mining also have the potential to affect marae and urupā through downstream damage to communities, adding to the pressure already on hapū and iwi in protecting them from climate threats.

Food Security and Kai Sovereignty

28. Climate impacts are already disrupting Māori traditional and contemporary food systems.

29. Assessments must provide assurance that mining will have no further negative impacts upon these cultural systems.

30. Comments from tangata whenua highlight the need for self-sufficiency and resilience through māra kai and collective land management.

- *“I’ve been actively working with some of our whānau trying to encourage our whānau to start growing our own kai, but also trying to put pressure on our land trusts who are in control of our collective land resources.”* (Tangata Whenua, focus group 2, participant 1)
- *“For me, if you had more people who had their own māra kai and producing their own energy... being able to provide our own food and not have to rely on someone in a different country, importing food to us.”* (Rangatahi, participant 1)

31. Food sovereignty is both a practical adaptation strategy and a cultural imperative that strengthens resilience and connection.

32. Any cultural assessment undertaken must include the implications on food security and kai sovereignty as a key cultural consideration for Māori.

Loss of Waterways and Mahinga Kai

33. Whakapapa relationships are not abstract—they are lived and sustained through practices such as food gathering, weaving, building, trading, and hosting, which are all dependent on a healthy environment.

34. Whānau reported significant changes to local waterways, with drying streams, pollution, and the loss of traditional kai sources.

- *“That stream’s gone. The water’s dried up... the other stream... there’s so many houses there now, that it’s just got soap suds and stuff in the water.”* (Tangata Whenua, focus group 2 participant 2)
- *“Mātauranga Māori will play a big part for our people in the future, because we already had those systems. Well, that’s the same out at [BoP rural location]. It always used to be abundant with watercress, but now you’d be lucky if you can get anything”* (Health service staff, participant 2)

35. The degradation of waterways represents a critical loss of mahinga kai, undermining food security, cultural practices, and health.

36. Cultural assessments must mitigate concerns that mining will threaten whakapapa-based connections by degrading land and water systems, polluting ecosystems, and disrupting the foundations of Māori wellbeing.

37. **The recent example associated with mining is the “orange river” incident when in 2024 the Comstock Mine Portal at Karangahake leached a toxic discharge into the Ohinemuri River. That discharge included arsenic which is a risk to water but also can be uptaken by the food chain – see water cress and eels. The impact of this incident has been a major concern to iwi and communities.**

Māori health impacts

38. Climate change is compounding existing inequities in Māori health.

39. Poor housing quality, environmental exposures, and disrupted food and water systems are contributing to worsening outcomes.

40. From a te ao Māori perspective, health is inseparable from the land, waterways, ecosystems, and other species through whakapapa.
41. Tangata whenua are concerned about worsening impacts on health conditions.
- *“...it is getting worse, significantly worse. And the babies are affected and kids are affected, and the adults are affected. And it is worse than it used to be, say about 10 years ago... What I have noticed, and I do think it is getting worse, it's become more prevalent, and that is a result of perhaps the pine, the forestry, and it's the amount of allergic rhinitis and hay fever.”* (Tangata Whenua, focus group 2, participant 3)
42. In pursuit of employment Māori whānau are moving to, and working in, conditions that can have negative impacts on their social, cultural and medical well-being (health).
43. Without adequate access to health services and support, persistent health conditions are a concern.

Whakapapa and Intergenerational Responsibility

44. Participants consistently framed **environmental issues** and climate change through whakapapa, emphasising intergenerational responsibilities to tūpuna (those who came before) and mokopuna (those yet to come).
- *“What whakapapa am I leaving him? What whakapapa am I creating? What whakapapa was given to me? How am I improving on what our tūpuna already left for us?”* (Tangata Whenua, participant 7)
 - *“...our connection and the links with land is really important for Māori culture”* (Rangatahi, participant 4)
 - *“Going back to [papakainga] and seeing what wasn't there that used to be, that really, reconnected with my tipuna... this orchard across the way and it*

was by the awa and people used to go swimming there... they were telling us a story of how you don't go there now... the wairua is off... And it was just, dead trees... It hurt a lot. (Rangatahi, participant 2)

45. This framing underscores that climate and **environmental** responses must move beyond short-term mitigation to uphold intergenerational equity and kaitiakitanga.

CONCLUSION

46. The voices from communities across the Waikato, Lakes and Bay of Plenty regions provide compelling evidence that climate change is already impacting Māori communities across multiple domains—cultural sites, food systems, waterways, housing, and health.
47. These experiences demonstrate the urgent need for **environmental and** climate policy and legislation that:
1. Embeds Māori knowledge and leadership in adaptation and resilience planning.
 2. Protects marae, urupā, and wāhi tapu from further damage.
 3. Supports food sovereignty through māra kai and collective land initiatives.
 4. Prioritises health equity in climate adaptation strategies.
 5. Upholds whakapapa and intergenerational responsibilities as central to decision-making.
48. Previous research with members of the Waikato and nearby regions highlights the importance of integrating health services and support planning into strategies that will ensure protection for vulnerable populations.

49. Strengthening Māori-led climate responses in the Bay of Plenty is essential to ensure cultural survival, community resilience, and the well-being of future generations.
50. The need for cultural and social impact assessments to clearly demonstrate consideration of Māori voices is essential.
51. The Crown and its agencies have obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, including Tiriti rights in environmental and public health governance. While companies and decision-makers may claim to “consult” with iwi and hapū, the processes are often tokenistic, with compressed timeframes that prevent meaningful participation and erode existing governance partnerships already established through negotiated agreements.

Bridgette Masters-Awatere

Reference

Masters-Awatere, B., Young, T., Howard, D., Powell, E., Ranginui Charlton, A., Graham, R., & Dixon, R. (2022). *Haumanu Hauora: Strengthening health institution responsiveness to climate change*. Māori and Psychology Research Unit (MPRU), University of Waikato. Available from <https://deepsouthchallenge.co.nz/resource/final-research-report-haumanu-hauora/>