The Manukau Claim

Restoring the Manukau

The Manukau Harbour was once the dumping ground for waste and sewage from the rapidly growing urban area of Auckland. Māori living on the Manukau despaired at the despoliation of their harbour, long treasured for its fisheries.

Public concern over this environmental mess grew. But the Waitangi Tribunal’s report on the Manukau Claim in 1985 was the catalyst for major change. It laid the basis for new relationships between Māori living near the harbour, local government bodies, businesses, and the wider community.

Auckland protected

Māori living at Mangere and other Manukau settlements were part of the Waitangi Tribunal’s compensation of tribes. They sold varying amounts of land for the mutual benefit of Māori and settler, and helped protect the early town of Auckland. The town was a market for their produce, and its merchants benefited from Māori trade.

War and confiscation

As settler numbers grew, the Tamaki tribes in the Waitakere decided to resist selling any more land and to establish a king, Patea Te Wherewhata, in 1858. Governor Gore Browne and his successor, Sir George Grey, as well as the settler government, viewed the Māori King as incompatible with British sovereignty and prepared for war.

Grey’s troops moved to invade the Waitakere on 12 July 1863. Most Māori on the Manukau Harbour were forced to abandon their settlements and retreat into the Waitakere. Government policy treated Waitakere Māori as ‘rebels’ – that included those from Manukau, Te Aitoki, Ngāti Tamahu, and Ngāti Toa bands on the Manukau were confiscated as ‘rebels’, notably tribes - Te Kawau and Ngāti Whāia – were also affected.

New century, new issues

After the wars, some Māori returned to the Manukau Harbour. However, urban growth in the twentieth century meant that their remaining lands and fisheries were severely affected by industrial and agricultural developments, relocations, waste disposal, commercial fishing, and the blocking of access to the harbour.

Fragments of land

Some land was never returned when claimants could prove they had not been ‘rebels’. But the war, confiscations, and the belief of ‘rebels’ left a legacy of deeply felt injustice among Māori on the Manukau.

Owengi Creek. A canoe on the Owengi Creek takes up passengers from Makarau Marae in the late nineteenth century. The creek was blocked off from the harbour in the 1860s by Auckland’s sewage works. In 2001, the removal of the sewage works began. By mid-2005, the water could flow once more from the harbour into the creek, and along to the marae.

Healing the past – looking forward

The Waitangi Tribunal’s Manukau Report of 1985 found that the Crown had failed to recognise Treaty rights to land and traditional seafaring resources and had not provided the protection promised. Māori, local government, service companies, and environmentalists have worked together ever since to restore the Manukau Harbour and Manukau’s historical and cultural treasures.

For the several hapū involved in the Manukau Elam, the spiritual and physical well-being of the harbour was, and still is, all important. Today their role as guardians of the Manukau Harbour is maintained, though not formally recognised, as they work to secure a future in which cultural values and benefits are shared.