

Our Ancestors

Our ancestors were innovative, entrepreneurial, problem solvers

Māori have a strong heritage of innovative thinking to solve problems and forge new pathways ahead.

Maui – the original innovator!

From the mythology surrounding our earliest ancestor, Maui, we learn of how he thought and acted 'outside the box' to improve the day to day lives and conditions of all humankind. Maui was fearless, curious and steeped in entrepreneurial spirit. Some of his well-known exploits include:

- he captured and beat the sun to slow it down so that the seasons would be more favourable
- through the theft of his grandmother's fingernails he was able to bring fire to humankind
- Maui snuck aboard his brother's fishing canoe and fished up the North Island, Te Ika a Maui (the fish of Maui).

Maui had what Tawera Nikau (Rugby League legend and 21st Century entrepreneur) would describe as our UMF or 'Unique Māori Factor' – to innovate and creatively add value to the collective wellbeing of our people.

Excellent navigators

The skill, tenacity and inventiveness employed by our ancestors to journey across the Pacific to Aotearoa all of those years ago exemplifies this spirit of innovation and should not be underestimated. These perilous voyages have now achieved legendary status, requiring our ancestors to:

- create vessels that could withstand the tough ocean conditions and long distances involved
- navigate the Pacific ocean using traditional tools and a complex and highly successful navigation system based on the stars.

"It is easy to be inspired around our innovative spirit when 1000 years ago our ancestors were harnessing the natural elements and utilising celestial navigation to chart the Pacific and journey safely to New Zealand."

Potaua Biasiny-Tule (2014) The shared journey of Maori innovation, The New Zealand Herald

Smart architects and engineers

The traditional Pā was another example of our ancestor's ingenuity. These cleverly designed fortifications on hill-top locations provided a great vantage point for the inhabitants but were also very effective in terms of public health. They were located and constructed in such a way to maximise warmth and minimise damp and cold. Ample and well-designed storage facilities ensured that food was available throughout the year.

Particularly impressive were the public health considerations and design features of many Pā suggesting a quite sophisticated understanding of these issues. Typically Pā were sited near fresh water springs ensuring that the inhabitants had access to clean water. They were also designed in such a way that water would not pool and become stagnant. This helped to prevent the spread of disease as did the creation of areas specifically set aside for the disposal of human waste.

“At the time these so-called primitive PA were flourishing, many of the major cities throughout Europe had yet to appreciate their significance in terms of health and in particular the need for an effective system of sewage disposal. Chamber pots were the norm in most city dwellings (especially in London) and since no plumbing was present these were typically emptied out windows and onto the street below.”

Te Kani Kingi, Te Pūmanawa Hauora School of Māori Studies (2005) Māori Innovation, Māori Development, and Māori Models of Health.

Ruapekapeka Pā

Built by Warrior Chief Te Ruki Kawhiti in late 1845, Ruapekapeka Pā (a well preserved and significant site 14 kilometres southeast of Kawakawa in Te Tai Tokerau) also provides insight into the innovative engineering and design capability of our ancestors as noted by IPENZ Engineering Heritage (Institute of Professional Engineers NZ):

“Ruapekapeka may not have been the first pa to utilize trenches or to have strong palisades, but the combination of design innovations made it one of the most effective against assault by muskets and heavy artillery. At a time when British military technology led the world, this Māori reaction to the threat of artillery bombardment represents an ingenious indigenous response to European firepower and is a significant engineering innovation.

The fortifications so impressed the British that following the battle, military engineers from Britain twice surveyed the defences, built a scale model for education purposes, and tabled the plans in the House of Commons. This knowledge was used by the British in the Crimea in 1853 and led to the trench warfare of World War 1 when machine guns made underground warfare a necessity.”

A Department of Conservation brochure suggests that the site selected for this pa was also inspired:

“This type of pa was far better equipped to handle cannon fire than traditional pa, but almost as important as its innovative construction was the location. A pa built inland, a long way from European supply sources and navy ships bristling with armaments, was in a strong position. The attackers had to travel through rough, unfamiliar territory, dragging all their equipment with them and would have little choice when it came to finding a suitable base camp. As a result of its defensive success, many other tribes around New Zealand, took up and developed this pa system during conflicts over the next thirty years.”

The art of Māori adaptation

Throughout history Māori have shown great inventiveness, ingenuity and adaptability. Even in the face of hostility and the devastating effects of colonisation our ancestors drew upon their inner strengths to cope and survive. They were also quick to take up those aspects of European culture that might enhance their lives, for example using different tools and techniques to enrich their art. And they were entrepreneurial:

"... 180 years ago Māori once were integrated supply chain specialists, owning land, crops, flour mills and the ships that distributed their product internationally."

Potaua Biasiny-Tule (2014)

Much of what we know about our early ancestors suggests that they had an innate and extraordinary ability to change, transform and grow. A number of commentators today suggest that there is a special Māori quality to these attributes and that these can also help Māori to flourish today.

"Māori innovation is a bit different to the mainstream. It's about making connections between the old and the new; between the large and the small; between the whānau, the hapū and the iwi. It speaks to the transitional nature of change and looks to how Māori values can be retained throughout the entire process. And it is an essential part of bringing the culture into a 21st century paradigm."

Potaua Biasiny-Tule (2014)

Our ancestors were smart, innovative, adaptable and entrepreneurial...

There are many examples of Māori innovation within our own myths and stories and in evidence throughout history:

- Maui is often held up as the original Māori innovator – thinking differently to change things for the collective better – our ancestors revered and retold his exploits!
- Our ancestors used a sophisticated celestial navigation system to cross the Pacific in strong, crafted vessels that could withstand these treacherous journeys. Some have pointed out that this was at a time when many Europeans thought that the earth was square and they would sail off the edge!
- Pā were cleverly designed and located in ways that promoted safety and public health, and prevented disease
- Ruapekapeka Pā is cited as an example of ingenious engineering innovation and was studied by the British to improve their own battle tactics.

Commentators today believe that much of Māori innovative success comes from maintaining and applying Māori strengths and values to create new ways of doing things – or the addition of what Tawera Nikau calls the UMF "Unique Māori Factor."