

Cultural Impact Assessments - insights and observations

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Kupu Whakataki / Introduction

Māori have a deep and inherent relationship with natural resources. That relationship provides the lens through which Māori view, relate, connect and identify with those resources and encompasses inter-generational responsibility to uphold its mana and health and wellbeing. It is a lens that promotes the integrated management of resources. Additionally, it promotes integration as a way of working together to understand key issues and concerns and the best ways to move forward into the future. For Māori, a maunga or moana or awa or waahi may be symbolic of a unique event or representative of a tipuna. Because of this connection, Māori pay particular attention to the management, use, restoration and protection when there is an activity relating to that maunga or moana or awa or waahi.

Cultural impact assessments are used to articulate the values and aspirations of Māori and to document their interests and associations with an area or natural resource. At present, there are no formal guidelines or national or industry standards on how these are prepared. The quality and effectiveness of cultural impact assessments can often be reflected in the form of feedback, implementation of consent conditions or at project meetings if this element has been provided. At times, the process of developing a cultural impact assessment can be seen as more effective than the final assessment report.

As a Māori resource management consultant and practitioner I am often privileged to assist cultural impact assessment processes. I have worked with iwi and hapū to understand how a specific consent application and proposal might impact or affect their relationship with and abilities to interact with their natural resources as tangata whenua and kaitiaki. I have worked with local authorities and private sector clients to develop impact assessment processes to work with Māori where cultural capabilities are limited. As a result of these experiences, I have been privileged to see a range of approaches to cultural impact assessment.

Insights and Observations

This article continues the conversation about cultural impact assessments and whether they are making a difference in producing high quality cultural outcomes in resource management

decisions. Below I offer a few insights and observations for the impact assessment community, because working together and sharing experiences should lead to a greater understanding and confidence in applying cultural considerations to impact assessment.

Time to build relationships

When developing a cultural impact assessment, invest the time in building sound relationships with all parties and organisations involved in the proposal or project. This includes building an appreciation of the vision, values, aspirations, drivers and main points of interest for respective parties.

Be genuine and authentic in your approach

Relationships are based and built on trust and it is important to be genuine and authentic in your approach to developing relationships. Māori will get a quick sense if your approach is more focussed on meeting a deadline or completing a project. Think about appropriate locations and settings when organising to meet.

More than one project at a time

Understand the resource management environment that iwi and hapū are operating in and be flexible and prepared to accommodate change at short notice. Māori are often managing a multiple number of projects, proposals, and requests to meet with local Council and government department officials. Māori are often involved in Treaty settlement negotiations, Whanau Ora projects, papakainga developments, marae development meetings, wetland and ecological restoration projects and regular general business. Understand the capacity (not capability) of Māori to participate and contribute and allow for this. A good relationship will enable flexibility to respond to the dynamic and changing responsibilities placed upon iwi, hapū and Māori.

Understand the Vision, Values, Objectives and Aspirations

Appreciate, acknowledge and recognise the vision, values, objectives and aspirations of Māori into the future. Māori are not going anywhere and it is in the best interests of developing high quality cultural outcomes to work on a relationship that endures. This means understanding the Māori perspective and worldview and relationship with natural resources.

Work harder to communicate technical data

Ensure that technical data and details regarding a natural resource project or proposal are well communicated and presented in a digestible manner. Presenting scientific technical data can come across like another language and care needs to be taken to portray the necessary and important details. Moreover, this data needs to be communicated in a way that relates to the deep and inherent relationship Māori and how this might affect that resource. This may be influenced by your ability, as a practitioner, to empathise and understand that Māori lens and worldview.

Develop confidence in cultural settings

Develop and apply cultural confidence and awareness in cultural impact assessment settings. We are all working hard to understand what works for iwi, hapū and whānau and to appreciate their environment when it comes to cultural impacts. Cultural confidence will involve understanding the kawa and protocols of the local iwi and hapū and how to prepare when going onto a marae.

Persist in the perceived ambiguity

Cultural values are often perceived as being intangible, hard to define or difficult to assign a quantifiable measure. For this reason, cultural values (and the impact on these) are perceived as ambiguous. It is important to work together to articulate how a cultural value of meaning, importance and significance to iwi and hapū might be impacted upon by a physical transaction or activity.

Kupu Whakakapi / Conclusion

This article continues the conversation on cultural impact assessments and offers some insights and observations from my experiences. Cultural impact assessments provide opportunities for resource management practitioners and Māori to work together to develop confidence in understanding Māori perspectives and articulating values in order to drive solutions and decisions to meet our aspirations into the future.