

Respecting the Mauri of Tikapa Moana

Scattering of cremation ash at sea inappropriate says tangata whenua of Hauraki Gulf



To Maori, Tikapa Moana – the waters of the Hauraki Gulf – is the link in a spiritual chain connecting tangata whenua through whakapapa (genealogy) to Tangaroa (the sea) and all things in the universe.

Tikapa Maona is revered as a storage cupboard (pataka kai) and provider of food and has been for millennia, explains Hauraki kuia Betty Williams, but that link and life giving force (mauri) can be affected by human activities.

“It’s important we treat Tikapa with the utmost respect, if we are to continue to enjoy the benefits and sustenance it provides. Our mana and cultural survival as a coastal people pivots on making sure that our relationship to Tikapa Moana is sustained,” says Aunty Betty, as she is affectionately known to whanau and friends.

Betty Williams is one of six representatives of the tangata whenua of the Hauraki Gulf and islands, appointed by the Minister of Conservation, to sit on the Hauraki Gulf Forum.

All agree that the discharge of human remains, including the scattering cremation ash, into Tikapa Moana is inappropriate.

Betty Williams explains that traditionally when a person was drowned at sea a rahui tapu – a sacred prohibition – was placed on the surrounding area and the collecting of seafood would stop for a specified period – up to three months if the body was not recovered.

This would allow the water sufficient time to restore its energy. Betty Williams explains that to maintain water integrity Tikapa will reject anything that doesn't belong.

In Maori whakapapa people are descended from Papatuanuku (Mother Earth) and so upon death the body is returned to its place of origin.

Similarly a placenta, the organ that nourishes, feeds and sustains the unborn child, and shares the same name as the earth – whenua – gets returned to Papatuanuku after the birth.

The Hauraki Gulf Forum, whose role is to promote and facilitate integrated management among a dozen councils plus government departments and tangata whenua, identified the disposal of cremation waste within a recent review of strategic issues facing the Gulf.

It is similarly concerned about discharges of untreated sewage, from both cultural and health perspectives, the effects of dairy farming effluent on water quality, heavy metal contamination in Auckland's upper harbours and development pressures on marine areas and coastal landscapes.

Hauraki Gulf Forum Chairman John Tregidga says that the forum has listened to the perspectives and concerns of tangata whenua and raised these issues with the planning and regulatory agencies around the Gulf.

"We have also identified that professional and advisory bodies play important roles in building community awareness of these issues."

Ministry of Health guidelines for burial in a special place (Oct 2005), included within the Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand Handbook, state "there are no legislation requirements administered by the Ministry of Health relating to the disposal of cremated human ashes so these may be interred or scattered at the site. Consultation with appropriate local iwi and/or hāpu representatives, and territorial authority bylaws may be appropriate."

FDANZ President Neil Little says he welcomed the approach from Mayor John Tregidga and the Hauraki Gulf Forum on these matters and is pleased to pass on more specific direction to its members.

The forum's strategic issues document recognises the position of tangata whenua that physical influences can and do contaminate the mauri and life giving forces of Tikapa Moana (the Hauraki Gulf).

It states that "Hauraki Gulf Forum parties acknowledge that discharges of cremated human remains, burials at sea, and discharges of sewage that has not passed through land, are unacceptable to tangata whenua and should be avoided as a matter of urgency."

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