

Fear and conflict obstructs Māori land aspirations

March 1 2018, by Nicola Shephard



Credit: University of Auckland

"Idle," "unproductive," "marginal," "isolated" – Māori land often gets a bad rap. But a University of Auckland researcher is challenging this view, and offering a fresh approach to unlocking the potential of the whānau-owned whenua.

Kiri Dell (Ngāti Porou), a post-doctoral research fellow in the department of Property at the Business School, was driven to understand why whānau raruraru (conflict) pervades Māori land trusts. For her Ph.D., which she will receive in May, she conducted interviews with Māori land trust experts, trustees, shareholders, policy makers, lawyers and land development specialists.

Until now, she says, research into under-development has identified the land as the problem. "When you analyse government reports, they call whenua unproductive, fragmented, isolated, non-arable. Why do we project this badness onto the land? The land is as it's always been. Our land is bountiful if looked at in the right way."

Māori land covers 1.47 million hectares – 5.5 percent of New Zealand – and is represented by 27,308 titles and 2.7 million individual ownership interests. Over half is held and governed by whānau trusts, rather than at the iwi level.

"One of the biggest obstacles to development is raruraru," says Ms Dell. "Conflict and tensions often make it really hard to make decisions, and when there is uncertainty, the governance or management tend to stay with the status quo."

She found many whānau were in a state of anxiety about their land. "Some expressed a looming fear, where a perceived someone or something was coming to take the land. I heard sentiments like 'the bank will get it,' or 'the government just want our land.'"

Land trauma—the emotional legacy of historical colonisation, dispossession and displacement—heightened the family conflict you would expect in any large group of relatives, she says.

"Because of the history and grief from land loss, some people hold on to

things so tightly; there's a fear of making the wrong decisions and losing more land. But fear can be contrary to the much needed innovation, entrepreneurialism and advancement needed in land trusts. That's the focus of my research: how do we provide more agency – the ability of people to act freely and make choices for themselves and their future?"

Her answer is the Whenua BEINGS framework, a guide for development that covers six kinds of relationships that Māori have with whenua – Belonging, Emotions, Influence, Nourishment, Genealogy and Spirituality.

"When all these things are operating and thriving, you get optimal development."

The first step is to identify and embrace the unique characteristics of a piece of land. "Historically we've gone with trend crops –dairy farming then pine – and that hasn't always worked for Māori. Land has a personality just like people do. Just as you develop your child's personality, we have to develop our land's special character.

"As clichéd as it sounds, if we want to move forward with our land aspirations, we actually do have to face our fears."

Provided by University of Auckland

Citation: Fear and conflict obstructs Māori land aspirations (2018, March 1) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-03-conflict-obstructs-mori-aspirations.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.